The Gospel is in the Detail: Thomas Cranmer vs. Henry VIII on True Faith

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I am not, by nature, someone very fussed about detail. My natural disposition is to get the gist of things, and then to wave my hands and say "it'll be fine, we'll work it out when we're there – let's just get on with it". One of God's chief graces to me is, of course, that my wife is quite the opposite; I've learned, therefore, to take a bit more care in life to work things out in advance.

Another thing which has pushed me to be more concerned for detail is the study of theology. Perhaps no other area better demonstrates that the devil is, indeed, in the detail. The biggest theological conflicts of church history, in which heresies were defined and pastors excommunicated, are basically all disagreements over matters which, to the uninitiated outsider observer, seem to be over minor details.

Is the Son *homoousios* or *homoiousios* with the Father? Does the Son have two natures or one in the incarnation? Does the incarnate Son have one will or two? Is justification by faith or by faith *alone*? These are all matters which were thrashed out amidst heated debate, and in fine detail, at church councils and (in the last instance) the Reformation.

Many of you may share my basic attitude to detail: "enough of that, let's just get on with it." And, of course, one can be *too* concerned with detail: straining the gnat, missing the wood for the trees – pick your aphorism. Picking up fellow Christians, or preachers and pastors, on slips of the tongue or less-than-perfect theological articulation can simply be a kind of busybodying.

But, with Reformation Day upon us this coming Sunday, it's vital to remember that an insistence on detail is, in many ways, at the root of Protestantism. And the boldness to point out such details is vital.

Thomas Cranmer and Theological Detail

This was driven home to me whilst reading Gerald Bray's recently published book *The History of Christianity in Britain and Ireland*. As an aside, it is an *excellent* book – a gold standard overview, which I think achieves its goal of giving a singular history of the very different trajectories of Christiantiy on either side of the Irish sea.

One of Bray's specialisms is the literature of the English Reformation, and he gives a fantastic history of the Church of England's toing-and-froing over the wording of their articles of faith once Henry VIII broke with Rome in 1533.

Bray draws attention to the supposed "Lutheran Moment" of the English Reformation. This was when, in 1535 (two years after breaking from Rome), Henry VIII sent a delegation of clergy to Germany to discuss theology with the Lutherans, to see if England and Germany could form any kind of alliance (essentially whether the English could accommodate the 1530 Augsburg Confession).

Despite his break from Rome, Henry was a doctrinal conservative, still committed to Roman Catholic views of justification, purgatory, transubstantiation etc. Prospects weren't promising

then, but Henry was in need of allies. The English delegation, it seems, were won over to Protestant Lutheran beliefs, but knew that Henry would never accept them. In Germany, with the help of the Lutheran Philip Melancthon, they devised the "Wittenberg Articles" – a shared statement of faith, to take back to England. However, *en route*, the English delegation revised these articles into the Ten Articles of 1536. These rolled various Lutheran articles of faith together, softening them somewhat, and so were not yet what we'd regard as fully Protestant. However, they were an exercise in careful detail, "phrased in the way they were in order to get past the eagle eye of Henry VIII and to be acceptable to the Convocation of Canterbury, to which they were presented by Bishop Foxe on 11 July 1536."[1] The tightrope is clear: not to offend Henry VIII's conservatism, but not to affirm anything the delegates disagreed with having now been exposed to Lutheranism.

Tussling over detail continued the following year in 1537 with the publication of *The Institution [i.e. teaching] of a Christian Man* by Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury who had visited Germany. This was a kind of popular level handbook of Christian belief and living, incorporating the theology of the Ten Articles into the reader's personal life and belief (and Bray has produced an edition of it, with a thorough introduction). It became popularly known as "the Bishops' Book", as it was signed off (though not composed) by all of the C of E bishops.

The Bishops' Book went further than the Ten Articles did, drilling into more obviously Protestant detail. It was apparently published swiftly, possibly so that the King did not have a chance to vet it. When Henry did get his hands on it, he made numerous annotations and sent them to Cranmner, expecting the book to be revised. Bray recounts Cranmer's response:

"*Archbishop Cranmer replied to the king in detail, so we have a clear idea of where the two men differed in 1537, and it is evident that the archbishop was even then moving closer to Luther than Henry VIII ever would. To get an idea of this, consider what the Bishops' Book says about the first article of the Apostles' Creed: 'And I believe also and profess, that he is my very God, my Lord and my Father, and that I am his own son, by adoption and grace, and the right inheritor of his kingdom.' Henry VIII altered the words 'the right inheritor' to 'as long as I persevere in his precepts and laws, one of the right inheritors.'*

Cranmer responded to this alteration at great length, saying among other things:

"*There is a general faith, which all that be Christian, as well good as evil, have: as to believe that God is, that he is the Maker and Creator of all things, and that Christ is the Saviour and Redeemer of the world, and for his sake all penitent sinners have remission of their sins… And all these things even the devils also believe, and tremble for fear of God's indignations and torments, which they endure and ever shall do. But they have not the right Christian faith, that their own sins by Christ's redemption be pardoned and forgiven, that themselves by Christ be delivered from God's wrath, and be made his beloved children and heirs of his kingdom to come.*"

… Justification by faith is not merely an intellectual assent to the power and love of God, important though that is. It is also a new life in Christ, made possible by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Cranmer was too politic to say so, but his lengthy exposition of this theme suggests that he doubted whether the king had had that experience. In effect Cranmer was using his theological

responses to the king's 'corrections' of the Bishops' Book as a means of preaching the gospel to him without saying so.

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I think this is a fantastic thought: the Archbishop of Canterbury preaching the Gospel to the King of England in the annotations of his book. Early on in the English Reformation, the true Gospel was fought for both on the margins and in the margins! Detail *mattered* to Cranmer, here – such that he would speak up to the King himself, perhaps even seeking to win his very soul.

Disappointingly, Henry got his way with revisions in the end, overruling Cranmer's continued objections such that, in 1543, a new work was released entitled *A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition for Any Christian Man, Set Forth By The King's Majesty of England* (it became known, unsurprisingly, as the King's Book). Cranmer ultimately went along with this, despite (we can safely assume) many reservations. The overall climate in the late 1530s to early 1540s swung much more in favour of the traditionalists, and he was on thin ice.

Yet Cranmer held on. When Henry was succeeded by his son Edward VI in 1547, the Archbishop was finally able to make sweeping reforms in the church. He never revived the Bishops' Book under Edward – in part because his detailed thinking continued to develop. But it was an important stepping stone in Cranmer's theological development, and for the English Reformation as a whole.

With Reformation Day upon us, all of us who are tasked with preaching and teaching in our churches should remind ourselves of the importance of theological detail, and the necessity for boldness when it matters. Luther himself was kickstarted by discovering, via Erasmus' Greek New Testament in 1516, that the Latin Vulgate had mistranslated a single Greek word for a century – "do penance" instead of "repent". Cranmer was willing to go toe-to-toe with the monarch in the margins to defend the true nature of faith. These things mattered, and still do.

So may we all have a right and godly eye for theological detail, and the boldness to point it out – to friends, to our flock, to our ministers, even to the king himself.

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1. Bray, *A History of Christianity in Britain and Ireland*, 193. ↑