

Real Presence, Spiritual Presence: Assessing Thomas Cranmer's Appropriation of St. Ambrose's Eucharistic Doctrine

DANIEL MARRS*

While Thomas Cranmer's frequent appeals to the church fathers are often noted, focused evaluations of his theological use of particular patristic sources remain lacking. In a manner both historical and theological, the present article assesses the nature and quality of Thomas Cranmer's appropriation of Ambrose of Milan's doctrine of Christ's eucharistic presence. Devoting special attention to Cranmer's A Defence, in which he makes extensive use of Ambrose's De mysteriis and De sacramentis, the author contends that Cranmer's engagement with Ambrose contextualizes and informs his final vision of Christ's presence in the eucharist, and is therefore able to bring greater clarity to the ongoing debates surrounding Cranmer's understanding of eucharistic presence.

Introduction

Though commenting on Thomas Cranmer's frequent appeals to the church fathers is a commonplace, focused evaluations of his theological use of particular patristic sources remain lacking, with the possible exception of Walsh's.¹ The present article's modest goal is to make a small contribution toward addressing this lacuna, and it stands, broadly speaking, within the growing field of studies in the reformers' use of the fathers.² Using historical and theological perspectives I

* Daniel Marrs is a teaching fellow and Ph.D. candidate at Baylor University, where he is studying theology and ethics, and writing on Søren Kierkegaard's theological anthropology.

¹ K. J. Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers, especially in the *Defence*," *Journal of Religious History* 11, no. 2 (December 1980): 227–246.

² Pierre Frankel, *Testimonia Patrum: The Function of the Patristic Argument in the Theology of Philip Melancthon*, *Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 46 (Geneva: Droz, 1961); Irena Backus, ed., *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, 2 volumes (Leiden: Brill, 1997);

assess the nature and quality of Cranmer's appropriation of Ambrose of Milan's teachings on Christ's eucharistic presence, with special attention to Cranmer's *A Defence*, in which he makes extensive use of Ambrose's *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*.³ I contend that Cranmer's engagement with Ambrose contextualizes and informs his final vision of Christ's presence in the eucharist—thus bringing greater clarity to ongoing debates surrounding Cranmer's understanding of eucharistic presence.

Several complications present themselves. First, centuries of controversy have made it difficult to situate and define Ambrose's eucharistic doctrine. Second, Cranmer's notions of Christ's eucharistic presence have proven notoriously difficult to pin down, due largely to their long, uneven evolution. Finally, establishing a sense of Cranmer's educational background and his general attitude toward the church fathers is vital for contextualizing his appropriation of Ambrose. Thus, this essay consists of three sections: (1) a brief excursus on Ambrose's doctrine of eucharistic presence; (2) an examination of the gradual development of Cranmer's eucharistic doctrine; and (3) an analysis of Cranmer's appropriation of Ambrose in *A Defence*, couched within the broader context of Cranmer's rhetorical purposes and attitude toward patristic sources.

Excursus on Ambrose's Eucharistic Doctrine

Though scholars seldom see Ambrose of Milan (c. 340–397) as a speculative theologian of any great genius—he is usually regarded as a politically astute ecclesial leader or a pastorally-focused practical ethicist—his sacramental theology has undeniably exercised vast influence.⁴ He is the first Latin Father to attempt to explain the eucharist's change from bread and wine to Christ's flesh and blood, and he placed great importance on the words of institution and consecration

Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity: The Construction of a Confessional Identity in the 17th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ Thomas Cranmer, *A Defence of the True and Catholike Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ* (London: Reynold Wolfe, 1550).

⁴ Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), 47, 49, 52; Daniel H. Williams, *Ambrose of Milan and the End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 109–110; F. Homes Dudden, *The Life and Times of St. Ambrose*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 555–558.

in bringing about this change.⁵ These emphases, especially evident in *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*, ensured his prominence in the later eucharistic controversies of the Western church.⁶ Indeed, many see Ambrose as an early articulator of something approaching transubstantiation.⁷ Unfortunately, the lens of later doctrines and debates has all too often obscured Ambrose's intentions, with the concerns and vocabulary of later periods overlaying and warping Ambrose's own contributions.⁸ Furthermore, sustained examinations of Ambrose's eucharistic doctrine remain rare.⁹ Thus, in what follows, I contextualize Ambrose's eucharistic doctrine within his pronounced pastoral focus, and then analyze key eucharistic terms in Ambrose's *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*, two texts that figure significantly in Cranmer's *A Defence*. This will generate some traction for assessing Cranmer's appropriation of Ambrose.

Primacy of Pastoral Concerns in Ambrose's Theology

Ambrose's pastoral sensibility was his most defining characteristic—despite Ambrose's own admission he felt he had been “snatched into the priesthood” without adequate preparation.¹⁰ Ambrose approached his ministerial duties with astonishing energy, delivering sermons every Sunday, on feast days, and daily during Lent; celebrating

⁵ J. H. Srawley, ed., T. Thompson, trans., *St. Ambrose: On the Mysteries and the Treatise On the Sacraments by an Unknown Author* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), xxxiv.

⁶ Edward Yarnold, “Transsubstantiation [sic.],” in *The Eucharist in Theology and Philosophy: Issues of Doctrinal History in East and West from the Patristic Age to the Reformation*, ed. István Perczel, Réka Forrai, and György Geréby, vol. XXXV, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy, Series 1 (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2005), 382–383.

⁷ Enrico Mazza, *The Celebration of the Eucharist: The Origin of the Rite and the Development of Its Interpretation*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 154.

⁸ Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vi–ix.

