Cranmer's Attitude to the Episcopate: Bishops, Priests and Deacons

MAURICE ELLIOTT

This is the last of four articles by Maurice Elliott concerning Cranmer's view of authority. It is followed by a short concluding article.

Cranmer's attitude to the Church has been implicit in everything discussed thus far. In that the Bible, as opposed to the Pope, represented the ultimate rule of faith, it had to be at the very centre of Church life. The king was to be viewed as the supreme head of the Church as an institution, and the whole programme of reform was designed to renew its life and witness. This necessitated some radical and, at times, painful changes, but in spite of that it must be conceded that Cranmer's goals were significantly realised.

However there remains one area which has not been elucidated, namely his attitude to the exercise of authority within the Church, and in particular his understanding of the episcopate. What were Cranmer's reasons for retaining bishops within the Anglican denomination when the Continental Reformers had reduced the ordained structure to a twofold diaconate and presbyterate? What was their intended role and what was the basis of their ministerial authority?

All the Reformers held that the late mediaeval Church had fallen into a critical misunderstanding regarding the episcopal oversight which it exercised. In the eyes of most clergy the ordained ministry had become co-terminous with an episcopal succession which, it was claimed, might be traced back to the apostles themselves.[1] This in turn had been given a sacerdotal emphasis, largely based on the thinking of Cyprian in the third century,[2] and from the outset Cranmer rejected this understanding as unbiblical.[3] As a

1 See the reference to the Petrine origins of the Papacy in the previous article (*Churchman* 109/3 p 244 note 26).

2 The influence of Cyprian is discussed more fully in W H Griffith Thomas *The Principles of Theology* (London: Church Society 1978) pp 325 ff.

3 See J H Merle d'Aubigné *The Reformation in England* vol II (London: Banner of Truth Trust 1962) p 113: 'England preserved episcopacy, but she rejected that Roman superstition which makes bishops the sole successors of the apostles and maintains (as at the Council of Trent) that they are invested with an indelible character and a spiritual power which no other minister possesses'.

convinced son of the Reformation Cranmer could have no truck with any view of the episcopate which was not firmly rooted in the biblical records. The question remains therefore as to why he did not do away with the whole rank of bishops in the first place.

Any appraisal of Cranmer's understanding of episcopacy must start from the perspective of his Erastianism. This had to do with the sixteenth century conflation of the roles of Church and State and, as we have already seen, it was the corner-stone of Cranmer's attitude to the monarchy. Thus, as the crown was afforded supremacy in both the political and spiritual domains, it was as if Cranmer made the Church the Department of State for Ecclesiastical Affairs. This emerges most clearly from his *Answers Concerning the Sacraments and the Appointment and Power of Bishops and Priests* of 1540. Having outlined the double jurisdiction of the king and the various civil officers in authority under him, Cranmer proceeds:

> The ministers of God's word under his majesty be the bishops, parsons, vicars, and other such priests as be appointed by his highness to that ministration... All the said officers and ministers, as well of the one sort as of the other, be appointed, assigned, and elected in every place, by the laws and orders of the kings and princes.[4]

Paul Avis suggests that Cranmer's Erastianism adopted an incarnational model so that just as the two natures of humanity and divinity were conjoined in the Person of Christ, so also the civil and the clerical needs of government came together under the person of the king.[5] Be that as it may, it is quite clear that Cranmer saw the authority of the episcopate as deriving directly from the authority of the monarch and as a necessary offshoot from this. As a point of departure this is vitally important. It permits us to infer that inasmuch as Cranmer's dominant view of the monarchy was flawed and indeed fluid, his whole understanding of the episcopate may have been equally misplaced. As a balance to this, however, it should equally be noted that Cranmer did not see the episcopate as a merely human establishment. In a tract of 1538, *De Ordine et Ministerio Sacerdotum et Episcoporum*, he observes:

> Scripture clearly teaches that the order and ministry of priests and bishops are not of human authority, but by divine institution.[6]

4 J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p 116. Further references from this book will be abbreviated to CW (Cranmer's Works).

