

TRINITY LECTURE 2 - Cranmer - Rediscovering the Power of the Bible

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[0 : 00] Well, thank you very much for your imaginative introduction, Rod. George does send his best wishes, by the way.

My previous poodle, Poppy, was not as polite as George, and on one occasion in the 80s I was taking a preaching class at Ridley. I think Paul might have been in it, actually.

And some poor student preached his first sermon, which was not of a great quality. And the time came to comment on the sermon, and no one could think of anything to say about it.

So Poppy stood up and vomited. Not discreetly, but publicly, loudly, and as if she was really enjoying it. Poppy, mind you, was the dog, not another student.

I don't think that student has ever preached again. Well, let's turn our attention tonight. We're thinking about the Reformation, and we're turning tonight, as we've seen, to the Reformation in England, and to particularly Thomas Cranmer.

[1 : 06] Thomas Cranmer was an Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry VIII, his son Edward VI, and Cranmer was put to death in the time of Queen Mary. He promoted the Reformation under the direction of King Henry VIII, continued this ministry during the reign of his son Edward, and he was put to death because he refused to renounce his Reformed faith.

He was the architect of the Reformed Anglican Church and the Reformed Book of Common Prayer, and promoted gospel ideas by all means in his power.

When we think about the Reformation, the Great Reformation, it's often in terms of the great slogans, Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, the Bible alone.

Of these slogans, though the slogan Christ alone, that is, Christ is the only Savior, the only one to be worshipped, Christ alone is more central. Of course, the Bible alone is actually more fundamental and formative, because we gain our understanding of Christ and the gospel, and indeed God, from the Bible.

In the words of James Smart, who wrote this in 1970, without the Bible, the remembered Christ becomes the imagined Christ. We might expand that and say, without the Bible, the remembered God, or the thought about God, becomes the imagined God.

[2 : 35] Now, when we think about the role of the Bible in the Reformation, it's often in terms of its authority. And indeed, and I'm pleased to say this, the authority of the Bible is written into the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia.

One of our fundamental declarations is this. Number two, this church, that is the Anglican Church of Australia, receives all the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as being the ultimate rule and standard of faith, given by inspiration of God, and containing all things necessary for salvation.

Well, while Cranmer certainly believed in the authority of the Bible, and we'll see that, he also believed in its power, and it's this scene that I want to develop tonight. And I do this because it's a striking feature of Cranmer's theology, and of his theology of the Bible.

It's also true, I think, to the Bible's own self-description. If you ask the question, what does the Bible claim about itself, its most frequent claim and constant claim is that it is a powerful word.

And because this issue of the power of the Bible is of great relevance to our use of the Bible today. See, if you think to yourself, the Bible is true, but not powerful, then you'll believe it, but not use it.

[3 : 51] If you believe the Bible is true and powerful, then you'll use it, and use it in your ministry to help others to know God. Well, in Thomas Cranmer's day, who was born in 1489, England and Europe are ripe for Reformation.

Reformation. And Reformation always comes from the rediscovery of the Bible or of the message of the Bible. The Bible in the church of the time in Europe was weakened because only the clergy knew the Bible.

The Bible was mixed with the teaching of the church given equal authority of the Bible, whether they were theologians, councils of the church or the Pope. The Bible was read often second-hand, that is, people read commentaries about the Bible rather than the Bible itself.

It wasn't read in Hebrew or Greek, the original languages, but in a translated form called the Vulgate. That's the Bible translated into Latin. Many clergy were illiterate, so they didn't know the scriptures and could not preach them.

And the increased focus on the liturgy, that is, the service, resulted in a reduced focus on the reading and preaching of the Bible. Worse than that, lay people were particularly ignorant of the Bible because around 1000 AD, the church had decided that the Bible was beyond lay people.

[5 : 27] And so the church would use statues and paintings instead of the Bible, and they described those statues and paintings as the Bible of the uneducated.

So that's why you'll see in many European churches of the medieval period, they're covered with paintings of Bible stories or stained glass windows in some cases, or statues.