⁹ See Raymond Johanny, *L'Eucharistie, Centre de l'Histoire du Salut, chez Saint Ambroise de Milan* (Paris: Beauchesne et Ses Fils, 1968); and Luisa Teresa Coraluppi Tonzig, “The Teaching of St. Ambrose on Real Presence, Its Misunderstanding in Later Tradition, and the Significance of Its Recovery for Contemporary Eucharistic Theology” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duquesne University, 1998).

¹⁰ Ambrose, *De officiis*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth, trans. Ivor J. Davidson, vol. 1, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), I.i.4; Craig Alan Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 38.

eucharist daily; and making himself available to anyone seeking counsel.¹¹ Indeed, Ambrose's devotion to pastoral ministry left little time for theological study.¹² Acutely aware of this deficiency, Ambrose confessed that even as he took up the duties of teaching he was himself in the process of learning.¹³ Much of his theological work thus grew out of his ministerial duties, and focused on scripture exegesis and virtue training.¹⁴ When he did undertake theological projects, his work was not particularly groundbreaking, and was shaped more by polemical or political concerns than theological reflection.¹⁵

Yet, Ambrose's aim was not solely to counter political foes or give ethical instruction. Ethical Christian living was for Ambrose no mere duty. It required intimacy between the individual soul and its Lord.¹⁶ This emphasis is especially evident in *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*, the central texts of Ambrose's eucharistic teachings.¹⁷ Rather than focusing on speculative theology, these works attempted to draw hearers into a deeper understanding and experience of the mysteries. Ambrose's pastoral focus thus provides a determinative context for his doctrine of the eucharist.¹⁸

In *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis* Ambrose seeks to draw "neophytes" into the mysteries of the Christian faith.¹⁹ Both texts "provide a window on [Ambrose's] entire theological orientation as a pastor of souls and teacher of the faithful" who was focused on the inner transformation of the baptized—specifically the believer's increasing spiritual attunement to God's powerful presence.²⁰ More than any other Father of the church, Ambrose "stresses the personal encounter with

¹¹ Satterlee, *Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, 67–69, 89.

¹² Satterlee, *Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, 68.

¹³ Ambrose, *De officiis*, I.i.4.

¹⁴ Marcia L. Colish, *Ambrose's Patriarchs: Ethics for the Common Man* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 13–14.

¹⁵ See Ramsey, *Ambrose*, 52; and Williams, *End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 143–145.

¹⁶ Williams, *End of the Arian-Nicene Conflicts*, 557.

¹⁷ Tonzig, "St. Ambrose on Real Presence," 125–126.

¹⁸ Tonzig, "St. Ambrose on Real Presence," 26.

¹⁹ Satterlee, *Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, 2.

²⁰ William P. McDonald, "Paideia and Gnosis: Foundations of the Catechumenate in Five Church Fathers" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1998), 254; Satterlee, *Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, 94–95. See also Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.55–58.

Christ in the sacrament.”²¹ “See, no longer in shadows . . . but in truth radiating light . . . face to face . . . I find you in your sacraments.”²² In emphasizing the experiential, Ambrose seeks to build faith in his hearers. Enumerating scriptural accounts of God’s miraculous power (perhaps Ambrose’s most favored rhetorical strategy), Ambrose asserts that what the Christian experiences through the sacraments is greater still:

If that which you so wonder at is but shadow, how great must that be whose very shadow you wonder at. See now: what happened in the case of the fathers was shadow. . . . You recognize now that which is the more excellent, for light is better than shadow, truth than a figure, the Body of its Giver than the manna from heaven.²³

Ambrose then launches into the theme that would eventually play a pivotal role in later controversies: the conversion of nature (*natura*) that occurs in the eucharist. Before examining Ambrose’s use of *natura*, it will be helpful to say a quick word about Ambrose’s motivation to talk about a conversion of the elements in the first place. Mystagogical preaching, rather than functioning primarily as theological argument, sought to draw neophytes into experiencing through faith the mysteries—the spiritual realities that underlie the perceived elements and outward rituals.²⁴ Why would Ambrose, who tended to avoid innovation and speculation in even his dogmatic treatises, use this sacred and private context as an opportunity for theological creativity? The context reveals his purpose in bringing up eucharistic conversion: the pastorally-minded Ambrose is anticipating and answering the doubts of those who see only bread and wine and question its value, or who think the eucharist compares unfavorably with the manna showered from the heavens.²⁵

²¹ Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 17–18.

²² Ambrose, *De apologia prophetarum David* 1.12.58 (CSEL 32/2.339.18–340.5), translated in Kilmartin, *Eucharist in the West*, 18; Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, V.27; *PL* 16:397b–c; *NPNF* X, 320–321.

²³ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, VIII.49; *PL* 16:405a–b; *NPNF* X, 323–324 (translation modified).

²⁴ Satterlee, *Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, 2–4.

²⁵ Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, IV.iii.9; *PL* 16.438a. All references to English translations of this text, denoted by “De sacramentis” followed by a page number, are drawn

Recognizing that the unassuming appearance of the sacramental elements might undermine the spiritual nature of the experience for new believers, Ambrose employs three strategies to prove that the bread and wine are better than even the outwardly impressive miracles of the Old Testament: (1) showing how the Old Testament examples are symbols (*figura*) of the eucharistic reality; (2) emphasizing the power of Christ's word in all things, from the act of creation to the efficacy of the sacraments;²⁶ and (3) asserting that by the power of Christ's word the very nature (*natura*) of the sacraments is changed (*convertere, mutare*) into Christ's body and blood, effective and present for the believer.

