

4

THE LATER YEARS WITH HENRY VIII

The Great (alias Cranmer's) Bible

Although the evangelical cause suffered numerous setbacks in the later years of Henry VIII's reign, in April 1539 there appeared the first edition of a new officially authorized Great Bible. This new translation was not, it seems, initiated by Cromwell (as some have claimed), instead Cromwell was prompted by Cranmer to persuade Henry to agree to its publication. Cranmer had given up on his bishops producing the translation that he had asked for, suggesting their work would not be ready until 'the day after doomsday'. On the Great Bible's title page a grateful people receive the word of God from the monarch — on his right the clerics and on his left the lay people. Despite Henry's innate conservatism and fear of radicalism, he seemed genuinely interested in securing the Bible in English for his subjects: he said that he wanted 'free and liberal use of the Bible in our own maternal tongue'. He commissioned Cranmer to write a

new preface for the Great Bible, which subsequently gained the misleading designation ‘Cranmer’s Bible’.

But just at this time Henry, after failing to come to any agreement with the Lutheran princes, decided England’s political fortunes lay with an alliance with the Empire after all, which in turn meant demonstrating that at heart he was a true Catholic — his problem all along had apparently been with the papacy.

The *Six Articles*

The *Six Articles* were duly pushed through Parliament the same year; they were undoubtedly a reversal for the evangelical cause. They reaffirmed Communion in one kind, clerical celibacy, the vows of chastity, and restated the doctrine of transubstantiation. Furthermore, they declared that confession is ‘expedient and necessary’ and that private masses should be permitted. But it was not perhaps as bad as it appeared for evangelicals: the word ‘transubstantiation’ was not used and confession was not described, as it had been previously, as ‘necessary to the law of God’.

Henry knew that the *Six Articles* went against Cranmer’s conscience, and so he told his friend that he could miss the final vote on the passage of the bill in the House of Lords. In a similar vein, when Sir John Gostwick complained to Henry about Cranmer’s sermons, which it appears were not in accord with the *Articles*, Henry was furious and threatened Gostwick with retribution if he did not personally apologize to Cranmer; no idle threat from one of the most ruthless monarchs of his age. Loyalty to Henry, at least in part,

accounts for the fact that Cranmer stayed on as archbishop when others at this time advised him to flee the country. But it is thought that, in 1539, Margaret, Cranmer's German-speaking wife, and at least one child, were sent back home and only returned again sometime under Edward's rule. It is only to be wondered how he had managed to keep her presence secret when so many of Cranmer's enemies were eager to discredit him before the king.

Despite the setback of the *Six Articles* all was not lost for the evangelicals: Henry's decision in the autumn of 1539 to marry Anne of Cleves, the sister of a Saxon prince, indicated a move away from an alliance with Roman Catholic France and the Holy Roman Empire, and instead towards Lutheran Germany. Although Cranmer was part of the negotiating team for this match, he showed his pastoral concern for Henry when he expressed doubts that Anne would make him happy. The politically motivated Cromwell had no time for what he saw as Cranmer's naïve approach and pushed the negotiations through — much to his subsequent regret.

The downfall of Thomas Cromwell

Later in 1539, Henry eventually met Anne of Cleves and immediately felt he had been duped about her supposed beauty. Despite Henry's attempts to avoid the match it was felt the political fallout would be too great and on 6 January 1540, Cranmer performed the ceremony.

But the king never forgave Cromwell. His enemies now saw their chance and plotted against him, with the result

that on 10 June, he was arrested and taken to the Tower. As he had three years previously for Anne Boleyn, Cranmer now pleaded heroically Cromwell's hopeless cause. But the conservatives were in the ascendancy, and they had successfully snared their chief enemy: the political genius who for so long had had the ear of the king which had enabled him to ruthlessly push through the reforms they had so resented. On 28 July 1540, Cromwell suffered the same fate as the young Anne Boleyn whom he had so effectively plotted against. And ironically, like her, he was falsely convicted on a confusing mixture of rumour and innuendo. It is said that Henry VIII deliberately chose an inexperienced executioner, a young boy, who made three attempts at severing Cromwell's head before finally succeeding.

