The Godly Discipline of the Primitive Church

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Introduction

The twentieth century saw a remarkable flourishing of ecumenical dialogue between Anglicans and Roman Catholics on the international level, and agreement on many matters long held to be disputed. In the midst of agreement, however, differing practices in regard to private confession continued to be described as a “matter of special significance,” where the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church had moved in different directions in the sixteenth century.1 This matter was most recently described as one of a number of present “serious disagreements” between Anglicans and Roman Catholics in regard to discipleship and holiness.2

Both communions practice private confession. What is at issue is the nature of the practice. In the Roman Catholic Church, private confession to a priest is part of “the sacrament of penance” and is obligatory “for those conscious of serious sin.”3 For their part, the Anglican reformers rejected the obligatory nature of private confession. For Anglicans, private confession is “a wholesome means of grace” that can offer assurance to the troubled conscience, but which is set in the greater context of the believer’s direct access to the Word of God for the assurance of forgiveness, and linked as well to the practice of general confession and absolution within the liturgy.4

It is difficult to gauge the weight given in these two documents to the differing practice. Life in Christ speaks of the divergence as one

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3 Life in Christ, 17.
4 Life in Christ, 16–17.
of the differences that “appear in a new light when we consider them in their origin and context.” This is on a different order of magnitude from the two areas of “official disagreement” that are dealt with elsewhere: “the marriage of a divorced person during the life-time of a former partner; and the permissible methods of controlling conception,” and different as well from points where Anglican and Roman Catholic “attitudes and opinions appear to conflict” on abortion and homosexual relations. For its part, the later statement Growing Together in Unity and Mission simply lists the differing practice on private confession as one of a series of divergences that includes remarriage after divorce, abortion, contraception, and homosexual relations.

What these two ecumenical documents do not provide is any account of the origin of private confession in the practice of public penance, a common history that points toward greater understanding and possible theological convergence. For Anglicans, consideration of our own particular history also leads us to reclaim a part of our own tradition that has been eclipsed. In this way a deeper consideration of private confession could function as an example of how ecumenical dialogue can lead to understanding and the reclaiming of gifts that have been forgotten.

Reclaiming a Common History

The story of how the early church’s practice of public penance for major sins (adultery, homicide, apostasy, schism, as well as others) became the medieval church’s system of private confession of all mortal sins (deliberate, conscious sins) has been recounted before. A common thread is the idea of reconciliation with the church. Baptism into the church, celebrated by the community, was a sign of reconciliation with God. Any sin after baptism alienated a person both from

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5 Life in Christ, 18.
6 Life in Christ, 20.
7 Growing Together in Unity and Mission, 42–45.
God and from the community. Whether any reconciliation was possible in these circumstances was roundly debated in early Christianity, but by the period of the fourth century a public penitential discipline administered by the bishops that led to reconciliation had developed on a widespread basis. By its prayer and by Christ’s authorization the church reconciled sinners to the community and to God and restored them to communion. The communal dimension of sin and forgiveness, the authoritative role of the church, and the public nature of reconciliation were all emphasized by the practice.

This practice continued to evolve in the period from the fourth to the eighth centuries. The increasing popularity of monastic spiritual guides, who were accustomed to giving private counsel and (sometimes) absolution, coupled with the success of the Celtic and then Anglo-Saxon monastic missionaries in Western Europe, spread the practice of private penance for a whole range of sins. The Constantian evolution of Christianity, as it became coextensive with society, strained the practicality of the old public discipline when applied rigorously to all sins, especially those that were private and not public. Both factors contributed to the transformation of the church’s practice, and so what had been public and extraordinary gradually became private and common during this period throughout Western Europe. The public rituals of penance survived in the West in attenuated form, and in the rituals of Lent practiced by the whole community. The idea of penance as a necessary reconciliation with the community persisted as well, but as Karl Rahner demonstrated, it was not seen as the primary effect of the sacrament but as one effect among others.