Thus, Ambrose's emphasis on real presence remains in keeping with his Western tradition. His only "innovation" here is to borrow the language of conversion from Greek theologians.²⁷ Some interpreters see Ambrose as initiating a new concept of conversion by separating typology (*antitypa*) from his discussion of Christ's eucharistic presence.²⁸ Others see Ambrose as a bit of a bungler, with his partial appropriation of Eastern concepts resulting in a warped version of "metabolic" (*metabolé*) conversion.²⁹ Still others see Ambrose as hopelessly inconsistent. Moreover, Ambrose has subsequently been claimed, quite anachronistically, as a source for the "realist" conception of Christ's presence, over against the "symbolist" approach of Augustine, an interpretive tendency especially evident during the Reformation. Where does this leave us? We have seen Ambrose's pastoral motivation in introducing the notion of conversion; we now turn to his terminology to clarify his meaning.

from Srawley and Thompson, *St. Ambrose: On the Mysteries and the Treatise On the Sacraments by an Unknown Author*.

²⁶ Joseph M. Powers, *Eucharistic Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 21.

²⁷ Srawley and Thompson, *St. Ambrose*, xxxiv–xxxv; William Ledwich, "Baptism, Sacrament of the Cross: Looking Behind St. Ambrose," in *The Sacrifice of Praise: Studies on the Themes of Thanksgiving and Redemption in the Central Prayers of the Eucharistic and Baptismal Liturgies*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks, Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 1981), 199–214, 200.

²⁸ Srawley and Thompson, *St. Ambrose*, xxxv–xxxvi; Mazza, *Celebration of the Eucharist*, 150–151.

²⁹ Kilmartin, *Eucharist in the West*, 15, 18, 21–22; Max Thurian, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, trans. Emily Chisholm (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 32–44.

Key Terms in Ambrose's Eucharistic Theology

Two terms are especially fruitful for understanding Ambrose's concept of conversion in connection with Christ's real presence in the eucharist: *natura* and *figura*. In the passages in which Ambrose describes elemental conversion, those which pair *mutare* or *convertere* with *natura* are the most controversial. Their interpretation rests upon the meaning of *natura* as the object of the conversion process.³⁰ For example: "Shall not the word of Christ, which was able to make out of nothing that which was not, be able to change (*mutare*) things which already are into what they were not? For it is not less to give a new nature to things than to change them (*mutare naturas*)."³¹

Usually this conversion of nature is taken to mean a transformation at the elemental level. However, nuances in Ambrose's usage of the word *natura* complicate this simplistic interpretation. Sometimes a change in nature refers to a complete transformation, as in the case of Moses' rod turning into a serpent; yet, Ambrose clarifies that this does not illustrate the *kind* of change that takes place in the eucharist, but rather the fundamental principle that grace has power over nature.³² A change in nature can also refer to a limited modification, as in the case of the bitter water in the river Marah; the water remains water, but its quality miraculously changes.³³ Ambrose also notes that sometimes things miraculously take on a quality *contrary* to their usual nature. For example, though iron normally sinks in water, Elisha caused an iron axe head to float.³⁴ This change presumably did not entail the transformation of the axe head into something else, but rather of its qualities relative to the water.

The sheer variety of illustrations may indicate that Ambrose himself has no definite sense of what he means by "a change in nature." Certainly, his primary purpose is to show that grace is more powerful than nature.³⁵ Yet, it remains possible that Ambrose intends a nuance of *natura* that indicates a certain kind of change—perhaps at the level of relatedness (as in the case of the iron axe head relative to

³⁰ Tonzig, "St. Ambrose on Real Presence," 136–137.

³¹ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.52; *PL* 16:407a; *NPNF* X, 324.

³² Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.51; *PL* 405c–406a; *NPNF* X, 323.

³³ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.51; *PL* 405c–406a; *NPNF* X, 323.

³⁴ Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.51; *PL* 16.406b; compare Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, IV.iv.18.

³⁵ See Ambrose, *De mysteriis*, IX.52; *PL* 16:407a; *NPNF* X, 324.

the water). Take the specifically eucharistic example of this nuance in *De sacramentis*:

I told thee of the word of Christ, which acts so that it can change and alter the appointed forms of nature. Then when the disciples of Christ endured not his saying, but hearing that he gave his flesh to eat and gave his blood to drink, they turned back. . . . Accordingly, lest others should say this, feeling a shrinking from actual blood, and that yet the grace of redemption might remain, therefore thou receivest the sacrament in a similitude, but truly obtainest the grace and virtue of the nature.³⁶

Furthermore, Ambrose views the bread and wine as remaining even after the consecration, indicating that he is not really talking about a conversion of the elements *per se*, but rather the process through which the bread and wine “become appropriate vehicles of sacramental action.”³⁷ In short, Ambrose uses *natura* in a variety of ways, including a sense that allows for a change in the eucharist that occurs at some level of reality beyond either appearance or substance. Luisa Tonzig argues that Ambrose should be read as a forerunner not of transubstantiation but of transignification, in which the change is less about the substance underlying the accidents, and more a matter of the believer’s experience of the person of Christ, intimately communicated through the eucharist; Christ’s person and work are made “sacramentally present to the conscience of the faithful.”³⁸ This view accords well with Ambrose’s pastoral emphases and mystagogical preaching.

With an isolated examination of *natura*, ambiguities remain; but Ambrose’s use of the term *figura* sheds additional light.³⁹ The usage of *figura* in theological Latin can be narrowed down to three categories: (1) a “type” or prefiguring of a future reality; (2) the external appearance of something; and (3) a “sign” of an invisible reality.⁴⁰ Ambrose most often uses the term in keeping with the first meaning, with *figura* indicating how the sacraments were “prefigured” in the Old Testament.⁴¹ Thus, Ambrose’s use of *figura* in direct reference

³⁶ Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, VI.i.3; *PL* 16:454d–455a; “De sacramentis,” 129–130.

³⁷ Tonzig, “St. Ambrose on Real Presence,” 144.

³⁸ Tonzig, “St. Ambrose on Real Presence,” 143.

³⁹ Johanny, *L’Eucharistie*, 103.

⁴⁰ Tonzig, “St. Ambrose on Real Presence,” 148.

