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The Scriptural Hermeneutic of Early Anglicanism

A Touchstone

INTRODUCTION: A HERMENEUTICAL MODEL

THIS CHAPTER SITUATES THE context of my discussion of an enervated biblical exegesis by describing a uniquely Anglican reading of the Bible. This vision of reading Scripture is the organizing principle, or “touchstone,” for the analysis of various competing exegetical approaches to Isaiah in subsequent chapters. It also provides helpful categories for assessing the similarities and differences *within* the Church of England as well as that between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. The intent is not to prescribe this hermeneutical vision as normative *per se*, but to employ it as a heuristic for exegetical analysis, based on historical and theological data. While the vision that emerges in early Anglicanism was a unique one, it did not survive intact; nonetheless, its impact continues to be perceived, however evanescent.

The foundational theological figures who shape this touchstone are Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), John Whitgift (1530–1604) and Richard Hooker (1554–1600). I attend to each of these insofar as their thought impacts a particular vision of reading Scripture. Three central categories help to define this exegetical touchstone:

- (1) the relation between the Bible, the Church, and the individual;

- (2) the way that each book of the Bible participates in the *canon* of Scripture as the *one* word of God; and
- (3) the nature of a *christological* reading of the Bible, which pertains to how Old Testament is related to the New.

I should note the asymmetrical nature of my discussion; the first category—the communal nature of reading Scripture—is the most distinct one in Anglicanism and I give it the most space. It is also the one category most closely bound to the identity of the Church. The christological reading of Scripture and the claim that the entire Bible comprises the one Word of God are not *per se* unique to Anglicanism but does manifest certain peculiarly Anglican modalities of expression. In the discussion below, where I attend to the christological reading of Isaiah, I detail some specific uses of the Old Testament in general, and Isaiah specifically, in the Prayer Book.

THE TOOLS OF DIVISION: HUMANISM, SPIRITUALIST TRADITIONS, AND SKEPTICISM

It is instructive to outline some challenges and competing options amidst the various factions within the Church before and after the Reformation. These movements were instruments of division, though they were not themselves a direct cause of it. Often I show that a certain “party” within the Church identifies with one of these new ways of thinking of thinking.

I challenge the contention that the emergence of new hermeneutical options, particularly in a highly critical form, are primarily (though not exclusively) *external* rather than *internal* ecclesial phenomena. Indeed, many new approaches to the Bible arose for the purpose of edifying the Church rather than for destroying it. The standard account, as represented, for instance, by Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, suggests that “the doctrinal conflict between historical criticism and the dogmatic tradition” is “nothing less than a war between two worldviews of faith: the worldview of modern critical awareness originating in the Enlightenment and the inherited Augustinian worldview of the Western church.”¹ Again, Gadamer states that “Enlightenment critique is primarily directed against the religious tradition of Christianity—i.e., the Bible. . . . This is the real radicality of the modern Enlightenment compared to all other movements of enlightenment: it must assert itself against the Bible and dogmatic interpretations of it.”² This story, in which new hermeneutical approaches emerged because of external

1. Sundberg and Harrisville, *The Bible in Modern Culture*, 5.

2. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272.

challenges to traditional doctrine, is mistaken, or at least too simplistic, based as it is on the presupposition that the Church is distinct from the rest of society. While such a distinction can perhaps be made today in the post-Christian West, the Reformation and its antecedents occurred in the midst of “christendom,” an era during which most people rarely had any other option than to be steeped in Christian beliefs. The typical narrative of ecclesial dissolution suggests that changes were imposed externally on the Church, as the “enemy” of a putatively “Augustinian worldview.” The debates between those who read the Bible in a traditional mode—one which attempts to reflect on the theological claims of the Church—and those who interpret by the use of historical-critical tools cannot, in my view, be effectively distinguished from each other as representations of two “worldviews of faith.” Instead, *they issue out of the same Christian tradition*. New modern interpretations are, in fact, the offspring of the Church, however misshapen and corrosive.³ They emerged in response to the divided Church’s claims on Scripture and were birthed through division and fragmentation. My account, therefore, is a theological and historical description of how this change in reading the Bible emerges *internally* to the Church, despite the claims of thinkers such as Harrisville and Sundberg, who characterize it as an external assault on the Church’s traditional doctrines by those who whose goal was to attack “the Church” itself.

