Thomas Cranmer:
A Eucharistic Theology of True Presence

Final Paper presented for:
HS 503
History of the Reformation to the
Modern Church

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#08006

Due March 27, 2009

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Introduction

This paper will seek to explore Cranmer’s Eucharistic theology, with particular emphasis on its expression in the Book of Common Prayer. After a brief historical treatment, the development and complexities of Cranmer’s Eucharistic thought will be outlined. His brilliance lies less in the area of innovative theological development than in a synthesis of various strands of thought in a breathtakingly elegant liturgical presentation. My thesis is that Cranmer, after a lengthy period of theological development in which he assimilated an impressive variety of influences, argued for the true presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper received through the Spirit, which has been immortalized in his reworking of liturgical tradition to create the Book of Common Prayer.

Thomas Cranmer

Historical Setting

Europe was hovering on the edge of a period of tremendous social and religious upheaval as Thomas Cranmer was born in England in 1489. His earliest life was quiet, largely taken up with outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing, until he entered university at Cambridge in 1503.¹ His time at Cambridge would eventually add up to almost 30 years, yet much of this time remains largely unknown. He lived “in residence” at Cambridge during the years of the famous White Horse Tavern meetings of reformer sympathizers, although his involvement is uncertain.²

Meanwhile, over on the continent Luther began to stir up controversy with the publication of his 95 theses in 1517. The Reformation was starting to take shape as anti-Roman sentiment swept over Europe. England’s path away from the fold of Rome took a different direction than the rest of Europe, as it was, generally speaking, imposed from above,

instead of as a more popular movement. The Anglican Church is often described as the “middle way” between the other Protestants and the Roman Catholics, and has retained a “high church” acceptance of liturgical worship, due largely to the work of Cranmer.

Rise to Prominence

Thomas Cranmer’s rise to prominence occurred in a somewhat unusual fashion for an ecclesiological figure: as a proponent of royal divorce. Henry VIII was unable to produce a male heir by his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, his brother’s widow, and was seeking an acceptable way out. John Cox relates the position of Cranmer from a conversation concerning this topic:

“It were better, as I suppose,” quoth doctor Cranmer, “that the question, whether a man may marry his brother’s wife or no, were decided and discussed by the divines and by the authority of the word of God, whereby the conscience of the prince might be better satisfied and quieted, than thus, from year to year, by frustatory delays to prolong the time, leaving the very truth of the matter unbought out by the word of God.”

This answer was later to prove highly satisfactory to King Henry VIII, and Cranmer was to become a trusted confidant. In the words of Thomas Cromwell to Cranmer, “do or say what you will, the King will always take it at your will.” Cranmer was appointed by the king to be Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533, and held the post until his death in 1556. Serving as the Archbishop always involves a great deal of politics, and the requirements of the post took much of Cranmer’s time and energy away from his true love of study. He continued to manage the King’s marital affairs, annulling his various ensuing marriages as the situation required.

However, serving as a marriage specialist was by no means Cranmer’s primary function or legacy. He had his own agenda, in which he was highly successful, as

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4 Dickens, The English Reformation, 234.
6 Dickens, The English Reformation, 234.
MacCulloch relates: “Two of his chief priorities were to see the Bible published in English, and the worship of the church changed from Latin to English.” 7 Both of these were accomplished, and have influenced the course of the Anglican Church beyond Cranmer’s greatest expectations. As early as 1534, he influenced the Convocation of Canterbury to ask the king that the scriptures be translated into the vernacular. 8 Dickens described the development of two opposing theological camps during the period from 1532-1540, one conservative, and the other not: “The radical group, headed by Cromwell and Cranmer, stood for the policy of the open Bible and for the further diminution of ecclesiastical wealth and privilege.” 9 As his views progressed, Cranmer’s life was to become inextricably caught up in the controversies surrounding the Lord’s Supper, and his creation of a new Anglican liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer.