Why is that so? Well, the church had decided about 1000 AD that people couldn't understand the Bible, so they'd have statues and paintings to tell the story of the Bible instead. They had statues and paintings.

The Bible, if it was read, was read in Latin, which most people couldn't understand. The Bible was compromised by the addition of stories about saints and miracles and so on. It was also compromised by being read in selections rather than being read in its entirety.

Amazingly, Martin Luther was ordained. At the time he was ordained, he'd never actually seen a Bible. Isn't that extraordinary? Now, each one of these issues which I've just talked about would have been destructive, but the cumulative and combined effect of all of these in combination was fatal to vigorous Christianity.

[6 : 48] For, to quote James Smart again, without the Bible, the remembered Christ becomes the imagined Christ. However, it's also true that in the time which Cranmer lived and learnt, there were a number of influences in England which made it more likely that he would study the Bible.

The work of Wycliffe in the 14th century and his followers, the Lollards, they had been most interested in the Bible and provided many Bible translations which were prohibited publicly but circulated privately.

The influence of the humanist movement in Europe, which was a movement about the rediscovery, among other things, of original texts like the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, that it had good influence.

So a man called John Collett had come back from Italy and had lectured on Corinthians and Romans. And Erasmus, one of the humanist leaders, had visited England and taught in Cambridge. There'd also been some more recent translations of the Bible, that by Tyndale in 1526 and Coverdale in 1535.

And when Thomas Cranmer was a student in Cambridge, the influence of Luther was already coming across from the continent. And perhaps significantly, three leaders of the Reformation, Cranmer, Ridley and Latimer, all studied theology at Cambridge, whereas the leaders of the counter-reformation, like Gardner and Samson, had studied canon law.

[8 : 24] Well, that's a kind of historical introduction. I want to make now the first of five points about Cranmer's view of the scriptures. The first point is that God has spoken powerful words.

In 1547, Cranmer produced the first book of homilies. These were sermons, and their purpose was to provide a public statement of reformed Anglican theology, and also to provide sermons for clergy to read to their congregation, if they were unable to or unlicensed to preach.

And the first book of homilies included sermons on the following topics. Here are the first five, and their little summary of the gospel, really, begins with a fruitful exaltation to the reading of scripture.

Secondly, of the misery of all mankind, that means its sinfulness. Next, the salvation of all mankind, then of a true and lively faith, and then of good works.

And here are some quotations from the first homily, written by Thomas Cranmer, a fruitful exhortation to the reading of holy scripture. Unto a Christian man, and he means, of course, Christian woman as well, there can be nothing more necessary or profitable than the knowledge of holy scripture, for as much as in it is contained God's true word, setting forth his glory and also man's duty.

[9 : 44] So he's saying, Christian people ought to read the Bible, because there we find God's true word of his glory and our duty. So he says, let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by man's imagination for our justification and salvation.

And in the most significant quotation from this first homily, here are the words, the words of holy scripture be called words of everlasting life, for they be God's instruments, that's the key word, God's instruments ordained for the same purpose.

And in fact, here, Cranmer is quoting from the early church preacher and writer, John Chrysostom, who described the Bible and the words of scripture as the instruments of our salvation.

An instrument, of course, is a means or a tool. And by the instrument of the Bible, God achieves the work of bringing us to a saving knowledge of himself.

Well, here is an extended quotation where Cranmer talks again and again about the power of scripture. Please listen to this carefully. The scripture of God is the heavenly meat of our souls.

[11 : 08] The hearing and keeping of it maketh us blessed, sanctifieth us, and maketh us holy. It, that is scripture, turneth our souls.

It's a light lantern to our feet. It's a sure, steadfast, and everlasting instrument of salvation. It giveth wisdom to the humble and lowly hearted. It comforts, makes glad, cheers, and cherishes our conscience.

The words of Holy Scripture should be called the words of everlasting life for they're God's instrument. They have the power to turn through God's promise. They're effective through God's assistance.

And being received in a faithful heart, they have a heavenly spiritual working in them. Or again, there is nothing that so much strengthens our faith and trust in God that so much keeps up innocency and pureness of the heart and also of outward life and conversation as the continual reading and recording of God's word.