H. G. Reventlow outlines the effect of spiritualism on Puritanism, which impacted Scripture’s interpretation in England.⁴ It would be beyond

3. What I mean by “modernity” is not the development of new scientific methodologies and rational systems in themselves, i.e., Newtonian mechanistic science and Cartesian epistemology. Rather, it is the universalization of these methodologies to *all* human enterprises as sufficiently valid tools that informs my employment of “modernity.” In this I am following Stephen Toulmin’s argument in Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*. See also Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* in which Gillespie argues against the common story that modernity was the ushering in of an age that surpassed the need for religion and religious language, but rather, that modernity was a theologically/metaphysically derived phenomenon.

4. Numerous movements prior to the Reformation can be denoted as “spiritualist,” characterized by their particular view of history. Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202) was an exemplar of this Spiritualist position, which can be discussed only briefly (see Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, 25–31) but there were many other groups such as the Brethren of the Common Life and Girolamo Savonarola’s (1452–1498) quasi-theocratic republic (Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 88–89). Fiore and his followers envisioned the flowering of a new age of the Spirit in eschatological terms that saw the materiality of the world as unnecessary. Fiore did not repudiate Scripture, but the important point for my purposes is that for spiritualist followers, “the sacraments become superfluous, the priesthood is unnecessary, [and] the significance of Scripture is in fact evacuated” (Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, 27).

Theologically, in spiritualist traditions external matters assume a diminished role

the task of this chapter to enter into the history of spiritualism in general. My more modest claim is that the Puritan discourse—taken up by the Evangelical movement in later centuries—takes on a spiritualist tenor, adopting spiritualist “traditions,” rather than being direct descendants of spiritualist thinkers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The primary characteristic of this tradition (or, better, set of traditions) is a focus on the inner life of the *individual* and a minimization of the Church’s concrete particularity. Its contribution to division is the tendency to think of the Church as playing a variegated but diminishing role within theological discourse in favor of more “spiritual” ideas that are detached from concrete embodiment. In Protestantism, there came to be many manifestations of this spiritualist tendency, one of which was a distinction in the Church between the “visible” and “invisible” Church, the latter of which is the set of those who are the “elect” or the “saved.” It is the non-visible Church which, ironically, came to be seen as the “embodied” one.

Humanism is an intellectual and cultural phenomenon with a complex history, but its impact generates a series of movements, which in turn influence biblical exegesis. I characterize this impact as one that results in a desire for a *repristination* of the Church and a concern for the moral life of the individual believer. It is the former that had a greater impact on ecclesial division, as ecclesial repristination suggests a desire to move theological and biblical discourse *ad fontes* and a tendency toward criticizing the era following the patristic period.

Finally, I follow Popkin’s account of skepticism’s impact during the Reformation as formative for theological discourse and the context out of which modern thinking developed.⁵ For instance, the agitation of William Tyndale (1494–1536) generated new rhetorical modes of disputation, as argued by Peter Auksi. While it may to some extent be a generalization, Auksi’s analysis of the debate between Tyndale and Thomas More (1478–1535) reveals that the Catholic history of *disputatio* led to rhetoric in which (at least for More) “verbal expressions which religious certitude makes possible become conflated with or analogous to mathematical exactitude.”⁶ In Tyndale’s mind, Catholic focus on logical syllogisms, distinctions between terms with agonizing exactitude and hyper-rational sophistry insufficiently

in salvation. For some, this means arguing that the sacraments are unnecessary. The interest in the inner dimension of the individual human before God becomes determinative for a thought pattern that “sees man himself, his spiritual quality and his ethical conduct, as the decisive factor for salvation” (Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible*, 25).

5. See Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*.

6. Auksi, “Reason and Feeling as Evidence,” 13.

account for the affective or experiential mode of human sensation.⁷ No longer do these modalities reflect the simple message of Scripture; rather, they actively obscure it. Tyndale regards scholasticism as a belletristic veiling of Christianity's truth, the result being the severe occlusion of its affective power. Thinkers like Tyndale, however, found new ways to argue their case against the rigorous scholasticism of Roman Catholic opponents. More's reliance on the tradition of disputational methodology is countered by Tyndale's appeal to the experience and feelings of the individual believer—the "heart" being the catch-all phrase—to prove the veracity of his arguments. In Tyndale's debate with More, targeting what he sees as dry scholasticism, he appeals to feeling, "because it indicates the crucial presence of the Spirit" and the labyrinth of Catholic scholastic argumentation is a Sisyphean effort that produces an empty faith: "The children of light . . . have empirical subjective experience of the internal, rejuvenating power of a 'feeling faith' which lies beyond the manipulations of reason and the authority of others."⁸ This shift in discursive modality from the scholastic-disputational to the affective-emotional is indicative of a crisis of thought in religious belief, arising directly from disputes within a dividing Church, rather than an intentional and conspiratorial attempt to usurp Christendom. Popkin describes the time of the Reformation as an "intellectual crisis" during which thinkers sought for means of achieving certainty. This intellectual crisis led to a rise of skepticism, a mode of thought that continues to dominate Western thinking. The resulting skeptical attitude accords with Tyndale's approach.