**Cranmer’s Eucharistic Theology**

During his years as a fellow of Jesus College, Cranmer’s intensive study—for three years restricted to the Bible alone—earned him the name “Scripturist.” 10 This was to lay a strong foundation for his Eucharistic theology, and rendered him open to the Protestant elevation of scripture. Cranmer sought to defend clearly his understanding of the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist: “my meaning is, that the force, the grace, the virtue and benefit of Christ’s body that was crucified for us, and of his blood that was shed for us, be really and effectually present with all them that duly receive the sacrament: but all this I understand of his spiritual presence…” 11 Unfortunately, his meaning was often not clear, and has led to debate ever since.

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9 Ibid., 233.
Theological Development

For Cranmer, “the very pith of the matter, and the chief point whereupon the whole controversy hangeth, [is] whether in these words, “This is my body,” Christ called bread his body…” These four simple words of Christ during the Last Supper have caused a tremendous amount of confusion. Understanding Cranmer’s doctrine of the Eucharist as it developed is notoriously difficult, and much of the disagreements has centered on the question of Cranmer’s influences. Several various positions have been argued as to the nature of Cranmer’s theology, and an even greater variety of potential causes. Patricia Wilson-Kastner points out the danger in applying particular theological labels (i.e., Zwinglian): “such categories may be anachronistic, inaccurate, or may be so colored by later controversy as to be virtually meaningless.” Brooks agrees, writing that Cranmer “by no means imbibed the ideas of any one school of thought to the exclusion of the others.”

One fairly solid starting point is that during the 1530s Cranmer held to the Roman Catholic position of transubstantiation. After that, the theological fog thickens. MacCulloch writes that by the beginning of Edward VI’s reign in 1547, “it is virtually certain that … Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley, had abandoned belief in corporal presence in the eucharist.” The recent departure of Henry VIII, who was distinctly not open to dissention from the tradition view, provided a more conducive atmosphere for creative theologizing.

The question then becomes, what position now replaced transubstantiation?

Ridley was a strong influence on the development of Cranmer’s Eucharistic theology. According to Cranmer’s own testimony in court in 1555, Ridley has persuaded him to accept

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12 Ibid., 332. Richardson concludes his article with the suggestion “that it is the meaning given to the expression ‘body of Christ’ which determines the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper” (Cyril C. Richardson, “Cranmer and the Analysis of Eucharistic Doctrine,” The Journal of Theological Studies 16, no. 2 (October 1965): 437).
14 Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist, 55.
17 Ibid.
the Lutheran view and reject transubstantiation by 1548. At this trial, Cranmer defended his theology in these words: “Outwardly we eat the sacrament; inwardly we eat the body of Christ.” Knox takes an opposite approach, in seems an oversimplification: “…Luther’s theology of the Lord’s Supper made no appeal in England. English Reformation theology was from the beginning and without deviation unambiguously ‘Reformed’ (or ‘Zwinglian’, to concede a term used exclusively by opponents of this doctrine).” Brooks surveys the arguments, and concludes that “evidence is not lacking that shows Cranmer to have been considerably indebted to Wittenberg in the years before 1546.” Cranmer’s so called “Lutheran phase” was after his rejection of transubstantiation when “the Archbishop nevertheless held firmly to an understanding of the Real Presence by faith in the straightforward terms of the Holy Scripture.” This was not Cranmer’s final position, however.

Cyril C. Richardson and Dom Dix both argue that Cranmer’s ultimate position was Zwinglian. G. B. Timms disagreed with Dix, and in his book Dixit Cranmer, A Reply to Dom Gregory, “endeavored to make the Archbishop a ‘dynamic receptionist’ on the lines of Bucer and Calvin.” One major source of controversy between the Reformers was over the question of whether unbelievers receive the body and blood of Christ if they were to eat the elements: Luther maintained they would, while the Swiss camp and many others denied it. Brooks reports some arguments of Cranmer from a debate in 1548 pertaining to this issue:

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18 Dickens, The English Reformation, 258-259. According to Peter Brooks, there exists a huge amount of debate over whether Cranmer ever held to a Lutheran view of the Eucharist, and three distinct camps have developed (Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist: An Essay in Historical Development (London: Macmillan, 1965), 7-37. A full treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.
19 Ibid., 259.
21 Brooks, Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist, 36.
22 Ibid., 37.
24 E. R. Hardy, Jr., “Review of Zwingli and Cranmer on the Eucharist (Cranmer Dixit et Contradixit) by Cyril C. Richardson,” Church History 20, no. 2 (June 1951): 89.
“Onely goode men can eate Christ’s body. When the evil eateth the Sacrament, Breade and wyne, he neither hath Christ’s body nor eateth it.”