What is to be made of Cromwell? Without him the pace of reform would have been less swift and might have stalled altogether. Cranmer did not have the political skill to work in that arena — he relied on Cromwell to push through both Parliament and Convocation all of the changes he wanted. They had a close and successful working relationship and, indeed, friendship. And yet it seems the motivations of the two men were entirely different. Cromwell does not appear to have had a personal faith in the gospel that the new learning had revealed; he backed the reforms in as far as they enhanced his power and wealth, dispensing with others (notably Anne Boleyn) when they got in his way. In contrast, Cranmer used his power in office, an office he was reluctant to accept, to drive forward the cause of the gospel, often at personal cost to himself and eventually, as shall be seen, paying the ultimate price to witness to the Saviour he believed in.

Anne of Cleves divorced

Now there was more controversy for Cranmer as he looked to do Henry's bidding to extract him from the marriage with Anne of Cleves. It was decided that there existed for Anne a pre-contract of marriage with the Duke of Lorraine; this, coupled with Henry's claimed lack of adequate consent and non-consummation, absolved the consciences of a sufficient number of clergy in the gathered assembly to pronounce, on 9 July 1540, that the marriage was null. The anomalies created by the abundance of reasons mustered for the annulment echo the annulment of Anne Boleyn's marriage. Anne of Cleves graciously accepted the divorce and retired to the country on a generous pension from Henry. MacCulloch wryly comments: 'No one has ever suggested she made the wrong decision.' Within days Henry had married the nineteen-year-old Catherine Howard.

The Privy Council formalized

To sum up the confusion of these tumultuous times, on 30 July, Henry executed for treason three Catholics who supported the papacy, and three prominent evangelicals for heresy. The following month the Privy Council, which up to this point had been an informal group of advisors to the king, was given a formal constitution. First in the list of precedence was to be the Archbishop of Canterbury.

But Henry's health was in decline, and he often expressed his regret at Cromwell's demise; he seems to have realized, somewhat belatedly, that the charges against him had largely

been false. Henry realized that he needed to be wary of those at court whose allegiance was primarily to Rome and the old religion. Furthermore, unrest continued in the north of the country and this reminded the king of how close the earlier Pilgrimage of Grace had been to becoming a major rebellion. Neither of these facts did the evangelical cause any harm and when the king went on a visit to the north with his new wife Catherine Howard, Cranmer was left behind very much 'in charge' of the affairs of state. In May, the Privy Council announced financial penalties for parishes that did not have a copy of the Great Bible in every church. The French ambassador who, understandably, was having difficulty keeping his bearings with the theological seesaw, reported back with some amazement to King Francis that in England preaching was now to be based on the pure text of Scripture. In July, Cranmer was the author of a royal proclamation reducing the number of saints' days and, in the autumn, royal letters were sent out ordering the final destruction of the remaining shrines, including the image of Our Lady at Canterbury Cathedral.

The Six Preachers

Furthermore, Cranmer was able to ensure the appointment of several evangelical clergy to vacant posts, including three of the Six Preachers of Canterbury Cathedral. One, John Scory, reportedly preached at the cathedral in March 1541 that 'he that doth deny that only faith doth justify would deny, if he durst be so bold, that Christ doth justify'. Many cathedral staff made formal complaints to Cranmer, but he gave them short shrift: 'You make a band, do you? I will break

your band, ywis, and I will make you leave your mumpsimus.¹ Cranmer had always wanted the cathedral to be a place of learning, like a university college, but the conservatives wanted it to be a place of prayer and beautiful music; it could be that Cranmer had some residual anger with the cathedral staff over losing that battle. The conservative view on the role of cathedrals within the Anglican Church has prevailed down to our own day.