This skeptical attitude led someone like Luther to seek absolute certainty, a quest that fails if it relies on the dictates of the Church. In turn, "the rule of faith for the Reformers . . . appears to have been subjective certainty, the compulsion of one's conscience."⁹ While Luther does not resort as directly to feeling and personal experience as Tyndale, both attempt to solve the epistemological crisis in similar ways. The ensuing perennial Pyrrhonic problem brings into question new epistemological approaches to the Christian faith, out of which emerge further methods to validate the new method, resulting in an infinite regress of methodological skepticism. The

7. Consider Tyndale's mocking of Catholic methodology: "First, they nosel them in sophistry and in *benefundatum*. And there corrupt they their judgements with apparent arguments, and with alleging unto them texts of logic, of natural *philautia*, of metaphysic, and moral philosophy, and of all manner books of Aristotle, and of all manner doctors which they yet never saw . . . one holdeth this, another that; one is a Real, another a Nominal. What wonderful dreams have they of their predicaments, universals, second intentions, *quiddities*, *haecceities*, and relatives" (Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, 22–23).

8. Auksi, "Reason and Feeling as Evidence," 14.

9. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, 8.

discussion shifts from a concern about the meaning of the biblical texts to that of *method*: each party therefore identifies with a particular school and its respective claims to certainty.

AN ECCLESIAL READING OF THE BIBLE

The first dimension of a uniquely Anglican reading of the Bible is an *ecclesial reading*, which has to do with several important hermeneutical themes unique to Anglicanism. This exegetical aspect is distinct from Roman Catholic practice (at least, from that of most of the late Middle Ages) in the Anglican “laicization” of not only the Bible, but also of the liturgical practice of the entire Church in England, aiming at one “common” worship. While an episcopal structure remained that “imposed” various doctrines on parishioners, the aim is conformance for the common good of the Church. The perils of individualism are avoided, while at the same time, private reading, if not private interpretation, is encouraged only *within* this common structure.¹⁰

The rise of spiritualist and humanist traditions within the intellectual milieu of the Middle Ages had the ecclesial consequence of placing an emphasis on the inner life of the individual believer. By the commencement of the Reformation, these traditions also had an effect on the liturgical life of the Church by decoupling the connection between liturgical practice and

10. I deny the contention popular claim that Anglicanism, in its inception, and thus in its scriptural vision, is a *via media* between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, and thus that it was somehow “half-reformed.” This myth is promulgated by many, such as Roman Catholic Aidan Nichols. He argues that the *via media* is the source of Anglican instability. Nichols asserts the *via media* that developed “corresponded to the demands of realistic politics when Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558” (Nichols, *The Panther and the Hind*, 38). The consequence of the *via media* is the comprehensive nature of the Anglican Church, a kind of permissive large tent that allows for a wide spectrum of beliefs, the source of his contention that there is an unstable diversity that undermines Church unity. In comparison to the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, as such, has no unique doctrinal standard or creed which gives it a formative and unique identity. This is not an uncommon perspective. This oft repeated idea has recently come under increased scrutiny. Despite the popular use of the term *via media*, early shapers of Anglicanism aimed for a truly Catholic Church within England, an *Ecclesia Anglicana*. To cast Anglican identity as an entity that emerged out of a phenomenon of Henrician and Elizabethan *realpolitik* does not accurately take into account the theological dimension and scriptural vision of major thinkers in the Church of England. Dewey Wallace’s reassessment of the so-called Anglican *via media* in “Via Media? A Paradigm Shift” makes the salient point that later Anglicanism, following thinkers like the Caroline Divines, might rightly be thought in its later development as a *via media*, but not in its early form under Elizabeth and its culmination in the work of Richard Hooker.