⁴¹ Tonzig, “St. Ambrose on Real Presence,” 149–153.

to the eucharist likely follows the same nuance, with the eucharist functioning in turn as an *antitypa* of Christ's death.⁴²

The question is whether Ambrose's use of *figura* is truly meaningful in the face of his apparent movement toward elemental conversion language. The two concepts seem to be incompatible, especially in light of the later eucharist conflicts in the West. Enrico Mazza concludes that Ambrose, attempting innovation, appropriated an incomplete notion of conversion from the Greeks, leading to a disconnect within Ambrose's thought between typological thinking on the one hand and his sudden shift toward elemental conversion on the other.⁴³ Other scholars interpret Ambrose's use of terms like *similitudo* and *figura* as little more than leftover concepts, overshadowed by his move toward element-conversion language and a realist conception of Christ's eucharistic presence.⁴⁴

However, this critique assumes the later development of outright opposition between realist and symbolist approaches. Ambrose probably did not envision such a sharp disjunction.⁴⁵ To see his emphasis on real presence and eucharistic conversion on the one hand and the eucharist as *figura* or *similitudo* on the other as inconsistent or contradictory is probably anachronistic. Ambrose's use of symbolist-sounding language, far from opposing the reality of Christ's presence, "rather indicates the way by which Christ's presence is being realized for the believer, shifting the emphasis from the physical elements of bread and wine to the efficacy of the sacrament."⁴⁶ Indeed, *figura* for Ambrose sometimes seems to express a reality that is "more real" than the physical and visible. The reality of Christ's presence is not merely compatible with the description of Christ's body and blood as *figura*, but perhaps even intensified.⁴⁷ Ambrose's use of *figura* should not be allowed to fade into the background; retaining its significance in his understanding of Christ's eucharistic presence provides

⁴² Tonzig, "St. Ambrose on Real Presence," 154; Johanny, *L'Eucharistie*, 103. Ambrose, *De sacramentis*, IV.v.21; PL 16.443b; "De sacramentis," 113.

⁴³ Mazza, *Celebration of the Eucharist*, 152–154; Kilmartin, *Eucharist in the West*, 21.

⁴⁴ Roch A. Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago, Ill.: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 119; William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (Collegetown, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1990), 96–98.

⁴⁵ Crockett, *Eucharist*, 98.

⁴⁶ Tonzig, "St. Ambrose on Real Presence," 145.

⁴⁷ See also Johanny, *L'Eucharistie*, 103.

a helpful corrective to the tendency to read too much into his conversion language.⁴⁸

Final Remarks on Ambrose's Doctrine of Eucharistic Presence

Ambrose's eucharistic theology, though often viewed simplistically as a forerunner to transubstantiation, is best viewed from the perspective of his mystagogical purpose in *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis* and his deeply pastoral character. His language of conversion, though perhaps derivative and somewhat inconsistently applied, effectively engenders faith and draws believers into a deeper experience of Christ's presence in the eucharist. To read Ambrose's work as a major shift into a new trajectory leading inevitably to transubstantiation is to misunderstand his use of words like *natura* and *figura*, and illegitimately to superimpose a sharp disjunction between the symbolic and the real on Ambrose's teaching. Though some tension between the concepts is present in Ambrose's thought, this does not necessarily manifest incoherence or indecision. For Ambrose, both the conversion of *natura* and the characterization of the eucharist as *figura* speak to the same reality: Christ's presence, experienced truly by the believer.

Cranmer's Doctrine of Christ's Eucharistic Presence

With this understanding of Ambrose's notion of Christ's eucharistic presence, we are now ready to examine Cranmer's thoughts on the same subject. I first describe the circumstances that contextualize Cranmer's doctrinal evolution, and then provide a provisional synopsis of his mature understanding of Christ's eucharistic presence.

Cranmer's Doctrinal Evolution

As the Archbishop of Canterbury during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, Cranmer is undeniably a monumental figure in the story of the English reformations.⁴⁹ His central role in the formation of both the doctrines and liturgical structures of the Church of England and his martyrdom during Mary I's reign have ensured a

⁴⁸ Johanny, *L'Eucharistie*, 104; McDonald, "Paideia and Gnosis," 254.

⁴⁹ Basil Hall, "Cranmer's Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism," in *Thomas Cranmer: Churchman and Scholar*, ed. Paul Ayris and David Selwyn (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 1993), 3–37; Davena Davis, "An Examination of Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist," *Arc* 17 (1989): 18–30.

near constant stream of literature dedicated to examining his life and doctrines.

Cranmer's importance in the Church of England's early doctrinal controversies can be traced back to 1527, when he became one of a team of Cambridge dons recruited by Thomas Wolsey for general diplomatic service.⁵⁰ Quickly establishing himself as a "promising minor diplomat," Cranmer even gained an audience with Henry VIII in June of 1527. More importantly, Cranmer became a key player in Henry's annulment proceedings. By 1529, he was recognized as "a leading advocate of the King's case," thereby securing the King's favor, establishing the trajectory of his career, and ensuring his lasting prominence.

Yet, Cranmer seems not to have been obviously disposed for the roles thrust upon him. According to one biographer, although Cranmer "was accounted a man of personal charm, an erudite scholar, a theologian of liberal sympathies," his suitability for leadership was questionable at best "for his views were ever apt to be indeterminate and to shift with the company in which he found himself."⁵¹ Despite the early enthusiasm of the academic-turned-diplomat in aiding the King's pursuit of an annulment, Cranmer was eventually thrust into "a conspicuous position for which he was strangely unfit," and forced to take definite, public positions on extremely controversial issues.⁵² Additionally, the political exigencies Cranmer faced throughout his career often interrupted his active theological development, sometimes for years at a time, leading to gaps in our knowledge of Cranmer's gradually changing thoughts. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the evolution of Cranmer's doctrine of the eucharist has been notoriously difficult to pin down.