For that thing which by continual reading of Holy Scripture is deeply printed and engraven in the heart at length turns almost into nature. That's a wonderful statement, isn't it?

[12 : 26] God works in us so deeply, so profoundly, so constantly that eventually serving God, doing God's will becomes almost natural to us.

And it's true, isn't it? You meet lots of old believers like myself, my kind of age, and some of them at least just seem to serve God naturally and joyfully.

They're not thinking to themselves, well I must do what the Bible says. No, they are so formed by the scriptures, by the words of God that they seem to do the will of God almost, they just naturally turn to God, they naturally trust in God because God has transformed them not by laws from the outside but by the work of his spirit within them.

Now what Cranmer is saying about the power of the Bible of course reflects what the Bible says about itself. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.

We read in Acts that the word of God increased, the word of God continued to advance and gain adherence, the word of God grew mightily and prevailed. We read in Colossians that the word of truth the gospel has come to you is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world.

[13 : 54] It's being bearing fruit among yourselves. In 1 Peter that we're born anew through the living and enduring word of God or in James that God gave us birth by the word of truth and we should welcome with meekness the implanted word which is able to save your souls.

Jesus himself spoke in John 15 when he said to the disciples you've been made clean by the word I've spoken to you and Jesus likens the growth of the kingdom of God as the sower sows the word.

The kingdom of God is as if someone sowed seed upon the ground. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Few things more powerful than seeds. No wonder then Paul says in Romans 16 that God is able to strengthen you by my gospel that is the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

and if generally the gospel is powerful then scripture says about itself in particular that it's powerful. Here's the end of Joshua.

Not one word has failed of all the good words that the Lord your God has promised concerning you. All have come to pass not one has fallen to the ground. What he's saying is every word of God has reached its target.

[15 : 06] That's wonderful isn't it? Or here's Psalm 19. The law of the law is perfect reviving the soul making wise the simple enlightening the eyes. Or God says in Isaiah 55 My word will not return to me empty but will accomplish my purpose.

So if you like our belief is in the power of the word of God that is the gospel in the words of God that is the Bible.

So what I'm saying is that Cranmer believed in the power of the word of God. Now that's a very important issue for us today because lots of theologians around the world today teach that words are powerless to communicate God.

That human words are too weak too finite to communicate an infinite God. What happened I think was in the 19th century there's a growing belief that God was not the author of the Bible and in the 20th century a growing belief that God could not be communicated.

You couldn't communicate the truth about God with words. And we have today a frightening mixture I think of neoplatonic Catholic spirituality a romantic movement distrust of words to communicate emotions and presence of emotions and a postmodern distrust in words and their meaning combining to produce a belief that intelligible speech cannot communicate God.

[16 : 49] On the contrary Cranmer believed that the words of the Bible were God's instrument to bring us to faith in Jesus Christ. Second point God's powerful words are for lay people and I wasn't expecting to find this theme so powerfully in Cranmer's writings.

There had been no accepted English translation of the Bible until 1539. Bibles had been in Latin available to ministers if they wanted to find them not to lay people.

No Bible readings in English in churches. But in 1539 King Henry commanded that a copy of the Bible in English be put in every church in England.

So this was the first Bible endorsed rather than condemned. Just a few years before Tyndale had been killed for translating the Bible and it was the popular Bible in England until 1560 when the Geneva Bible took over.

And Cranmer wrote a preface to the second edition of this 1539 Bible in 1540 and his main concern in the preface is to commend the reading of the Bible to lay people.

[18 : 10] It isn't about ministers what they do, it's about lay people. He wants to encourage those who are reluctant to read the Bible and also warn those who are overexcited about Bible reading to learn to read with patience and humility.

Notice again that his focus is on what the Bible can do on the power of the Bible. I would marvel much that any man would be so mad as to refuse in darkness light, in hunger food, and when cold fire.

why should lay people read the Bible? Well, when lay people are under pressure, where canst thou have armor or fortress against thine assaults?

Where canst thou find healing for thy sores but of Holy Scripture? When troubles or temptations arise, then you're really in trouble unless, as Cranmer wrote, thou hast in readiness wherewith to suppress and avoid them, which cannot elsewhere be had but only out of Holy Scriptures.