the Bible. Structurally, immediately after Henry VIII's break with Rome, much remained the same within the Church of England and it took several decades to solidify something recognizably "Anglican." Many Anglican divines saw the separation and independence from Rome, both politically and ecclesiastically, as an inheritance and continuation of the rights that were afforded England in the past. In the *Act in Restraint of Appeals* of 1533, Henry argued that the King was the "Supreme Head" of the Church because England was not a mere subject of the Pope, but an "*empire*—or as we should say today, a nation-state, fully self-sufficient in its single sovereignty. In this nation state the King . . . is furnished by the goodness of Almighty God with plenary and entire authority and jurisdiction."¹¹

Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury during Henry VIII's reign, began the process of developing the Anglican scriptural vision. Numerous writings of Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran perspectives were disseminated and the new Church of England had to find a way of navigating them. Upon Henry VIII's death, the radical element succeeded in despoiling shrines, removing monasteries, and stripping away numerous aspects of the liturgy. Increased permissiveness for reform allowed Cranmer to bring about several changes. Cranmer was the primary writer of the first Prayer Book and it was part of the Act of Uniformity in 1549, permitting the use of only one liturgy. For the first time, Mass was also said in English, rather than in Latin.

The theological ancestors of the Puritans borrowed ideas from Zwingli and Calvin, raising challenges to Cranmer's Prayer Book as timid and falling short of removing the ceremonies they saw as superstitious practices unwarranted by Scripture. Two central Puritan biblical perspectives vis-à-vis ceremonies and practices can be generally described:

- (1) practices that were commanded or described in Scripture (e.g., baptism), are to be "repristinated" in a form that is the least "papist." This approach usually urged a reduction or elimination of liturgical action and a more spiritualist interpretation of the practice; and
- (2) that all ceremonies not so explicitly outlined in the Bible were considered superstitious and therefore proscribed.

In response to these looming challenges to the ecclesial form of life formulated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, in 1547 Cranmer and other notable thinkers issued a set of sermons to be publicly read.¹² The first of

11. Dawley, *John Whitgift and the Reformation*, 11.

12. The low level of education of the average priest and the extent to which Reformed theology had yet to permeate all of England necessitated a common set of sermons to be preached to ensure a smooth transition to the new regime. See Miller, "The

these so-called Edwardine Homilies was Cranmer's "A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture." In it we can readily obtain an understanding of his view of Scripture.¹³ For Cranmer, a personal familiarity with Scripture is important and he affirms the importance of duty and right behavior. However, while the countenancing of the vernacular can appear to suggest a perspective that encourages a purely individualist reading of Scripture for moral formation, Cranmer's vision is directed toward the *common* good, and as such his sermon describes a vision of Scripture that differs from his opponents' who offered other perspectives of the Bible. For instance, Scripture, says Cranmer, is more than that which must be read; it is the very Word of God, and "there is . . . abundantly enough, both for men to eat, and children to sucke. There is, whatsoever is meet for all ages, and for all degrees and sorts of men."¹⁴ Scripture is food and constitutive not only of the individual, but also the commonwealth. Reading the Bible in the Church is like sitting down to a family meal. As the Word of God, Scripture has its own power to transform all who read it: "he that is most turned into [the Bible], that is most inspired with the Holy Ghost, most in his heart and life altered and changed into that thing which he readeth."¹⁵ The use of the term "Word of God" with respect to Scripture is notable, for "holy scripture is the 'true word of God,' the phrases, 'word of God,' 'God's word,' 'scripture,' and 'holy Scripture,' are, in fact, interchangeable in the homily."¹⁶

One reason why everyone should read Scripture, and the implicit aim of this sermon, is that they are to be steeped in this word of God, fully engaged not only in terms of reading, but participating in habitual, even repetitive, practice. There is to be a "continual reading of God's word"¹⁷ "where holy scripture's use is characterized as reading, hearing, searching and studying"¹⁸ since, as the word of God, Scripture is the source of all theology. Cranmer's sermon cannot be seen as an injunction to an individualist, private reading of the text:

First Book of Homilies and the Doctrine of Holy Scripture."

13. I use the version printed in Leith, "A Fruitful Exhortation," reprinted from *Certain Sermons appointed by the Queen's Majesty to be declared and read by all Parsons, Vicars, and Curates every Sunday and Holy Day in their Churches* (1623). I make the not entirely proven assumption that Cranmer was the author of this homily, which has only been agreed to by a consensus opinion.

14. Leith, "A Fruitful Exhortation," 233.

15. *Ibid.*, 234.