Martin Bucer, the reformer of Strasbourg, was also a major influence upon Cranmer. Diarmaid MacCulloch notes that their relationship began during the Catherine divorce saga, and was to continue for the rest of their lives. McNeill points out that “Cranmer also repeatedly asserts his own agreement with Bucer, as well as with Peter Martyr and the Swiss.” Needham also highlights the connection between Bucer and Cranmer, as Cranmer invited Bucer to England upon the occasion of Bucer’s flight from Strasbourg. At Cambridge, Bucer strongly influenced Cranmer’s second edition of the Prayer Book in 1552. Bucer is often considered to be one of the primary links between Reformed theology and the English Reformation.

One difficult question which arises concerns the distinction between a figurative presence and a spiritual presence. Osiandne, who is alleged by Wilson-Kastner to have influenced Cranmer, attacked Zwingli for subverting the clear meaning of Christ’s words, and in expressing his opposing position “denied a simplistic physical understanding of the presence but at the same time asserted a real personal presence of the whole Christ,” yet also affirmed “that our eating of Christ in the Eucharist is spiritual and by faith.” He strongly disliked any reduction of Christ’s presence “to imagination or a mental act.”

I would argue against too precise of an identification of Cranmer with Zwingli, as some differences can be found. Zwingli placed less importance on the Eucharist, and only

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25 Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist, 49.
30 Ibid.
31 Anderson lays out the traditional view of the various Protestant Eucharistic positions: “between the substantive verb of real presence and the figurative verb of absence, and thus between the extremes of Luther and Zwingli … is the middle ground eventually occupied by Calvin, whose preeminence in England is a
held a “simple service of commemoration but four times a year” after his revision of worship in 1525, in marked contrast to Cranmer’s liturgy of the Prayer Book. Another interesting point is that “Cranmer, unlike Zwingli … emphasizes the doctrine of mystical union with Christ.” Brooks provides a useful clarification: “to dub Cranmer a ‘Zwinglian’ simply because he believed in the ‘True’ Presence is an unhistorical as the application of similar tags to Bucer, Melanchthon or even Calvin.” He also argues, however, that Cranmer “became the clear exponent of a ‘True’ Presence doctrine that embodied the mean features of what may be called the Swiss viewpoint,” yet also incorporating other schools of thought.

Knox argues that Cranmer’s theology of the Eucharist is derived from Wycliffe, as passed down through the Lollards, and describes 5 characteristics of the English view of Eucharist: “the concepts of ‘double eating’, of the eye of faith, of the efficacious sign, of the union of the worshiper with Christ, and of the preaching and praise of God’s goodness in Christ being the sacrifice we offer.” He contends these were all also found in Wycliffe.

Cranmer’s primary theological expositions on the Eucharist come in the Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament, published in 1550, which was then attacked by Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester. In reply, Cranmer wrote his Answer unto a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation, published in 1558. Some excerpts from these will be explored in the section on theological analysis, following a brief overview of the Prayer Book.
Expression in the Book of Common Prayer

The Book of Common Prayer is indisputably the most enduring legacy of Cranmer’s Eucharistic theology, and indeed of his life’s work. However, determining Cranmer’s theology from the Prayer Book is less straightforward than would be ideal for the project at hand. Patricia Wilson-Kastner notes that “many scholars would insist that one cannot simply assume uncritically that Cranmer’s theology is adequately represented in either edition [1549 and 1552] of the Book.”³⁹ For the sake of this paper, Cranmer’s theology will be deduced as best as possible from the Prayer Book and integrated with his own writings.