In this sacrament Christians are not simply being reconciled to God, but reconciled to God in the community of the church. Rahner claimed that the practice of public penance kept this idea clearly in the mind of the Christian community, by emphasizing the loss of the privileges of church membership when one was undergoing public penance. Rahner showed that this truth is still present in private confession, as practiced in the Roman Catholic Church: confession to

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13 Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 143.
the church’s representative, just as much as public penance, involves reconciliation with the church.\textsuperscript{14} This communal aspect of reconciliation as a part of the sacrament of penance received renewed emphasis in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.\textsuperscript{15}

Private confession, in other words, is in origin a public rite, so adapted now in practice that its essential communal nature is easily overlooked. Rahner’s insight about this “forgotten truth” applies with equal justice to the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers. The penitential discipline of the early church might still be present in substance in private confession, but this was not clear or satisfactory to the reformers. In this context the Church of England attempted its own reform of private confession and a reclamation of public penance, with mixed results.

\textit{The Revival of Primitive Discipline in the Church of England}

Private confession was retained in Thomas Cranmer’s Prayer Books of 1549 and 1552, but offers little testimony to the public and communal nature of reconciliation as conceived by the English reformers. In fact, this retention testifies to the extent to which this truth had been forgotten. In the 1549 Prayer Book, private confession to a priest was made optional, and it was implied that “the generall confession to the churche,” that is, the general confession recited at the eucharist, was the equivalent of it. Private confession to a priest was for the quieting of conscience, for the “auoyding of all scruple and doubtfulness.”\textsuperscript{16} The emphasis was a subjective one, on private confession as a pastoral tool among others, with no necessary communal dimension beyond the presence of the church’s authorized representative, a note that continued to be sounded in the absolution itself.

By the 1552 Prayer Book, all mention of private confession as a regular discipline had disappeared, and the emphasis was more clearly on confession as a pastoral tool for the relief of the individual conscience. The idea that the church had been given the power of the keys, exercised through its ministers, was still present in the formula of absolution in the office of the Visitation of the Sick (“Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolue al sinners

\textsuperscript{14} Rahner, “Forgotten Truths,” 145.
\textsuperscript{15} Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution \textit{Lumen Gentium}, 11.
The Godly Discipline

. . .”), as well as in the new absolution supplied in Morning Prayer,\textsuperscript{17} but private confession in the Prayer Book tradition was not seen as a regular means of reconciliation with the church.\textsuperscript{18}

Cranmer was aware of the older practice of public penance, however, and sought to revive it. The Prayer Book of 1549 introduced a liturgy for “The First Day of Lent” based on the old medieval service for the blessing and distribution of ashes. The new service (called “A Commination” in the 1552 Prayer Book) contained a series of God’s curses upon sinners, coupled with prayers for pardon. As a preface to the rite, the priest was directed to read an exhortation which deserves to be quoted in full:

Brethren, in the prymitiue churche there was a godlye disciplyne, that at the begynnyng of lent suche persones as were notorious synners, were put to open penaunce, and punished in this worlde, that theyr soules myght bee saued in the day of the lord. And that other, admonished by theyr example, might be the more afrayed to offende. In the steede whereof until the saide disciplyne maye bee restored agayne: (wiche thynge is muchoe to bee wyshed,) it is thoughte good, that at thys tyme (in your presence) shoulde bee read the general sentences of goddes cursyng agaynste impeni-tente sinners, gathered out of the xxvii Chapter of Deuteronomie, and other places of scripture. And that ye shoulde aunswere to euery sentence, Amen: To the entente that you beeyng admonished of the greate indignacion of God agaynste sinners: may the rather be called to earneste and true repentaunce, and maye walke more warely in these daungerous dayes, fleyng from suche vices, for the whiche ye affirme with your owne mouthes: the curse of god to be due.\textsuperscript{19}

This exhortation was continued in substantially the same form in later Prayer Books, though the liturgy’s use was no longer restricted to the beginning of Lent.

It is also worth mentioning the rubric Cranmer included in both 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books, in which the priest was required to admonish any “open and notorious evil liver” to repentance, and then

\textsuperscript{17} Gibson, First and Second Prayer-Books, 262, 348.
\textsuperscript{18} See Ashley Null, Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) for a complete account of Cranmer’s evolving understanding of penance and private confession.
\textsuperscript{19} Gibson, First and Second Prayer-Books, 280.
in the absence of that repentance to prevent him or her from coming to Holy Communion. While not necessarily a matter of public discipline, it bears on the matter, and the corporate nature of discipline within the community.