5 See P D L Avis *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London 1981) pp 138ff.

6 *'sacerdotum et episcoporum ordinem ac ministerium non humana auctoritate sed divinitus institutum, scriptura aperte docet'* CW p 484

The need for episcopal oversight, at least in very general terms, could be dated back to the divine command of Christ himself, and, as we might expect, that was sufficient proof for Cranmer.

To return to his *Answers* Cranmer continues by dealing with the necessity of certain ceremonies surrounding the office of a bishop, and this opens up for us a second fundamental insight into his position:

> In the admission of many of these officers be divers comely ceremonies and solemnities used, which be not of necessity, but only for good order and seemly fashion.[7]

This point brings us to Cranmer's understanding of *adiaphora*.[8] While there were certain aspects of gospel truth which were non-negotiable, such as the means of salvation or the absolute authority of the Bible, in all other secondary matters Christians were free to differ. This was undoubtedly the case with Church order. Thus for the Archbishop it was a pure matter of convenience that the English Church should decide to keep its rank of bishops, while it was equally acceptable that the Lutherans or the Calvinists should do away with it. This idea of *adiaphora* is further enhanced as Cranmer goes on to assert an Hieronymian view of the ordained ministry:[9]

> The bishops and priests were at one time, and were not two things, but both one office at the beginning of Christ's religion.[10]

Yet again Cranmer was relying on Patristic sources. Even up to the time of Clement of Alexandria in the late second century the terms 'bishop' and 'presbyter' had been interchangeable.[11] Thus it is clear that, while Cranmer did consider episcopacy in the sense of oversight to be essential within the life of the Church, he did not see it as necessarily mediated through an ordained episcopate. The two offices of bishop and priest were originally not differentiated, and consequently the reason for retaining bishops was a matter of mere expediency on account of historical practice, and possibly by analogy with the threefold synagogue pattern of deacon, elder and president.[12] However, it will be essential to contrast this relatively early

7 CW p 116

8 '*Adiaphora*' (literally 'things indifferent') – see Liddell Scott Jones *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: OUP 1940).

9 Jerome wrote an account of the origins of the ordained episcopate, pointing to its development out of custom and not as a result of an irrevocable divine command. Cranmer is known to have leaned heavily upon this.

10 CW p 117

11 See W H Griffith Thomas *The Principles of Theology* (London: Church Society 1978) p 325.

12 See Griffith Thomas p 322.

outlook with Cranmer's later writing on the same subject in his *Preface* to the *Ordinal* of 1552.

The other matters of importance arising from Cranmer's *Answers* of 1540 bear directly upon the authority of a bishop as he saw it. For instance, he deals with the issue of priests being made by bishops:

> A bishop may make a priest by the scripture, and so may princes and governors also, and that by the authority of God committed unto them, and the people also by their election.[13]

Again this is a highly significant statement, for it necessarily distances Cranmer from the imperative need for episcopal ordination to the priesthood in which the mediaeval Catholic Church believed. The Roman Church envisaged its whole existence to be dependent on a continuous episcopal succession; in Cranmer's eyes what mattered was a proper ministry of the Word and sacraments. The mention of the 'election of the people' is especially interesting since it alludes quite clearly to a typically reformed understanding of the priesthood of all Christian believers.[14] It was ultimately the choice of the laity based upon ethical considerations coupled with the inward vocation of the candidate, and not simply the external act of laying-on of hands by a bishop, which was crucial in the Church's exercise of its ministry.