On 1 June of the same year, Cranmer went to the cathedral and had an argument with Serles, one of the three conservative Six Preachers (Henry's idea of trying to balance the theological seesaw), over the devotion to images. In September, Serles took his complaints about Cranmer direct to Henry who was then in York; he was not granted an audience but members of the council with the king sent Serles back with a letter to Cranmer that Serles was not allowed to open. On receipt of the letter Cranmer had Serles committed to prison and temporarily expelled from the Six Preachers, thus demonstrating that in his stand against images Cranmer had support from within the council.

Catherine Howard's demise

It was at this time that Catherine Howard's sexual immorality before marriage and her subsequent adultery with Thomas Culpeper came to light. A minor courtier, John Lascelles, an evangelical, had been told by his sister what others at court already knew; Lascelles in turn chose to tell Cranmer. Cranmer shared the information with his co-councillors, Audley and Hertford, who had been left in London like Cranmer while the king and queen were on their royal visit

in the north. Audley and Hertford decided, not surprisingly, that it was Cranmer and not themselves who should present the news to Henry on his return. But even Cranmer, with his close friendship with the king, did not have the courage to speak the words to the face of the notoriously volcanic Henry and instead handed him a letter as the king attended Mass on 2 November 1541. Henry was stunned. But Cranmer need not have feared; his friendship and pastoral skill seemed to have prevented an immediate explosion of wrath from the king. This time there was no intricate fabricated plot. It emerged that, despite only being a young teenager, she had lived a sexually immoral life while living with the dowager Duchess of Norfolk (seemingly with that lady's knowledge) and had continued such while married to Henry. It was Cranmer who interviewed Catherine and despite initially denying the charges she eventually admitted to them all. Catherine's lovers were executed in the December and Catherine herself in February 1542, along with her chief accomplice Lady Rochford — Anne Boleyn's sister-in-law. At Anne Boleyn's trial Lady Rochford (Jane Boleyn), never a sympathizer with the evangelical cause, had falsely accused Anne and her own husband, George (also an evangelical), of incest. It is said that Jane declared her own death to be God's just punishment on her for the false accusations she had made against George and Anne.

Proposed revisions to the Great Bible

Many conservative members in Convocation had never been happy about making a Bible in English available in the parishes. But when, in January 1542, it was decided

to give Convocation the task of revising the Great Bible, those sympathetic to the conservative cause were keen to influence any new translation, and so they embraced the opportunity. Gardiner himself financed the distribution of an existing volume to enable those of their number considered to be theologians to start work. But in March Cranmer announced, much to the consternation of Convocation, that it was the king's wish that the universities should undertake the revision instead. But the Great Bible was in any case safe, as shortly after the announcement a royal four-year monopoly was given to Anthony Marler to print the existing version. In the end, there was no new official version until Elizabeth's reign.

The King's Book

In April 1543, Convocation sought to provide a new doctrinal statement based on a revision of the original *Bishops' Book*. In the debates, despite Cranmer's ever more desperate pleas, including an appeal to Henry to intercede, the doctrine of justification by faith was rejected. Published in the May and titled *The Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for any Christian Man*, it became known as *The King's Book*. Henry had demonstrated, as he had in his marginal notes on the original *Bishops' Book* deliberations, that he could not shake off the traditional teaching of the church — that of a works-based salvation. It undoubtedly represented a setback for the evangelicals.

Henry pushed on with his reversals of the reforms, probably because he wanted to show Charles V, to whom he was making diplomatic overtures, that at heart he was an

orthodox Roman Catholic. There followed a parliamentary bill to prohibit from Bible reading any group below the social standing of a yeoman (usually a free man owning a small area of land). In turn leading evangelicals were rounded up and detained for questioning as the conservative forces in London and Canterbury sensed things at last were going their way. Undoubtedly Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, was a moving force behind this.

Henry marries Catherine Parr

On 12 July 1543, Henry married his final wife Catherine Parr. Within days of the marriage the Privy Council, in Cranmer's absence, authorized the burning of three evangelicals at Windsor. Henry was keeping his distance from Cranmer during these theological reversals. For example, he had not been asked to officiate at the royal wedding ceremony.

Although it seems that Catherine was initially conservative in her beliefs, under Cranmer's influence she moved to an evangelical position during the short time she was married to Henry. This is clearly evidenced in the book that she wrote and had published shortly after Henry's death, which proclaimed justification by faith alone.