And more significantly, I think, wheresoever these holy and spiritual books be occupied, that is, where they focus our attention, then neither the devil nor none of his angels dare come near.

[19 : 27] And then he returns to the theme of the Bible as God's instrument. Of like mind and affection ought we to be towards the Holy Scriptures, for as mallets, saws, chisels, axes and hatchets be the tools of our occupation, that is, for those who spend their time using mallets, saws, chisels, axes and hatchets, so be the books of the prophets and apostles and all holy writ inspired by the Holy Ghost in the instruments of our salvation.

For the Holy Ghost has so ordered and tempered the Scriptures, that in them as well publicans, fishers and shepherds may find their edification as great doctors their erudition.

So the reading of Scripture is a great and strong bulwark, or fortress against sin. The ignorance of the same, of Scripture, is greater ruin and destruction of them that will not know.

Or in this beautiful image, I love this, in the Scriptures be the fat pastures of the soul. Isn't that splendid? If you're a sheep, you're looking for fat pastures, go to the Scriptures. But notice the contrast then.

Therein is no venomous meat, no unwholesome thing. So stick to the Scriptures, because anything else will do you damage. The Scriptures will feed you. Other teaching from other sources will cause you damage.

[20 : 52] They be the very dainty and pure feeding. He that is ignorant shall find there what he should learn. He that is a perverse sinner shall there find his damnation to make him fear or tremble.

He that laboreth to serve God shall find there, that is in Scripture, his glory and the promises of eternal life, exhorting him more diligently to labor. But the Scriptures for Cramer not only tell us how to serve God, but how to live our daily lives.

Herein may princes learn how to govern their subjects, subjects' obedience, love, and dread to their princes, husbands, how they should behave them to their wives, how to educate their children and servants.

On contrary, the wives, children and servants may dare their duty to their husbands, parents and masters. Here may all manner of persons, men, women, young, old, learned, unlearned, rich, poor, priests, laymen, lords, ladies, officers, tenants, mean men, virgins, wives, widows, lawyers, merchants, artificers, husbandmen, and all manner of persons, or whatever estate or condition, soever they may be, may in this book, that is in the Bible, learn all things they ought to believe, what they ought to do, what they ought not to do, as well as concerning Almighty God, as concerning themselves and all other.

What was happening, of course, is that in the Reformation, it wasn't just people in monasteries, it wasn't just the priests who were learning to serve God, but actually ordinary people, Christians were learning to serve God, and Cranmer says they'll learn that from the scriptures.

[22 : 32] Furthermore, he quotes Gregory, one of the early church writers, I commend the law which bideth to meditate and study the scriptures always, both day and night, and sermons and preachings to be made both morning, noon, and eventide.

And I trust, Hilliard Holy Trinity, sermons are being made morning, noon, and eventide. For indeed, the word of God is the most precious jewel and the most holy relic that remains on earth.

So Cranmer didn't just want preachers to preach the scriptures and read the scriptures. He wanted ordinary believers to read the Bible to be taught by God through its wisdom. He wanted them to experience the power of the teaching and transforming God.

Well, I visited some friends of mine, a few years ago, and they had four children, and next to their meal table they had a blackboard, a very old-fashioned blackboard, with their verse for the week.

It was, I remember, Galatians, the fruit of the spirit. And what they were doing is every time they met together as a family to have a meal, they talked about what was going on during the day.

[23 : 44] They also talked about this Bible verse. Well, Cranmer would have been very pleased, wouldn't he? Because there they were as a family studying the word of God, talking about it with their children.

That's exactly what Cranmer wanted to happen. So, God's powerful words, first point. Second point, God's powerful words for lay people.

Third point, God's powerful and true words. It's commonly asserted nowadays, and then in communion, that truth is the product of the community. Cranmer believed that the community is the product of the truth.

It's the Bible that produces the church, the truth that produces the community. And the great slogan from the Reformation, the Bible alone, is saying that from the Bible alone, and in the Bible alone, we find the truth of God.