Lastly Cranmer addresses the question of excommunication, and in particular whether, and under what conditions, a bishop or priest might have the right to invoke this authority:

> A bishop or a priest by the scripture is neither commanded nor forbidden to excommunicate, but where the laws of any region giveth him authority to excommunicate, there they ought to use the same in such crimes as the laws have such authority in; and where the laws of the region forbiddeth them, there they have none such authority at all: and they that be no priests may also excommunicate, if the law allow them thereunto.[15]

Two points with which we are already familiar re-emerge from this section. First, Cranmer's ongoing determination to submit all his doctrine in every area to the rule of the Bible, and secondly, his interweaving of Church and State affairs. It is worth noting that all of this constitutes the famous text in which Cranmer 'temerariously' defers his own opinions to

13 CW p 117
14 See E Cameron *The European Reformation* (Oxford 1992) p 149.
15 CW p 117

those of the king.[16] The Archbishop's attitude to the monarchy clearly impinged directly upon his understanding of the episcopate.

In terms of extant material there is little of consequence on the matter of episcopacy between this text of 1540 and those which appear much later in Edward's reign. By this stage the Reformation in England was in full cry and it is not surprising, therefore, to find a close connection between the role of the episcopate and the centrality of the Bible. In 1547 Edward issued a set of injunctions delivered to the bishops.[17] Of course they were not directly from Cranmer's own hand, but it is reasonable to assume that the Archbishop had quite some influence on the King's thinking in the matter. What emerges from this treatise is that the role of the bishops was seen to involve the preaching the Word of God as a primary responsibility:

> They should preach within their diocese every quarter of the year once at the least, that is say once in their cathedral churches, and thrice in other several places of their dioceses.[18]

The implicit emphasis here is upon the need to spread abroad the scriptural teaching of the reformed faith, and this idea of episcopal authority deriving from the Bible is reiterated as the letter moves on to outline the requirements for episcopal ordination:

> They should not give orders to any person, but such as were learned in holy scripture; neither should deny them to such as were learned in the same, being of honest conversation and living.[19]

This scriptural emphasis was carried right into the *Ordinal* of 1552. Thus in the Consecration Service the new bishop was to be questioned as follows:

> Are you persuaded that the holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrine required of necessity for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? Are you determined out of the same holy Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge?... Will you then faithfully exercise yourself in the same holy Scriptures, and call upon God by prayer, for the true understanding of the same; so as you may be able by them to teach...[20]

By the same token, however, the *Ordinal* marked an interesting

16 CW p 117
17 CW pp 504–505
18 CW p 505
19 CW p 505
20 *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: CUP 1960) p 303

development in Cranmer's understanding of the place of episcopacy. This is to be found as early as the *Preface* which begins thus:

> It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy scripture and ancient authors, that from the apostles' time there hath been these orders of ministers in Christ's church; bishops, priests, and deacons.[21]

It was noticeable in the previous chapter that Cranmer made a significant shift of his position with regard to the monarchy towards the end of his life. What is interesting here is that a similar process would appear to have been underway in his attitude to the episcopate. Thus, while the retention of bishops was originally a mere issue of *Adiaphora*, now it is evident that the Archbishop considered it to be much more central. If bishops had been instituted during the apostolic era, then the Church could have no right to remove them from its structure of authority. Furthermore the three orders of ordained ministry, being thus cast in stone in the *Preface* to the *Ordinal*, had by this stage become distinctive in Cranmer's mind, and his earlier Hieronymian outlook seems to have receded somewhat. It is worth discussing this development as a means of tracing some of the influences upon Cranmer's thinking.

Jasper Ridley notes that Cranmer, even as early as 1549, was becoming increasingly concerned with Protestant extremism, and his new emphasis upon the role of the ordained episcopate may have owed much to his desire to undermine this by bolstering the establishment.[22] The most obvious influence behind the 1552 *Ordinal*, however, came in the person of Martin Bucer.[23] Bucer had come to England at Cranmer's invitation in 1549 and, having been appointed to a chair at Cambridge, he quickly published a number of tracts as comments upon Cranmer's liturgical revision. All these were influential and it is self-evident that the Archbishop leaned heavily on Bucer's counsel. There is even an extant letter of 1550 from Cranmer to Bucer in which the Archbishop sought his advice:

> To these questions [concerning vestures], if you will make most brief answer, and send unto me your judgment as soon as you may possibly, you shall do me great pleasure.[24]

21 CW p 519

22 See J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) pp 290 ff.

23 Martin Bucer (1491–1551) is best known for his attempts to make peace between the Lutherans of northern Germany and the Zwinglians of southern Germany. He spent most of his life at Strasbourg until forced to leave because of his opposition to Charles V's 'Augsburg Interim', the proposed compromise of 1548. He is also thought to have been anxious for reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the various reformed groupings.