Cranmer's earliest understanding of eucharistic presence was an unreflective doctrine of transubstantiation—a view he later described as amounting to "cannibalism."⁵³ During his time at Cambridge,

⁵⁰ See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), 34–37.

⁵¹ Anthony C. Deane, *The Life of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 2. See also Theodore Maynard, *The Life of Thomas Cranmer* (Chicago, Ill.: Henry Regnery, 1956), xi, 35–36.

⁵² Deane, *Life of Thomas Cranmer*, 3–4; see also Maynard, *Life of Thomas Cranmer*, xii, 16.

⁵³ Eugene K. McGee, "Cranmer and Nominalism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 57, no. 3 (1964): 189. See also MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 12, 182; and

Cranmer experienced with the school itself a move away from medieval scholasticism; between 1511 and 1516 Cranmer shifted permanently to a lifelong devotion to the “new learning” and the systematic study of theology.⁵⁴ This early foundation in Erasmian-influenced dedication to language-based scripture study and a critical but appreciative approach to patristic sources energized Cranmer’s subsequent theological work.⁵⁵ However, he did not begin significantly to revise his eucharistic doctrine until sometime later.

Between 1529 and 1533, Cranmer’s career had something of a “medieval ‘wandering scholar’ dimension”; he floated between Cambridge and Waltham, working as a tutor and enjoying the hospitality of various friends.⁵⁶ However, Cranmer had already come to the attention of Henry VIII as a useful academic ally in the matter of his sought-for divorce. On the strength of the good impression Cranmer had made at court, Henry began to send him overseas with various delegations.⁵⁷ This set in motion a remarkably rapid rise from “the mists of donnish obscurity” to “the bright light of royal favour,” culminating in 1533 with Cranmer’s ascendancy to the Archbishopric of Canterbury.⁵⁸

It remains unclear exactly how Cranmer came to entertain serious doubts about transubstantiation. What is clear, however, is that Cranmer eventually began to differentiate between transubstantiation and “real presence,” moving away from the former but continuing to hold to some version of the latter for quite some time.⁵⁹ Early in his career as Archbishop, Cranmer certainly retained his traditional viewpoint. One of his first official actions as Archbishop testifies to his continued embrace of transubstantiation: faced with the unpleasant prospect of prosecuting John Frith for unorthodox views of the eucharist—a situation Cranmer had the misfortune of inheriting along

Peter Newman Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist* (New York: Seabury Press, 1965), 12.

⁵⁴ Hall, “Cranmer’s Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 6; Peter Newman Brooks, *Cranmer in Context* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1989), 1–2; Deane, *Life of Thomas Cranmer*, 19; McGee, “Cranmer and Nominalism”; and Cyril C. Richardson, *Zwingli and Cranmer on the Eucharist* (Evanston, Ill.: Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1949).

⁵⁵ Hall, “Cranmer’s Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 11.

⁵⁶ Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 8.

⁵⁷ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 34–36; Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 9.

⁵⁸ Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 16. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 82–88.

⁵⁹ Jasper Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 169.

with his new role as Archbishop—he ultimately had Frith burned at the stake. In a letter to Nicholas Hawkins, Cranmer states that he repeatedly attempted to persuade Frith to recant, finding his denial of Christ’s “corporal presence” in the eucharist “notably erroneous.”⁶⁰ As late as 1537, Cranmer remained sharply critical of Oecolampadius’ and Zwingli’s denials of Christ’s *vera presentia* (true presence) in the eucharist. His concern was based largely on the conviction that some version of “real presence” was explicitly taught by the early church fathers, and the thought of the church being in error for so long disturbed him.⁶¹

But by 1538, there were clear indications that Cranmer, though preserving a notion of real presence, had begun to question transubstantiation, going so far as to admit to Thomas Cromwell in a letter that he found the anti-transubstantiation teachings of Adam Damply somewhat persuasive.⁶² Some argue that at this point and for several subsequent years, Cranmer went through a vaguely “Lutheran” phase in his eucharistic theology, during which he remained strongly opposed to Zwinglian interpretations even as he left behind the Aristotelian metaphysical categories that funded the doctrine of transubstantiation.⁶³ The fact that Cranmer presided in 1538 over the execution of John Lambert for denying real presence, and at least half-heartedly opposed the ratification of “The Six Articles” of 1539 on points related to the language of transubstantiation provide evidence that Cranmer continued to hold to “real presence” in some sense, but not transubstantiation, by 1538–1539.⁶⁴

The initial movements of the final phase in Cranmer’s evolving view on eucharistic presence are nearly impossible to determine.

⁶⁰ Thomas Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Martyr 1556*, ed. John Edmund Cox (Cambridge: The University Press, 1846), 246; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 101.

⁶¹ Hall, “Cranmer’s Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 24–25; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 180–181.

⁶² Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters*, 375–376. See also Hall, “Cranmer’s Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 25–26; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 182–183; Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, 168–170.

⁶³ Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist*, 12, 21–37. See also MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 181–182.

⁶⁴ Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, 176, 182–183; Hall, “Cranmer’s Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 25–27; and J. I. Packer’s introduction to Thomas Cranmer, *The Work of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. G. E. Duffield (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1965), xvi.

