

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCCHARIST

For: Prof. Dr. David Neelands

Anglican Theology
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J. Brian Bartley
Trinity College
662030885

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Through the ministry journey of Thomas Cranmer, from priest to Archbishop of Canterbury and finally martyr, the Church in England's Doctrine of the Eucharist shifted from transubstantiation through "real" presence to "true presence". The latter, expressed in Article XXVIII of the 39 Articles, continues to be the official position of the Anglican Church in Canada. This short paper will examine the influences on Cranmer, and the evolution of his thinking to its ultimate position.

When Cranmer became a priest of the Roman church he espoused the received Doctrine of Transubstantiation as defined by Thomas Aquinas.¹ That is to say, that the substance of the bread and wine were changed into Christ's body and blood without a physical change in their outward appearance.² This Doctrine, together with the authority of the Roman church, became the subject of much controversy at the dawn of the sixteenth century. The abuses of the church prompted Martin Luther to nail his ninety-five theses onto the church door in Wittenberg on All Saints Day, 1517. His action evolved into the Protestant Reformation, a re-thinking of the received Doctrines of the Roman Church which ultimately led to the establishment of alternatives to it.

Medieval fascination with transubstantiation had narrowed the focus of the eucharist to the sacredness of the elements - Thomas' theory of transubstantiation – and the individual communicant.³ The Reformers were preoccupied with both the doctrine of Christ's real presence in the eucharist, and the loss of the corporate worship experience. Paramount among them were Luther himself, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin.

Luther believed that the Sacrament was a gift of God; and, although opposed to the concept of transubstantiation, fought to preserve the principle of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine.⁴ His solution was the concept of Co-Presence, or consubstantiation. He argued that just as Christ was completely human and completely divine, the two natures of the incarnation are present in the sacrament – every part both bread and wine, and body and blood – co-mingled.⁵

Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss humanist Reformer, argued for a purely symbolic interpretation of Christ's Eucharistic presence. He believed that the true body of Christ is not eaten not in a gross and carnal manner, but in a sacramental and spiritual manner by the religious faithful.⁶ In his view, the true body of Christ was present in the eucharist by the contemplation of faith. Sharing in the meal acknowledged what Christ did for us, rather than His abiding presence which does something for us now.⁷

¹ Peter Brooks, Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1965), 3.

² Paul H. Jones, Christ's Eucharistic Presence: A History of the Doctrine, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1994), 95.

³ Ibid, 118.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 121.

⁶ Jones, 122

⁷ Ibid, 123.

John Calvin, the French-born Swiss theologian, presented a Doctrine of the Lord's Supper that was a *via media* between Luther and Zwingli.⁸ For him, union with Christ had roots in election and faith.⁹ Christ's presence in the eucharist was manifest through faith, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, and through the Word.¹⁰ In fact, he held that the sacraments are a pictorial representation of the Word, and the gift is the whole Christ, given by the Holy Spirit.¹¹

Thomas Cranmer's early Eucharistic beliefs were firmly grounded in the received doctrine of the Roman church, as can be demonstrated by his comments in a letter to an Archdeacon Hawkins. In it he described the trial of one John Frith, who "thought it not necessary to be believed as an article of our faith, that there is the very real corporeal presence of Christ within the host and sacrament of the altar, and holdeth this point most after the opinion of Oecolampadius."¹²

By 1538 Cranmer's thinking had evolved to the point of regarding transubstantiation as an "opinion" that could be denied without abandoning the Real Presence doctrine. In writing to Thomas Cromwell about the case of Adam Damplip, who was accused of teaching false doctrine, he remarked "...he (Damplip) saith, that the controversy between him and the prior was, by cause he confuted the opinion of the transubstantiation, and therein I think he taught but the truth."¹³