16. Miller, "The First Book of Homilies," 446

17. Leith, "A Fruitful Exhortation," 234.

18. Miller, "The First Book of Homilies," 451.

The fact that [this sermon] appears in an approved, sanctioned homily of the institutional hierarchy of the church belies such a notion. Rather, what is contended [by the homilist] is that because the Bible is God's word to his people and his church, it warrants direct use by all its people.¹⁹

Most importantly, any individualistic tenor of *A Fruitful Exhortation* must be understood in the light of the Prayer Book, the central participative element of this early Anglican hermeneutic. The Prayer Book is Cranmer's legacy, as its structure points to his ecclesiology and his understanding of the role of Scripture.

In the Prayer Book, Cranmer aims for a reformation in England that "is less a triumphant embrace of the individual's private and invisible self than a concerted effort to shape the otherwise *uncontrollable and unreliable internal sphere* through common acts of devotion."²⁰ Ramie Targoff makes the rather startling and counterintuitive claim that Cranmer's support for an English service and a Bible available to all was to counter the danger of *Roman Catholic* interiority. Roman Catholic opposition to common liturgical practices in the "vulgar" tongue engenders a greater push for Roman Catholics to engage in individualist piety. "For sixteenth-century Catholics, the challenge of public devotion was not to promote a shared and collective liturgical language, but instead to encourage the worshippers to perform their own private devotions during the priest's service."²¹ There was in Catholic practice a sharp dichotomy between the bodily actions of ordained ministers and the interior devotional life of the laity, of whom it was expected to find their own means to engage in devotional acts. Targoff's contention therefore is that Catholic worship for the laity was more individualistic than that suggested by Roman Catholic polemicists themselves.

It is not that Cranmer was unconcerned about personal piety and the inner life; like any reformer, Cranmer believes ultimately in the importance of personal faith for salvation.²² His construal of this faith, however, is not so neatly described as the inner disposition of the individual, and here Cranmer significantly diverges from using feeling and experience as "proof" of the certainty of a person's faith. The state of an individual's inner life, in fact, is unknowable ("uncontrollable and unreliable"). Therefore, bodily

19. Ibid., 450.

20. Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 6, italics mine.

21. Ibid., 14.

22. See Null, "Thomas Cranmer's Theology of the Heart," in which he outlines Cranmer's use of the term "heart" in the Prayer Book. In my view, Null attempts too strongly to cast Cranmer in Evangelical terms, zeroing in on the language of the "heart."

practices of common liturgical acts tame the chaotic feelings and emotions of *priest and laity alike*. It is for this reason that Cranmer focuses on the idea of *common* prayer and for *conformity* to a shared devotional language.

Consider as examples the prayers and responses for Morning Prayer. In the 1549 Prayer Book, the text, just like Psalm 51 from which it is taken, is in the first person. The priest says “O Lord, open thou my lips,” to which the people respond, “And my mouth shall show forth thy praise.” By the time of the 1552 Prayer Book, however, the singular “my” is altered to “our.”²³ Moreover, while Cranmer accepts that people who are “grieved in conscience” may wish to speak to a priest and make a confession Cranmer urges a common (or “general”) confession during which all members of the congregation pray together:

Gone is all attention to the relationship between the individual and his conscience: the focus falls instead on the harmony of social relations. What had become a personal, confidential confession from the worshipper to the priest becomes a public admission made before the entire congregation. . . . The “satisfaction” of the collective group, not the “quietness” of the inner self, renders the aspiring communicant worthy of admission.²⁴

The modern discomfort with “conformity” conceived in terms of bland homogeneity would be unintelligible to Cranmer whose liturgical aims were “to restructure corporate worship so that it is entirely compatible with, as well as conducive to, the practice of personal devotion.”²⁵ This approach to prayer is linked to the shape of the Prayer Book and thus to the reading of Scripture; while people can most certainly read it on their own, when they are gathered for worship, reading the Bible together is the primary task.

Cranmer’s Prayer Book is a nascent Anglican approach to Scripture and the embodiment of an Anglican way of reading the Bible. With the Prayer Book, people habitually engage Scripture: prayer, worship, and a lectionary. The call to uniformity therefore should be seen as a call to commonality and community in which the words and language of Scripture shape and inform each liturgical act. The role of the Church, under the authority of Scripture alone, is to be the teacher of Scripture. As I show below, one of these ways can be preaching, but this is not the sole mode by which people learn the faith and engage the Bible.

23. See Targoff, *Common Prayer*, 29–35 for more of Cranmer’s changes to more corporate language in the Prayer Book.

24. *Ibid.*, 33.

25. *Ibid.*, 35.