An archbishop in danger

Notwithstanding any evangelical teaching the new queen might have already embraced, this was an especially dangerous time for Cranmer. The conservatives were in the ascendancy again, Bishop Gardiner being a particularly

determined and powerful enemy of the evangelicals. In April 1543, a report of heresy in Kent (where Canterbury Cathedral is situated) was brought before the Privy Council. The council in turn presented the case to the king. The finger of blame was pointed directly at Cranmer himself. The summer wore on and a head of steam built up against Cranmer, but Henry did not seem to be taking any action. Then one late summer evening, as Henry was enjoying a trip down the Thames in his royal barge accompanied by his musicians, he came to Lambeth Bridge and called out to Cranmer: 'Ah, my chaplain, I have news for you! I know now who is the greatest heretic in Kent.' Henry duly showed the documentary evidence to Cranmer who 'besought his Highness to appoint such commissioners as would effectually try out the truth of those articles.' Henry told the hapless Cranmer that there was indeed to be an enquiry, only it was to be Cranmer himself who was going to be chief investigator; what is more he was to choose whosoever he wanted to assist him in his investigation. The greatest heretic in Kent was to investigate and pass judgement on himself.

Henry was a ruthless king and he could be petty and vindictive to those to whom he owed much. His friendship and loyalty to Cranmer in every phase of their shared life must surely speak much of Cranmer himself. Cranmer could now act against those that had not only sought to disgrace him but also, by their actions, had done so much to hinder the cause of the gospel. But Cranmer's investigation lacked rigour; MacCulloch comments that Cranmer 'had repeatedly shown himself devoid of the killer instinct if there was no one to back him up'. Or perhaps we could say when Cranmer was acting alone and not being pressured by somebody else's

agenda, he was happier to turn the other cheek. Cranmer allowed his commission of investigation to drag on with no definitive result. As a consequence, the conservatives began to regroup and two leading evangelicals were indicted for their preaching. On seeing the danger, and on Henry's authority, Ralph Morice, Cranmer's personal secretary, co-opted the more ruthless Dr Thomas Legh onto the enquiry team. Surprise night raids on prominent conservatives revealed incriminating correspondence. But Cranmer, after berating the culprits, duly forgave them and even continued to rely on some for their services, subsequently appointing one of them as a bishop.

Cranmer had yet to face one last attempt to bring him down; this time it was the Privy Council itself that plotted against him. It could be that the councillors wanted Cranmer out of the way before his commission of enquiry got to them. At the end of November 1543, they sought permission from Henry to summon Cranmer to appear and hear a fresh set of heresy charges put to him. Henry duly agreed but forewarned Cranmer in a private meeting of what was afoot. It seems that Cranmer thought he could successfully defend himself, to which the king replied: 'Do you not think that if they have you once in prison, three or four false knaves will soon be procured to witness against you and condemn you?' Then Henry gave Cranmer his personal ring.

Cranmer appeared next day at the council but was kept waiting outside for nearly an hour. When finally summoned inside, his colleagues duly announced that he was under arrest. Cranmer's response was simply to show them the ring, a sign that he had the personal protection and authority of the king behind him. Rushing from the chamber to escape the scene of a possible disaster they

were met by Henry. Morice (Cranmer's personal secretary) tells the story:

'How [asks Henry] have ye handled here my Lord Canterbury? What, make ye of him a slave, shutting him out of the Council chamber amongst serving men? ... I would you should well understand, that I account my Lord of Canterbury as faithful a man towards me as ever was prelate in this realm, and one to whom I am many ways beholding, by the faith, I owe unto God ... and therefore whoso will loveth me will regard him thereafter.' Upon this speech, they all, and especially the Duke of Norfolk, offered an excuse. They meant no harm to the Archbishop by putting him in the Tower; they thought that after his trial he would be set at liberty to his greater glory ... And so the King departed and the Lords shook hands every man with my Lord Cranmer, against whom nevermore after no man durst spurn during the King Henry's life.