During the decade between this admission and the celebrated Lords' Debate of December 1548, Cranmer was passing through an intermediate phase in his Eucharistic understanding.¹⁴ They were years of research when he acquainted himself with Scriptural and Patristic (Gelasius, Leo, Cyprian, Irenaeus, Cyril, Hilary, Chrysostom, and Jerome) evidence from a Real Presence point of view; compiling a record of his studies in the Commonplace books, which included passages from Luther and the other Continental Reformers.¹⁵ His comments in the *Answer to Smith's Preface* provides confirmation of an intermediate phase in his thinking: "...not long before I wrote the said catechism, I was in error of the real presence, as I was many years past in divers other errors: as of transubstantiation, of the sacrifice propitiatory of the priests in the mass..."¹⁶

By March 1548 there was further evidence of the shift in his thinking. In the preliminary *Exhortation to the Order of Communion*, Cranmer wrote that God: "... doth vouchsafe in a Sacrament and mystery to give us his said body and blood spiritually: to feed and drink upon."¹⁷ Later that year, in debate at Lord's, he opposed the doctrines of transubstantiation and adoration of the consecrated host, and clearly

⁸ Ibid, 134.

⁹ Ibid, 139.

¹⁰ Ibid, 142.

¹¹ Ibid, 145.

¹² Brooks, 3

¹³ Ibid, 8

¹⁴ Ibid, 11

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Brooks, 12

¹⁷ Ibid, 46

stated his understanding of the Reformed viewpoint.¹⁸ His understanding of the Eucharist was carefully related to the doctrine of Justification by Faith¹⁹; and throughout the debate he was careful to distinguish between eating the Sacrament and eating the body of Christ.²⁰ Perhaps most important was his use of the Fathers - Augustine, Cyprian, Cyril, Epiphanius, Irenaeus and Tertullian - to support his cause.²¹

The mature concept of Thomas Cranmer's True Presence Doctrine is expressed in his *Answer to Gardiner*:

This spiritual meat of Christ's body and blood is not received in the mouth, and digested in the stomach, (as corporal meats and drinks commonly be,) but it is received with a pure heart and a sincere faith...And herein standeth the whole effect and strength of his sacrament. And this faith God worketh inwardly in our hearts by his holy Spirit, and confirmeth the same outwardly to our ears by hearing of his word, and to our other sense by eating and drinking of the sacramental bread and wine in his holy supper.²²

And further:

This therefore is the sum of my teaching ...that in the true ministration of the sacrament Christ is present spiritually, and so spiritually eaten of them that be godly and spiritual ...he is not eaten corporally, but spiritually.²³

The fruit of Cranmer's journey is evidenced in *holy Communion*, 1549. His guiding principle was determination to both emphasize the Eucharist as a memorial of Christ's sacrifice for sin, and to express his understanding of a scriptural sacrifice of laud and praise.²⁴ And so he wrote:

O God heavenly Father, which of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesu Christ, to suffer death upon the cross for our redemption, who made there (by his one oblation, once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole World, and did institute, and in his holy Gospel command us to celebrate, a perpetual memory of that his precious death, until his coming again.²⁵

For Cranmer the 'True Presence' of Christ in the Eucharist is in spirit, not in his corporeal substance. In his view, Christ is really, carnally and corporally absent from his Supper, since he is locally circumscribed at God's right hand in heaven, the Lord's presence at the Eucharist is after a 'True' and 'spiritual' manner.²⁶ As Brooks notes, "With the publication of a Second *Book of Common Prayer* in 1552

¹⁸ Ibid, 47.

¹⁹ Ibid, 48.

²⁰ Ibid, 49.

²¹ Ibid, 50.

²² Carl S. Myer ed., *Cranmer's Selected Writings*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1961), 57

²³ Ibid, 61

²⁴ Brooks, 73

²⁵ Ibid, 74.

²⁶ Ibid, 107.

the Order for Holy Communion had been so recast it was no longer possible to understand any other doctrine of the Eucharist than 'True' Presence Cranmer had made his own."²⁷

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²⁷ Ibid, 109.

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