The exhortation acknowledges the desirability of a revival of the godly discipline of the primitive church, for which the Commination was merely a provisional substitute. For a stop-gap liturgy it has certainly had a long life. A version without the exhortation was included in the 1928 American Prayer Book, and a still different liturgy of corporate penitence, confession, and absolution with the imposition of ashes was introduced in the 1979 Prayer Book. This liturgy also contains an exhortation which refers to the disciplines of Lent but without calling for a revival of the public penitential discipline. Still part of the official liturgy of the Church of England, the 1549 exhortation stands witness to the desirability of a revival of primitive discipline which has yet to be effected in either England or North America.

“The godly discipline of the primitive church”: What Did Cranmer Mean?

On the face of it, the exhortation is straightforward, calling for a revival of the penitential discipline of the early church. The exhortation identified this discipline as “open penance,” performed during Lent by notorious sinners in the presence of the congregation. The public performance of penance served the purpose of further punishing the sinner, so that he might be saved at the Day of Judgment, and also served as a deterrent to others who might be tempted to sin. In the absence of the old discipline, the curses which made up the bulk of the Commination were intended to serve the purpose of stirring up the congregation to individual repentance.

It is reasonable to assume that the exhortation reflected Cranmer’s hope that public penance might be restored, and that its public nature is at the core of the primitive discipline. But this cannot be the case because public penance had not died out completely in the medieval period. Public penance, both before and after the Reformation, continued to be administered by the ecclesiastical courts in England. Those who heard this exhortation for the first time on Ash

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20 Gibson, First and Second Prayer-Books, 212, 377.
Wednesday of 1550 would have been familiar with the idea and the reality of public penance, if only in attenuated and occasional forms, and would not have supposed that the church authorities hoped to restore what was and continued to be a living reality. It seems that Cranmer was calling for something beyond renewal of familiar forms.

Wickham Legg supposed that what Cranmer meant to revive was open penance as a liturgical ceremony at a particular time—the Lenten season beginning on Ash Wednesday. Yet again this explanation does not quite fit. The service books used in many places in England before the Reformation already included a liturgical observance of public penance for use on Ash Wednesday. After the solemn absolution and the imposition of ashes, which the whole congregation received, there was a public exclusion from the church of those doing penance. If Cranmer were commending a revival of public penance specifically during Lent, it would be strange indeed to abolish the remnant of its liturgical celebration. It is also worth noting that, following Bucer’s recommendation that the service be used more frequently, Cranmer eliminated any suggestion that the service was linked to Ash Wednesday in the Prayer Book of 1552.

Whatever Cranmer meant by “the godly discipline of the primitive church” must be something more extensive than these living observances of the medieval church. At the same time, the desired revival of this discipline must be something more than a pious wish, something that Cranmer notes before passing on to the real item of business, the Commination service. The answer lies in another of Cranmer’s projects, the reform of the canon law of the Church of England.

Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum

Cranmer began working on reform of the church’s canon law under Henry VIII, and continued the work in committee during the

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23 Christopher Wordsworth, *Ceremonies and Processions of the Cathedral Church of Sarum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901), 63–64; J. W. Legg, *Missale ad usum Ecclesiae Westmonasteriensis*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Bradshaw Society, 1893), 2554–555; W. G. Henderson, *Missale ad usum percelebris ecclesiae Herefordiensis* (Leeds, 1874), 41. It should be borne in mind that these books took as their pattern the service as performed in cathedrals and abbeys, not in parish churches. The ejection of penitents would not necessarily have happened in every parish church of the land. Nor can it be certain that the ejection of penitents took place at Sarum or any place else simply because the rite was contained in these books.
reign of Edward VI. The *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum* was presented to Parliament in 1553, shortly before Edward's death, but it never received authorization, and the accession of Mary Tudor and Cranmer's arrest ended this attempt to reform the church's canons.25

The *Reformatio* continued a system of ecclesiastical courts and judges with jurisdiction; in fact, a large part of it is devoted to this subject. Here Cranmer continued a living usage rather than seeking to revive a defunct one. A variety of ecclesiastical cases are covered by the courts, including disputes over wills and tithes, as well as “correction of sin.”26 A judge with jurisdiction (ordinarily the bishop) could absolve from excommunication, and there was an extensive section dealing with the public and liturgical celebration of the reconciliation of the excommunicated.27