Cranmer's own testimony indicates that Nicholas Ridley played an important role in his shift from real presence toward an increasing tendency to speak of a kind of spiritual presence—an especially shocking transition when one remembers that Cranmer had played no small part in the executions of eleven people convicted of denying real presence.⁶⁵ Cranmer appears to have been seriously considering this final step as early as 1546, the year before Henry VIII's death; however, the ever-cautious Cranmer remained nearly mute on the subject until the following year.⁶⁶ Fascinatingly, on August 24, 1546, Henry VIII, in a meeting with Admiral Claude d'Annebaut at which Cranmer was present, flirted with the idea of abolishing the mass and replacing it with a communion service, as a diplomatic move geared toward consolidating certain political gains.⁶⁷ The king's proposal shocked Cranmer to no end (a fact he revealed in a private letter to Ralph Morice); perhaps this incident led to Cranmer's eventual receptivity to Ridley's disputations.⁶⁸

Cranmer's involvement in the parliamentary proceedings of December 1547 are taken by many to bespeak a final break from any doctrine of real presence, with the clear affirmation of a purely memorial notion of the oblation and sacrifice of Christ in the mass.⁶⁹ Yet, debate remains as to the timing and nature of Cranmer's shift—especially in light of inconsistencies such as the ambiguous *Catechismus*, published in 1548, in which he seemed to espouse real presence, with the bread and the wine described in no uncertain terms as the “veray bodye” and “veray blode” of Christ.⁷⁰ Although such inconsistencies served critics (notably Stephen Gardiner) very well in the disputes of subsequent years,⁷¹ it should be remembered that the text of the 1548 *Catechismus* was based largely on an earlier Latin work—Cranmer's involvement in its translation and compilation remains difficult to ascertain.⁷² According to Diarmaid MacCulloch, “Far

⁶⁵ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 354–355; Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, 252–254.

⁶⁶ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 352–353.

⁶⁷ Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, 254–255.

⁶⁸ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 357; Ridley, *Thomas Cranmer*, 255–256.

⁶⁹ Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters*, 150.

⁷⁰ Thomas Cranmer, *Catechismus, that is to say, a shorte instruction into Christian religion for the synguler commoditie and profyte of children and yong people* (London: Nycolas Hyll, 1548), ccxxxv.

⁷¹ Hall, “Cranmer's Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 32–33.

⁷² Hall, “Cranmer's Relations with Erasmianism and Lutheranism,” 33; MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 387, 390–391.

from attesting to Cranmer's continuing belief in the eucharistic real presence," the fiasco of the 1548 *Catechismus* should be counted as "strong evidence that by summer 1548 Cranmer's eucharistic theology had decisively crossed the Rubicon."⁷³ Even so, the text in question provided fodder for Cranmer's theological and political opponents.

In any case, in the Prayer of Consecration in the 1549 prayer book Cranmer revealed a definite preference for the language of thanksgiving and *anamnesis* over the medieval notion of a placatory sacrifice, shifting the focus toward the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, "who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world."⁷⁴ Yet even this work was deemed unacceptable by the reform-minded, thanks especially to Gardiner's underhanded praise of its structural similarity to the Catholic canon. Its moderate tone ensured revilement from all sides—which surely factored into Cranmer's desire to clarify his position in *A Defence* (1550).⁷⁵

Cranmer's Final Eucharistic Doctrine

Debate about the nature and timing of Cranmer's doctrinal evolution notwithstanding, *A Defence* is universally recognized as the culmination of Cranmer's development in the matter of eucharistic doctrine. This work's character as Cranmer's final say on the matter holds true despite Cranmer's wavering and recantation in the final months of his life (followed nearly immediately by a recantation of his initial recantation)—events which should be understood as a separate issue.⁷⁶ Its writing was motivated by Gardiner's *A Detection of the Devil's Sophistry*,⁷⁷ and was in turn answered by Gardiner, calling forth yet another refutation from Cranmer, followed by two further exchanges. *A Defence* was written originally in English and ran to

⁷³ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 391.

⁷⁴ C. W. Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 133; and Cranmer, *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters*, 136.

⁷⁵ Brooks, *Cranmer in Context*, 70; Davis, "Examination of Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist," 20–21.

⁷⁶ See MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 554.

⁷⁷ Stephen Gardiner, *A Detection of the Devils Sophistrie Wherewith He Robbeth the Vnlearned People, of the True Byleef, in the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Aulter* (London: John Hereford, 1546); Arthur James Mason, *Thomas Cranmer* (London: Methuen & Co., 1898), 133.

three editions within the year of its publication.⁷⁸ A French translation appeared the next year, followed by a Latin edition in 1553.

A Defence has five sections, reflecting the major aspects of the eucharistic debate: (1) a positive statement of the “true and catholic” doctrine of the eucharist; (2) a rebuttal of transubstantiation; (3) an account of the correct understanding of Christ’s eucharistic presence; (4) regarding the eating and drinking of Christ’s body and blood; and (5) an argument for a revised understanding of the oblation and sacrifice of Christ, in which Cranmer argues against the notion of Christ’s repeated sacrifice in the mass, suggesting instead that the communicants should offer themselves as sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving to God.⁷⁹

Two major concepts undergird Cranmer’s eucharistic theology. The first is belief in the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone, based solely on Christ’s completed work. This seems to have been the driving force behind Cranmer’s revision of the medieval placatory notion, as seen in the final section of *A Defence*. The second is Cranmer’s notion of the sacraments as “visible words” communicating Christ to our “eies, mouthes, handes and al our senses,” just as preaching communicates Christ to our ears.⁸⁰ Cranmer’s intent is clear: the purpose of the eucharist, as with every sacrament, is to nourish the spiritual life of the believer, engendering a deep sense of the reality of Christ’s work in and for them.⁸¹

Cranmer emphasizes repeatedly a kind of *spiritual* (though not real) presence of Christ in the eucharist: “For figuratiuely he is in the breade and wyne, and spirituallly he is in them that worthyly eate and drinke the bread and wyne, but really, carnally, and corporally he is onely in heauen, frome whence he shall come to iudge the quycke and deade.”⁸²

Note that for Cranmer there is a twofold presence of Christ in the eucharist: the *figurative* presence, which he sees as a signification added to the bread and wine by Christ’s words; and the *spiritual* presence, which is only a reality for those that “worthyly eate and drinke,”

⁷⁸ Davis, “Examination of Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist,” 21.