Development of the Prayer Book

Cranmer’s genius in his presentation of the Prayer Book is almost universally applauded. Dickens commends his “admirable knowledge of Christian liturgies.”⁴⁰ Cranmer first started working on his liturgy as early as 1538, and “saw his work in terms of restoration, not improvement.”⁴¹ Shepherd provides a helpful overview of the liturgical predecessors utilized by Cranmer, emphasizing the influence of the Eastern Orthodox. He writes that “the Gregorian Sacramentary and Antiphonary, upon which the medieval English uses were based, are the obvious and unmistakable pro-genitors of the Book of Common Prayer.”⁴² His order of communion in 1549 was also based upon the Latin rite of the Sarum Missal.⁴³ Cranmer reworked many of the collects in his Prayer Book, removing most of those used for the saints’ days, and instead writing new ones.⁴⁴ As argued above, it is the “‘spiritual presence’ view of the Eucharist which underpinned Cranmer’s remodeling of the Prayer Book.”⁴⁵

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⁴⁰ Dickens, The English Reformation, 233.
⁴³ Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist, 252.
⁴⁵ MacCulloch, “Introduction,” xii.
Cranmer’s influence from the Eastern branch of the church brought about a somewhat unique theological focus, explained by Shepherd: “he had studied carefully the principal Eastern liturgies—those of St. Basil and St. Chrysostom—with the result that the central prayer of his liturgy was suffused with what may be called a dynamic, rather than a juridical conception of redemption…” As well as Eastern influences, other European influences also contributed to the Prayer Book: “the influence of German ‘Kirchen-Ordnungen’ of the 16th century upon the English Prayer Book was unquestionably large…” In support of the concept that Cranmer was returning to the basics of the church, not pioneering a new trail, Shepherd provides a helpful summary of his argument:

To this point we have attempted to suggest that the Book of Common Prayer was conceived of as an endeavor to return to the classic norms and conceptions of the Western Church, at the time of its creative formulation of its liturgical practice, when it was still in close touch with Eastern theology but at the same time was developing its own peculiar manner of emphasis in matters doctrinal.

**Implications of the Prayer Book**

Cranmer’s new liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer has had deep theological implications for the church. To understand the significance of Cranmer’s work, first the nature of the medieval Roman Catholic mass must be understood. John Bossy describes how the mass was kept closed guarded and veiled in secrecy, with the exact words used excluded from public knowledge. The rationale was that given the superstitious nature of the people, any known formulations from the mass would be used for “conjuring and charming.”

Cranmer’s early changes to the mass “entailed a radical change of purpose, whereby the infrequent lay communion and the many private masses of medieval custom would be

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46 Ibid., 8. He further explains: “like his fellow Reformers, however, Cranmer did not allow his liturgical revisions of his inherited Eucharistic rite to dwell so exclusively upon the Atonement of Christ's passion, upon sin and the means whereby it is forgiven and its consequences removed” (7-8).
replaced by a regular congregational service.”50 The ‘order of communion,’ in which the people themselves receive the bread and wine, was a significant shift from the Roman Catholic mass.51 MacCulloch writes that the Prayer Book was “intended as an approach to the divine.”52

The introduction of worship in the vernacular is one of the most important contributions of the Reformation. Having a liturgy in a language understood by the common people was groundbreaking.53 This innovation was always well received, however. Violent riots broke out in Devon and Cornwall in 1549 after the release of first edition of the Prayer Book, smearing the Prayer Book as “a Christmas game” due to being written in English.54

The first version of the Prayer Book in 1549 did not stray very far from the Roman Catholic mass, and even retained the word “mass” buried in a subtitle.55 The 1552 Edition moved much further away from the Roman Catholic liturgy. One change was that “auricular confession has disappeared and was replaced by a general confession of sins.”56 Both versions, however, taught a doctrine of spiritual presence. Note the following from the 1549 Prayer Book: “For as the benefit is great, if with a truly penitent heart and lively faith we receive that holy sacrament ; (for then we spiritually eat the flesh of Christ, and drink his blood; then we dwell in Christ, and Christ in us ; we be made one with Christ, and Christ with us;)…”57 A passage from the 1552 version is similar, saying that Christ is “to be our spiritual

52 Ibid., xxiii.
53 Ibid., xi.
54 Ibid., xiii.
food and sustenance, as it is declared unto us, as well by God’s word as by the holy
sacraments of his blessed body and blood…”

Theological Analysis

To insist upon a fully literal reading of the scriptures without an understanding of
metaphor and symbolic language is to misunderstand much of the scriptures, particularly the
teachings of Jesus. When Jesus says he is the door to the sheep in John 10, should we declare
that since he said “I am,” the use of the verb to be necessitates the transformation of Christ’s
substance to wood or metal? As Zwingli wrote, after giving many examples of symbolic
language in the Bible, “‘is’ cannot mean ‘to be’, but is used to mean ‘signify’.” Cranmer
writes that “the bread is not made really Christ’s body, nor the wine his blood, but
sacramentally. And the miraculous working is not in the bread, but in them that duly eat the
bread, and drink that bread.” Christ gives “his own flesh spiritually to feed upon.”