24 CW p 428

When it came to the *Ordinal* Bucer's recommendations, which were adopted, included the replacement of any trace of sacerdotalism with a new emphasis upon the preaching of the divine Word, the removal of most of the old visual ceremonies, and a reduction in the number of orders. The mediaeval Church had created a full spectrum of lesser orders such as sub-deacons, acolytes, exorcists, lectors and ostiaries and all of these were systematically abolished. Paul Avis notes, however, that even from 1536 Bucer had become more and more clerically orientated; at that stage he believed in a fourfold office of the ministry, namely, pastor, doctor, elder and deacon.[25] Thus, while in many ways the alterations in the *Ordinal* were sweeping, it is conceivable that Cranmer, under the influence of Bucer, felt he had gone as far as he reasonably could or should, and that on account of this the threefold ministry itself was left untouched.

There are two other possible reasons which may underlie Cranmer's retention of the episcopate, and to assess these we need a wider view. It is evident all along that Cranmer was deeply aware of the English communion's role as but one small part of the Church universal, and, throughout his life, he maintained a passionate longing for the unity of the Church. In Cranmer's later years this emerges forcefully from his correspondence with a number of his fellow Reformers. We know, for example, that the Archbishop made a concerted attempt to convene a full-scale Protestant synod. In 1548 he wrote to Albert Hardenberg:

> We are desirous of setting forth in our churches the true doctrine of God... For the purpose of carrying this important task into effect we hold it necessary to have the assistance of learned men, who... may do away with doctrinal controversies, and establish an entire system of true doctrine. We have therefore sent for many pious and learned men...[26]

In 1549 he wrote to Melanchthon:

> I am aware that you have often desired that wise and godly men should take counsel together, and, having compared their opinions, send forth under their authority some work, that should embrace the chief subjects of ecclesiastical doctrine, and transmit the truth uncorrupted to posterity. This object we are anxiously endeavouring to achieve to the utmost of our power.[27]

Cranmer's initial attempts to bring such a meeting together were

25 See P D L Avis *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London 1981) p 103.
26 CW p 423
27 CW p 426

abortive. However, he was nothing if not persistent. Again in 1552 we read his letter to John Calvin:

> As nothing tends more injuriously to the separation of the churches than heresies and dispute respecting the doctrines of religion; so nothing tends more effectually to unite the churches of God... than the pure teaching of the gospel, and harmony of doctrine. Wherefore I have often wished, and still continue to do so, that learned and godly men... might meet together... and handle all the heads of ecclesiastical doctrine... under the weight of their authority.[28]

Despite his efforts, Cranmer's dream was never to be realised. Nevertheless this should not divert us from the fact that, for the oversight of the Church as a whole, Cranmer clearly envisaged a collective form of episcopacy, involving all those who could agree together of the authority of the Bible.

In keeping the threefold structure of the ordained ministry the English Church alone remained outwardly similar to the Roman Catholic Church. Part of the reason for this may have been the Archbishop's recurrent conviction that to be reformed was to be truly catholic and his natural desire to demonstrate this to his adversaries. It may also have been in the back of Cranmer's mind that the retention of the episcopate *per se* might in due course have facilitated some kind of reunion with the Roman Church, but only ever on the basis of accepted scriptural teaching. However, bearing in mind his comments about the Pope and the papal dominion, which we have considered elsewhere, this is a largely speculative statement and should be treated accordingly.