But it is in a section of the *Reformatio* devoted to the divine service that a new element of ecclesiastical discipline entered, one which Cranmer identified with the discipline of the early church. Following evening prayers, the principal minister and the deacon, or the minister's vicar and the elders, perform an accounting of funds set aside for charitable purposes and determine their use. The canon continues:

> And let penance be reserved for the same time. For those should be recalled to an acknowledgement of their sins who have done some public act of perversity which has caused a general offense to the church; and they should make public satisfaction in order that the church may be strengthened by their salutary correction. Then the minister will withdraw and take counsel with some of the elders as to how the remainder, whose morals are said to be depraved and [in whom] a shameful life is detected, may be accosted by sober and virtuous men with a certain fraternal charity in accordance with the precept of Christ in the gospel. If they have set themselves straight by the admonitions of these men, God is to be earnestly thanked. But if they have persisted in crime, they are to be apprehended with that harshness of penalties which we see in the gospel was prepared for their insolence.28

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The very next canon dealt specifically with excommunication, connecting this action of public discipline to the larger church in the person of the bishop.

When, however, the thunderbolt of excommunication is hurled, first the bishop should be approached and his opinion discovered. If he has consented and has added his authority, let the formula of excommunication be carried out before the whole church so that, as far as possible, we may reintroduce in this matter the ancient discipline.29

This disciplinary scheme represented a departure from medieval practice, but one which consciously harkened back to the primitive discipline. Public penance as outlined here was to be done in cases in which there was no excommunication but there was some public matter to be dealt with, in a system of correction and amendment that involved not only the minister of the congregation but also congregational elders (seniores). Cranmer did not specify the nature of these elders, but the context implies that they are lay leaders of the congregation, a feature that would distinguish it from public or private penance in the medieval church. These cases and their correction seem to lie outside the system of courts and sentences dealt with elsewhere in the Reformatio. In cases of excommunication where the bishop is involved, the formula is still pronounced within the same venue, before the whole church.

What is most innovative in these canons is the association of elders with the parish priest and bishop in administering the discipline of the church. Cranmer’s usage here may be a harkening back to the seniores of the North African church, lay officials who were involved in the financial and disciplinary administration of the church, and who are mentioned by Tertullian, Augustine, and others.30 James Spalding points as well to the connection of this disciplinary feature with “pre-Protestant” insights conceived before the reign of Edward VI, remarking on the way in which it is overlaid on a more traditional form of church order.31 The revival of discipline through lay elders

29 Spalding, Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws, 124.
31 Spalding, Reformation of the Ecclesiastical Laws, 43.
later became identified with the Puritan and Reformed party of the Church of England rather than entering mainstream Anglicanism.\textsuperscript{32}

The canon bears a close resemblance to the discipline mentioned in the exhortation, and gives an indication of what Cranmer had in mind in the revival of primitive discipline. Both note that public penance for notable sins serves the purpose of the edification of the congregation and the more sure correction of the sinner. Both are set within the context of the revival of an older discipline. The canon does not mention Lent as the only time for this discipline but envisions a more complete system. Both the \textit{Reformatio} and the exhortation sought to revive the “godly discipline of the primitive church.”

\textbf{Conclusion}

The penitential discipline of the early church emphasized the communal aspects of sin and forgiveness, the public nature of reconciliation, and the authoritative role of the church in prayer and absolution. While Roman Catholics reclaim a greater and richer understanding of the nature of private confession by seeking its roots in public penance, Anglicans have an opportunity to reappropriate their own history and set their understanding of the assurance of pardon within a wider framework that includes public reconciliation. If Anglicans have seen private confession as a pastoral tool deployed alongside the hearing of the Word of God and joining in general confession and absolution, it is because these disciplines when first conceived were set historically within an overall theological framework that included public penitential discipline.

If there is a role for individual assurance, the subjective appropriation of the gospel promise of forgiveness, there is also the objective truth of God’s forgiveness and the corporate celebration of the reconciliation of the sinner. Sin rends the fabric of the body of Christ. Roman Catholics and Anglicans have historic commitments that emphasize the corporate and communal nature of reconciliation. Differing practice in regard to private confession only scratches the surface of a more nuanced and challenging understanding of reconciliation within the two traditions. Perhaps it is time for both churches to take the 1549 exhortation seriously in its call for a return to the godly discipline of the primitive church.