⁷⁹ Davis, “Examination of Thomas Cranmer’s Doctrine of the Eucharist,” 22.

⁸⁰ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 10.

⁸¹ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 11.

⁸² Cranmer, *A Defence*, 75.

by which Cranmer is referring to the recipient's disposition of faith in the reality of Christ's work on his or her behalf.⁸³

This subjective aspect to the spiritual presence of Christ and its efficacy for spiritual nourishment is distinctive of Cranmer. He clearly espouses something more than pure Zwinglian memorialism—Cranmer insists on the spiritual presence of Christ for those who partake in faith, and repeatedly references the spiritual nourishment derived from partaking of the eucharist in a worthy manner. And yet, while Peter Brooks asserts that Cranmer's doctrine is essentially Calvinist or Bucerian, Cyril Richardson argues that Cranmer is neither Calvinist nor Bucerian precisely at the cardinal point of sacramental theology: in a manner much more Zwinglian than Brooks is inclined to admit, Richardson believes Cranmer rejects participation in the substance of Christ.⁸⁴

Cranmer's Appropriation of Ambrose

This brings us finally to the primary question of this paper: what is the nature and quality of Cranmer's appropriation of Ambrose in his articulation of Christ's presence in the eucharist?

Cranmer and the Fathers

Cranmer's confident use of the fathers in *A Defence* is striking. Indeed, his forceful appropriation of the fathers in *A Defence* accounts for some of the more serious charges brought against Cranmer in 1554 during the disputation on the eucharist, ranging from "corruption" of the patristic texts to "evil translating" and purposeful misuse.⁸⁵ A campaign to discredit Cranmer's learning climaxed with his examination at Oxford, where an assembly of supposed scholars condemned him as "unlearned, unskilful, [and] impudent."⁸⁶

⁸³ G. W. Bromiley, *Thomas Cranmer: Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 76.

⁸⁴ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 66. See also Cyril C. Richardson, "Review: *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist* by Peter Brooks," *Anglican Theological Review* 47, no. 3 (Spring 1965): 312; Brooks, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of the Eucharist*, 70–71; and Gordon E. Pruett, "A Protestant Doctrine of the Eucharistic Presence," *Calvin Theological Journal* 10 (1975): 142–174.

⁸⁵ John Foxe, *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, ed. George Townsend, vol. VI (London: Seeley, Burnside, & Seeley, 1843–9), 460–461, 466–467.

⁸⁶ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, 436.

Such an assessment is hardly fair, and has largely been discredited.⁸⁷ However, little has been done to assess the quality of Cranmer's usage of the patristic sources, though some have noted Cranmer's tendency to downplay realist language in his translations and interpretations.⁸⁸ Certainly Cranmer's work falls squarely within a much larger trend, evident both on the continent and in England. With the rise of the "new learning," coupled with the eagerness of the reformers to "multiply their precursors" and of Catholics to demonstrate the perpetuity and apostolic origin of their beliefs and practices, the sixteenth century was a veritable storm of polemically-loaded patristic investigation.⁸⁹

Cranmer's gravitation toward Erasmian-influenced "new learning" ensured that he had both the disposition and the abilities required for patristic study.⁹⁰ He stocked his library with the most up-to-date editions of patristic sources. He regarded his library as a "theological arsenal"—he was "no bibliophile. He wanted his books new with their margins clear so that annotations could be made in them."⁹¹ Indeed, Cranmer's scholarly engagement extends to an awareness of the then-current debates surrounding Ambrose's authorship of *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*.⁹² Rather than referring to patristic writers as "fathers," Cranmer, in good medieval scholastic fashion, calls them "authors" and their texts "authorities," in a manner too consistent to be unintentional.⁹³ His usage speaks of a special regard for the ancient authors (over the *moderni*) coupled with a desire to avoid nuances of church-sanctioned authority inherent in terms like "fathers" and even "doctors." In any case, Cranmer's position on the fathers' authority was fundamentally Protestant: "Cranmer's 'authorities' are of weight only in so far as they conform to the proper interpretation of the scriptures."⁹⁴

⁸⁷ Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 229.

⁸⁸ Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 230.

⁸⁹ William P. Haaugaard, "Renaissance Patristic Scholarship and Theology in Sixteenth-Century England," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10, no. 3 (1979): 37–60, 40. See also Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 232.

⁹⁰ Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 26.

⁹¹ Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 234.

⁹² See Cranmer, *A Defence*, 63.

⁹³ Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 26; Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 237.

⁹⁴ Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 238. Compare Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian Antiquity*, 26.

The Role of Ambrose in Cranmer's A Defence

Although Augustine is the patristic writer that looms largest in Cranmer's work, Ambrose's place is not insignificant. *A Defence* mentions Ambrose twenty times.⁹⁵ The use of Ambrose in reformers' eucharistic polemics was hardly unprecedented—editions of Ambrose's works had been abundantly available since the late 1400s, and Zwingli made extensive use of Ambrose's *De sacramentis* in a 1523 effort to demonstrate the non-uniformity of early church liturgies.⁹⁶ Cranmer himself, unsurprisingly, made use of the most recent (and most reliable) critical edition of Ambrose's works: the four-volume edition prepared by Erasmus in 1527.⁹⁷

Instances of Ambrose's appearance in *A Defence* can be divided into two categories: either he is marshaled in support of Cranmer's own views, or else he is mentioned as a case study of (what Cranmer sees as) Papist misuses of ancient texts. Of the twenty mentions of Ambrose in *A Defence*, seventeen relate specifically to *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*; these mentions appear in four groups.

