

Why the Necessity of the Prayer of Humble Access?

Professor Ashley Null – December 2017

Cranmer retained the slightly altered Prayer of Humble Access in its 1552 position for three reasons:

1. As the immediate response to the Sanctus, it functioned as a continuation of Isaiah 6, that even when we are permitted to be in Heavenly places, the first response of all flesh is our unworthiness to be there, despite God having brought us there by divine grace, as Isaiah cries in verse 5. Here we see the hugely important pastoral principle that the more we know God the more we realize how much unlike him we are and so realize how much more dependent we are on grace than we did before.
2. The Prayer of Humble Access makes clear, although we have been admitted to the Heavenly banquet (through justification by faith) so as to be able to eat at the table, we still need to grow in our sanctification, which partaking of this sacrament assists. Just as angels brought a burning coal to cleanse Isaiah's lips (Isaiah 6:7-8), Christ offers his body and blood to our lips at the table to continue the divine work of sanctification in our hearts.
3. Finally, for Cranmer the last phrase of the prayer makes clear that the sacrament is not a mere symbolic memorial but an effective divine means for conveying supernatural grace. This final phrase, 'that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us', is technical reformed theological language, derived from John 6:56 and developed by Martin Bucer, for sanctification being the purpose of regular Holy Communion, i.e., the Holy Communion promotes increasing greater supernatural union between Jesus and the participants. Indeed, this key phrase was a late reinsertion to the 1552 prayerbook, having been previously stricken by the revision committee from where it was used in the 1549 liturgy. (See my forthcoming article in 2018.) Now at the end of the Prayer of Humble Access, rather than in the middle, and now right before the prayer leading to the Institutional Narrative, this phrase functions to state the supernatural benefits that come from what immediately follows, i.e., the reception of the body and blood.

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In our age of down-playing the reality of the infirmity of the flesh (Cranmer's phrase for our tendency to self-centeredness) and the need for its daily crucifixion, in our age of assuming how much more we are like God than we truly are, in our age of assuming God loves us as we are and does not call us to the challenge of transformation, in our age of relying on our own efforts to please God than on the supernatural grace of the sacrament he has given us for our sanctification, it would seem to me that Cranmer's Prayer of Humble Access is pastorally strategic for our generation as well as solid biblical theology.