Anderson clarifies the two opposing ontological positions being taken: “Linguistic
literalism — what both sides considered the ‘plaine signification of the words’ — aligns with
objective, physical reality, and tropology with the subject and spirit. Either side recognizes
the other dimension of meaning, but secondarily and less crucially.” This can also be
related to the philosophical position of nominalism, which McGee argues is integral to
Cranmer’s thought: “Cranmer's objection to what he called the Catholic notion of the real
presence in the sacrament, and his declaration that this notion was an injury to Christ, turned
on the quantitative elements of time, place, and mutual exclusion.”

Certainly Cranmer eventually settled on a position in opposition to that of Luther and
the Roman Catholics, that Christ cannot be considered physically present in the elements.

59 From a letter by Zwingli to Matthew Alber, 16th November 1524, found in Needham, 2000 Years of Christ's
Power Part Three: Renaissance and Reformation, 184.
60 Cranmer, Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer, 34.
61 Ibid., 35.
63 McGee, “Cranmer and Nominalism,” 212.
Rather, the power of the sacrament comes through the work of the Spirit in the soul of the participant, not through the bodily consumption of the bread and wine. This is the concept of a spiritual and true presence. As to the exact nuances of how this relates to the complexities of the Reformed and Zwinglian positions, I will leave that to the experts.

**Significance of Cranmer’s Eucharistic Theology**

Celebrating Cranmer’s confounding of the Roman Catholics upon his recantation of his recantation as he was about to be burned, Cox writes that “there was never cruelty more notable or better in time deluded and deceived.” The overall impact of Cranmer upon future generations has clearly been for good. While he has been denied the celebrity status of a Luther, Calvin, or Zwingli, Cranmer stands as one of the titans of the Reformation. In some ways both a lesser known and perhaps more complex figure, he emerged from a fairly quiet academic life to dominate the course of the Anglican Church. He can without doubt be asserted to have been “vitally and inseparably connected with the Reformation of the English Church.”

Able to navigate the changing fortunes of the Protestant cause in England for a time, he was eventually martyred for his theological convictions.

The Reformation emphasis upon lay involvement and the necessity of the vernacular remains one of the movement’s greatest contributions to the development of the church. Luther’s Bible was to shape the German language, and Cranmer had a similar effect on English. His influence is felt both indirectly through his support of English Bible translation, and directly through his Book of Common Prayer. His theological understand of the Lord’s Supper has formed the bedrock for the Prayer Book. The influence of this work continues to this day: “the Book of Common Prayer is one of the most important books in the English language” as “one of a handful of texts to have decided the future of a world language.”

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64 Cox, “The Life, State, and Story of Thomas Cranmer,” xxviii. Cranmer first signed a recantation of his anti-Roman beliefs, but then when he was being burned, changed his mind and kept to his original views.
Cranmer’s influence continues far beyond the confines of England. Through the Episcopal Church, he has helped shape a major branch of American Christianity. MacCulloch notes that “the Book of Common Prayer, in a flurry of different guises and versions, still gives unity to Anglicanism, one of the major elements of the Christian mosaic.” While it is has been replaced today by many Anglican churches, Cranmer’s liturgy was in use for hundreds of years.

**Conclusion**

Cranmer remains a genuine hero of the Anglican tradition. While perhaps not a model of theological clarity, Cranmer’s work has contributed to the public worship of countless thousands. Both from his own study of the Bible and other traditions, in concert with considerable input from the Continental Reformers, Cranmer was able to steer the liturgy of the Anglicans away from a view of Christ’s corporeal presence, to an emphasis on the ‘true’ presence of Christ in the Eucharist, received and applied by faith.

*Word Count: 3500*

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67 Ibid., xvii.
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