In the first group, Cranmer simultaneously refutes the Papists' interpretation of key Ambrosian texts and provides his own alternative interpretation. Within the context of his broader arguments against transubstantiation, Cranmer points out that although Ambrose does declare "the alteration of breade and wyne into the body and bloud of Christe," the change he describes is not such that the "nature and substance of bread and wine be gone, but that through grace, there is a spirituall mutation by the mightye power of God."⁹⁸ Much in keeping with our analysis of Ambrose's doctrine above, Cranmer contends that the main thrust of Ambrose's argument is the active power of God, spiritually present and effecting spiritual changes. He bolsters this interpretation by pointing out, quite rightly, that Ambrose himself uses the illustration of the change wrought in a human by baptism: if

⁹⁵ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 43.

⁹⁶ Irena Backus, "Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer and the Church Fathers," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 630.

⁹⁷ Ambrose, *Divi Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Omnia Opera*, ed. Erasmus Desiderius (Basileae, Switzerland: J. Frobenius, 1527); Walsh, "Cranmer and the Fathers," 235, fn. 24; Jan den Boeft, "Erasmus and the Church Fathers," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. Irena Backus, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 565.

⁹⁸ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 26.

Ambrose is being at all consistent, a change of nature could not mean a change of substance.⁹⁹

In the second cluster of Ambrose quotations, Cranmer translates and quotes two passages from Ambrose at length.¹⁰⁰ Examining the illustrations Ambrose uses to prove that “grace is of more force than nature,” Cranmer demonstrates again that Ambrose is not positing a substantial change.¹⁰¹ Rather, Ambrose insists that God’s power is capable of changing things’ natural qualities such that, though they remain substantially themselves, they behave in unusual ways. The water of the Red Sea, though remaining water, stood up like a wall to let the people of Israel pass through; likewise, the Jordan River temporarily ceased flowing according to its regular pattern. None of these examples indicate a substantial change.¹⁰² Rather, Ambrose is making a point about the power of God, with the rhetorical goal of engendering faith in the hearers, convincing them that the simple bread and wine can become the means by which they become nourished by Christ spiritually. Cranmer then calls forth three additional examples from *De sacramentis* IV: the change undergone by a human when regenerated by God’s power involves no change of substance; the Incarnation of Christ is likewise a “change” wherein no substance perishes; and finally, though the water of baptism remains water, the power of the Holy Spirit comes upon it so as to cause true spiritual transformation in the baptized.¹⁰³

In the third group of Ambrose quotations, Cranmer shifts his argument to an emphasis on “plain grammar and definitions”: Ambrose, he notes correctly, repeatedly refers to the sacraments as “similitudes,” “significations,” and “figures” of the body and blood of Christ. What can this mean, Cranmer asks, but that the bread and wine “is not really and corporally the very natural substance of the flesh and blood of Christ, but that the bread and wyne be similitudes, mysteries and representacions, significacions, sacramentes, figures and signes of his body and blood?”¹⁰⁴ Here, Cranmer cites with approval the idea that in partaking of the eucharist, we become partakers of “grace and

⁹⁹ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 26–27.

¹⁰⁰ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 41–43.

¹⁰¹ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 41–42.

¹⁰² Cranmer, *A Defence*, 42.

¹⁰³ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 64.

virtue” and Christ’s “true nature,” that is, his “godly substance.”¹⁰⁵ This not only proves again that Cranmer was hardly Zwinglian, but even suggests he was closer to the Calvinist view of eucharistic presence than interpreters such as Richardson have been inclined to admit.

In the fourth and final group of Cranmer’s appeals to Ambrose, we see a continued emphasis on grammatical straightforwardness. Citing Ambrose’s assertion in *De sacramentis* IV that at the words of consecration the bread becomes Christ’s body, Cranmer points out that, in addition to the fact that Ambrose demonstrably was not referring to a substantial transformation, the word “consecration” simply means a kind of setting apart for a particular purpose: “Consecration is the separation of anye thing from a prophane and wordely vse, vnto a spirituall and godly vse.”¹⁰⁶ Armed with this simple definition, Cranmer states that when common water is taken for the use of baptism, it may rightly be called consecrated—it has been set apart for a holy use. The case with the consecration of the bread and wine is no different, to Cranmer’s way of thinking: consecration implies no mutation of substance, but rather a change of use or purpose.

Concluding Remarks

Far from merely hijacking Ambrose for his own polemical purposes, Cranmer in *A Defence* uses Ambrose in a manner both circumspect and appropriate; indeed, his interpretation of key Ambrosian texts prefigures some of the best recent interpretations of the same. Furthermore, Cranmer gives due attention to Ambrose’s use of key terms, drawing on their immediate context in order to gain a fuller understanding of Ambrose’s intentions and rhetorical goals. It even seems that Cranmer and Ambrose shared a similar disposition and motivation—both sincerely desired to help their hearers approach the sacraments with an attitude of faith in the power and presence of God. In Cranmer’s eyes, Ambrose was not an obstacle to be explained away. Rather, Ambrose’s theology may have factored positively into Cranmer’s own stance. Evidence abounds that Cranmer’s attitude toward patristic sources in general was one of measured respect, and his attitude toward Ambrose and Ambrose’s eucharistic doctrine is no

¹⁰⁵ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 63.

¹⁰⁶ Cranmer, *A Defence*, 82.

exception. The persistent confusion surrounding Cranmer's understanding of Christ's presence in the eucharist may well be assuaged by seeing how Cranmer's position was deeply grounded in his own interpretation of the church fathers, including Ambrose. Accordingly, despite Cranmer's doctrinal shifts and inconsistent terminology, a surprisingly steady emphasis on Christ's effective spiritual presence in the eucharist can be detected in Cranmer's writings, emerging especially in *A Defence*. This consistent sensibility becomes visible against the backdrop of Cranmer's careful appropriation of Ambrose's *De mysteriis* and *De sacramentis*.