Cranmer was safe. A consequence of the failed coup was that two were arrested: one died in prison, one was executed. Cranmer, true to form, showed no thirst for revenge or any malice and actually acted as a patron for one of those pardoned — the writer John Heywood.

In December 1543, the archbishop's palace at Canterbury was destroyed by fire, and Cranmer's brother-in-law and others died in the flames. The following August, when French warships threatened to make a landing at Dover, Cranmer (an accomplished hunter and rider) appeared on horseback with a hundred horsemen. He wore a helmet and carried a dagger, a page at his side ready with his gun. It was a striking image strangely at odds with the timid churchman and was long remembered in Kent.

Calmer waters

During the remainder of the 1540s, evangelicals steadily built their influence at court. Aiding the calmer theological waters seems to have been Henry's genuine happiness in his marriage with Catherine Parr. Her growing evangelical convictions must have been a great encouragement to Cranmer as he saw her stepson, Prince Edward, surrounded by tutors with evangelical leanings.

Despite this more benign atmosphere, the last year of Henry's life demonstrated that the evangelical cause still faced difficulties. Cranmer asked Henry to write to him urging him to abolish the adoration of images and crucifixes, but Stephen Gardiner wrote from Brussels warning Henry against further religious changes that might jeopardize negotiations with Charles V. The conservatives at court, despite recent reversals, renewed their efforts, believing the stakes were now higher as Henry's health grew weaker. Anne Askew (1521–1546), an evangelical who had links with Cranmer, was arrested and interrogated under torture by Chancellor Wriothsley and Lord Rich. They were hoping that she might reveal the names of wives of leading figures at court who had evangelical convictions, which, despite repeated efforts on the levers of the infamous rack by these eminent men, she categorically refused to do. She was eventually burnt at the stake on 16 July 1546, with three other evangelicals, including John Lascelles.

In light of the previous thirteen years of strife and rhetoric against Rome, it is a strange historical fact that it was at this time that Henry, in some considerable secrecy, was in touch with Gurone Bertano, a representative of the pope. It appears Henry was seeking some sort of reconciliation with

Rome. Some think that Henry pulled back from this venture because of the plot against Anne Askew. He suspected that Wriothesley and Rich were hoping she would implicate his beloved Queen Catherine.

But in the last months of his life, perhaps under the influence of his wife, Henry seemed to have renewed convictions about the direction of the reforms. In a spat over an exchange of land with the king, Gardiner misjudged Henry's mood, and he was promptly removed from the Privy Council. Another leading conservative, the Earl of Surrey (son of the powerful Duke of Norfolk), was executed.

A dying king

In late January, Henry knew the end was near, and refusing to see any other cleric, he summoned the archbishop. In the early hours of 28 January, Cranmer arrived. Henry was by now unable to speak:

As soon as he came, the King stretched out his hand to him. The Archbishop exhorted him to place all his hope in the mercy of God through Christ, beseeching him earnestly that if he could not testify this hope in words, he would do so by a sign. Then the King wrung the Archbishop's hand, which he held in his own, as hard as his failing strength would allow, and, directly after, breathed his last.

Was this Henry, like the dying thief on the cross, at the last moment putting his complete trust in the Saviour? MacCulloch thinks so:

Quietly playing out his calling as royal chaplain, Cranmer had won a final victory in his years of argument with the King on justification. No last rites for Henry; no extreme unction: just an evangelical statement of faith in a grip of the hand. Thus ended the most long-lasting relationship of love which either man had known.

Some think that Cranmer now grew a beard as a sign of mourning for the king, but more likely it was to identify with the Reformation; on the Continent a clerical beard was a sign of the break with Rome. Certainly for Cranmer a new chapter now opened in his life. He had a new freedom. He no longer had to look over his shoulder to gauge Henry's reaction, and for the first time he was able to publicly acknowledge the presence of his wife and children.

Note

1. 'Ywis' is an old English word meaning 'certainly'. 'Mumpsimus', a word in modern dictionaries, but rarely used, is an obvious error that is obstinately repeated despite correction.