So, Cranmer wrote, whatsoever is found in scripture must be taken for a most sure and infallible truth. In his Confutation Against Unwritten Verities, he attacked the idea that angels or oracles or miraculous events or customs could compete with scripture.

[25 : 02] In fact, he said these miracles be often delusions of the devil or his juggling ministers. He wrote, the scripture of the church is the pillar of truth because it rests on God's word, which is the true and sure foundation and will not suffer it to err and fall.

And, if a church neglects the scriptures, it's not a pillar of truth nor a church of Christ but the synagogue of Satan and the temple of Antichrist, which both errs itself and brings into error as many as to follow it.

God's word, he attacked the idea that there were words of God outside scripture. If there were any word of God beside the scripture, we could never be certain of God's word.

If we be uncertain of God's word, the devil might bring in among us a new word, a new doctrine, a new faith, a new church, a new God, yea, himself to be a God.

Or again, without faith it's impossible to please God, faith comes by hearing of God's word, therefore where there is no word of God, there can be no faith.

[26 : 20] But significantly, I think, for Cranmer, the final issue is not truth against error, but God against Satan. See, Cranmer doesn't think that human beings are neutral, all living in neutral territory.

He thinks we are being bombarded on the one hand by the word of God, and on the other hand, by the lies of Satan. So here is not a modern or scientific search for truth over against error.

Cranmer's concern is that we hear the truth of God, lest we be seduced by the lies of Satan. So he's committed to the idea of the Bible as the place where we find God's powerful and true words.

The fourth point, rather more briefly, the Bible as a powerful instrument of ministry. In the English service, he said, appointed to be read, there is nothing but the eternal word of God.

The New and Old Testaments are read that have power to save your souls. Now in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, when priests were ordained, they were given, at the heart of their ordination service, a chalice and a pattern, that is, a cup and a plate, and that was to tell them that the heart of their ministry was the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or as it was then called, the Mass.

[28 : 00] Cranmer changed that in the 1550 ordinal, he made sure that ministers were given, first of all, a Bible, and then a chalice, a cup and a plate, but in 1552, in the next ordination service that he wrote, those being ordained priests were given a Bible only and no cup and plate.

And what he was saying to the ministers being ordained at that time was, your tool of ministry is the Bible, use it. So as one modern writer has put it, the reading or hearing of the word of God is the sacrament of the gospel.

Cranmer places such emphasis on the scriptures because he saw them as the fundamental sacramental means of divine grace. And if the tool of ministry is a Bible, then of course, as we read in the preface to the homilies, the preaching is the setting forth and pure declaring of God's word.

But I remember a number of years ago, I discovered that the book I carried with me all the time was a diary and not a Bible. Isn't that interesting? What's that tell you about me? That tells you that I live in the Western world and I want to remember what I'm doing or try to remember, though I've double booked myself twice tomorrow, and that being organized is the most important thing.

Well, I should throw my Bible away, shouldn't I? Because the chief tool of ministry is actually a Bible, not a diary. And one thing I say to ministers, I warn them that in 10 years' time I'll ask the question, not do you still believe the Bible, but are you using the Bible in your ministry?

[29 : 52] It's amazing, you know, people do ministry without using the Bible at all. They preach sermons without the Scriptures, they do discipling without a Bible, they do marriage counseling without a Bible, they try and teach young people without a Bible, they do evangelism without a Bible.

Isn't that amazing? When the very tool we're given to do our ministry is a Bible. So Cranmer's saying, you've got a Bible, use it.

If the Bible is God's tool, it's a tool he's given to you for your ministry as well. No wonder then Cranmer wrote in the 40 articles that the Church of God is a congregation of faithful men and women in the which the pure word of God is preached.

He meant by the pure word of God, the pure word of God from the scriptures and not an adulterated word, adulterated by our ideas or the ideas of our imagination.

Final point, and this is I think one of the most moving points that I have to say tonight, and that is that Cranmer also put forward the idea of the Bible as a prayed book.

[31 : 16] Cranmer is perhaps best known today as the architect of the formed English prayer books. He was responsible for the books of 1549 and 1552. It's those books that form the foundation of the 1662 prayer book, which has not only formed the prayers and liturgy of Anglicans, but also informed and expressed their theology.