The other possible reason for Cranmer's retention of bishops has to do with the general social climate within England in the mid sixteenth century. Jasper Ridley observes that there was much moral degeneration in public life and that Cranmer was naturally very keen to counter this. One of the ways in which he went about this was by re-establishing the authority of the Episcopal Court. This body was afforded new powers on the basis of ecclesiastical laws which extended beyond the domain of heresy. Again the weight of circumstances may have forced Cranmer's hand to some extent. Be that as it may, the episcopate was granted the performance of these new tasks and thus its own survival was further assured.[29]

The final area for our consideration is that of the functioning of

28 CW p 432
29 See J Ridley *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: OUP 1966) p 330.

episcopal oversight. In 1552 the *Forty-two Articles* were published and, by royal decree, all clergy were obliged to subscribe to these:

> ...which Articles we will and exhort yourself to subscribe, and in your preachings, readings, and teachings to observe, and cause to be subscribed and observed of all other, which do, and hereafter shall preach, or read, within your diocese.[30]

The Articles formed a yardstick of orthodoxy for the Church of the realm and inasmuch as the bishops had to obey their contents, they were also required to enforce the same standards on those clerics who served under them. Failure to do so, as the mandate goes on to declare, would lead to removal from office or a refusal to admit into office in the first place. In such an instance the bishop was not to act on his own authority, for in that sense he did not in fact have any, but rather to draw the attention of the civil authorities to the case in hand and allow them to deal with it:

> And if any person or persons... shall from henceforth not only refuse wilfully to set their hands to these Articles, but also obstinately exhort their parochians to withstand the same... our pleasure is, that, being duly proved, ye shall advertise us, or our council, of the whole matter fully, to the intent such further order may by direction from us, or our said council, be taken, as the case shall require.[31]

Once more it is easy to see how the episcopate was perceived as an arm of the political establishment. Within the later sixteenth century, with the rise and growing opposition of the Puritan party, this understanding of Cranmer and his contemporaries would be enhanced to the extent that the estate of the bishops was raised even higher. In subsequent years the royal supremacy would essentially come to mean government under the crown, not by Parliament, but by the episcopate.[32] For our purposes it is sufficient to note that Cranmer paved the way for this aberration.

Cranmer's attitude to the episcopate is at once straightforward and highly nuanced. It was natural that the Church in every age needed some manner of spiritual oversight and direction, for Christ himself had clearly left instructions to this very end.[33] Cranmer was the inheritor of a threefold system of ordained church government which dated back to the early

30 CW p 532

31 CW p 532

32 This point is discussed more fully in C Cross 'Churchmen and the Royal Supremacy' F Heal and R O'Day edd *Church and Society in England; Henry VIII to James I* (London 1977) pp 27ff.

33 It was precisely for the purposes of oversight that the first apostles were appointed. Cf Matt 16:18, Luke 22:31, John 21:15–17.

second century but, as with every other aspect of ecclesiastical life, it had suffered much corruption away from its original intention. Cranmer's decision to retain the order of bishops was initially, at any rate, a matter of pure pragmatism. The scriptural gospel legislated explicitly neither for or against them. Later, however, in the face of mounting pressure from a nascent non-conformist movement, and in view of the highpoint of his own idealised Erastianism under Edward, he enshrined, within the pages of the *Ordinal*, the ordained episcopate as a biblical injunction. In the light of Cranmer's shift away from royal absolutism not long after this,[34] it is interesting to ponder how this might in due course have filtered into his thinking on the issue of Church order. That much said, however, the evidence of Cranmer's own mind in this area runs dry in 1552, except to note that his continuing contacts with the Continental Reformers, in an effort to assemble their combined wisdom in this and every matter, witnesses to his ongoing acceptance of non-episcopal denominations and his desire for collective oversight within the Church of Christ.

MAURICE ELLIOTT is Curate at St Patrick's Church, Coleraine.

34 Cf *Churchman* 109/3 pp 246ff.