So here is one of the ruling principles of the Anglican Church of Australia. It's hereby further declared that the Book of Common Prayer, together with the 13 articles, be regarded as the authorised standard of worship and doctrine in this church.

So Cranmer not only wanted people to hear the scriptures, he wanted people to use the scriptures in responding to God.

And Cranmer's prayer books express the scriptures in their theology, their commitment to the reading of the scriptures, the shape of the services, and the very words of the prayers.

If you think about it, the Bible contains not any instructions about God, but also expresses what it's like for the people of God to respond to God in words of praise, adoration, confession, affirmation, lament, and intercession.

[32 : 30] We find this throughout the Psalms, of course, the most obvious example, but also, of course, in many other prayers and songs elsewhere in the Bible. So if you want to know what it feels like to be a believer, pray your way through the Psalms.

Well, how did Cranmer put the Bible into the prayer book? Four ways. First of all, the theology of the prayer book. So, for example, in the prayer of thanksgiving in the communion service, the minister prays about Jesus Christ and his cross, who made there by his one sacrifice himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice of relation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

So for Cranmer, praying doesn't mean theology-less praying, it means truthful praying. They're big prayers, not little prayers.

Secondly, the book of common prayer, prayer as it developed, had a commitment to the reading of the scriptures. And Cranmer's great aim was that the psalms be read every month and all the rest of the scripture throughout the year in both Sunday and daily readings.

So he's committed to the fact that we ought to hear the Bible read, and that is really, that forms the shape of morning and evening prayer. prayer. But thirdly, the very shape of the services, they're gospel shaped.

[34 : 08] So think of the service of morning or evening prayer in the old prayer book, where first of all addressed by the Bible, I will arise and go to my father and say to him, Father, I've sinned against you, and so on.

Then we confess our sins, we receive assurance of forgiveness, we meditate on the word of God in the Psalms, we hear the words of God in Old and New Testament readings, then we respond to those readings with words of faith when we say the creed, I believe in God, and then we pray for the world.

Now there are a few ingredients there which get left out of services today, I'm afraid. It's very easy to go to services where we don't confess our sins, we don't hear the Bible read, we don't respond with what we believe, and we don't pray for others.

So Kranma crafted the shape of the services so they reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ. One writer described the communion service of 1552 as the only effective attempt ever made to give liturgical expression of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

men. But not only does the scripture form the shape of the services, but the very words of the prayers, as I'm sure you'll know, are the words of scripture.

[35 : 37] We return God's words to himself when we pray the words of the Bible. Bible. Well, what I've tried to talk to you tonight about is Kranma's theology of the Bible, which had a profound effect on him and on the Reformation in England, and thus to the inheritance of reformed theology that we enjoy today.

God's powerful words, first point. Second point, God's powerful words for lay people, that is, the Bible's not a book for ministers, but for everybody, every believer, as we might say.

Third point, God's powerful and true words. The fourth point, the Bible is a powerful instrument for ministry that we should all be using. And the fifth point, the idea that the Bible is prayed when we return God's words to him in prayer.

Ashley Null, who's the world authority on Kranma, gave a seminar at Ridley a few years ago, and we asked him what was Kranma's view of the Bible. He said, the Bible tells the way of salvation, the Bible turns us to Christ, and the Bible tethers us to Christ.

Tells us the way of salvation, turns us or converts us, and then keeps us believers. So let me end then with some more words from Kranma from his catechism.

[37 : 18] As much as lies in you, apply yourselves to hear godly sermons. Give your hearts to God like wax, apt and meet to receive what thing soever it shall please him to print in you.

For he that is willing and glad to listen to godly sermons, he that is studious to learn the word of God when Christ is preached, and with a steadfast faith cleaves to the promise of the gospel.

He is made partaker of this sanctification and holiness, and of this so great comfort and everlasting salvation. For God saith by his prophet Isaiah, my word shall not return to me in vain.

And St. Paul says, the gospel is the power of God wherewith he works the salvation of them that believe. Praise God.