A *christen sentence* was published anonymously fifteen years after John Frith’s death. Whether the true author was known or not at the time of printing is hard to tell, but John Foxe does not include this work in *The whole workes of W. Tyndall, John Frith, and Doct. Barnes*, published in 1573 (STC 24436), and it is only relatively recently that scholars have realised that this reformist tract on the sacrament of the altar is that referred to as his own by Frith in his later writing, *A boke [...] answeringe vnto M. mores lettur* (STC 11381).

Looking at the text in isolation, with its misleading date of 1548, we might think that it is a fairly standard and unremarkable refutation of the real presence of Christ in the Host in the vein of the Swiss Reformer Oecolampadius. However, the correct dating of 1532 shows that this must be one of the very earliest full expositions of the Lord’s Supper from this reformist perspective in English. Moreover, from the context provided by *A boke* we know that this little text spawned a polemical exchange between Frith and one of the most important controversialists of the Reformation, Sir Thomas More. This exchange took place while Frith was imprisoned in the Tower of London, from October 1532 until his execution on 4 July 1533. For several of the other works that he wrote whilst in the Tower, Frith actively sought publication; but from all the contextual evidence we have for the composition and the subsequent life of *A christen sentence*, it seems that as far as Frith was concerned this text should never have been printed.

To write on the controversial topic of the sacrament when he was possibly already imprisoned (and if not, certainly a wanted man) was a foolhardy action. This was not only because a written document would provide hard evidence of Frith’s heresy, but also because it left the evangelical church open to a more general attack: the accusation of being divided. In a letter to Frith written by William Tyndale, probably during Frith’s second visit to England when he was arrested, the exiled reformist advises: ‘Of the presence of Christ in the Sacrament, medle as little as ye can, þat there apere no diuision among vs. Barnes will be whote against you’. Robert Barnes was already known as a strict Lutheran on the question of the presence of the Lord in the Supper. In 1530 he had published (under the Latin name Antonius Anglus) his *Sententiae ex doctoribus collectae, quas papistae ualde impudenter hodie damnant* (Wittenberg: J. Clug, 1530). This book, containing a preface by Luther’s colleague Johann Bugenhagen, was set out in the style of a medieval sentence collection and sought to establish nineteen points, including: ‘In sacramento alteris est verum corpus christi’. Barnes believed in a local, but emphatically real (verum) presence of the glorified Body of Christ in the bread and wine; Frith, by contrast, believed that the Body was not present, and the bread and wine were merely a remembrance of Christ’s last supper. In a *christen sentence* he argues that Christ cannot be present in the sacrament because, having a natural body, he can only be in one place at a time:

Then may we answere by the auctorytie of saynt Austen whiche sayth. *Corpus in quo resurrexit in vno loco esse oporteth*. His body wherin he rose must be in one place, and after determineth that it contynueth in heauen, and shall so do vntyll the tyme that he shall come to judge both quycke and deade.
But this did not mean that the sacrament was any less important to Frith. As William Clebsch has rightly noted, he saw the whole sacrament theocentrically: though the body of Christ remained in heaven it might be eaten on earth by faith. It is clear from this divergence in Frith’s and Barnes’s theology on the sacrament why Tyndale would have wished to censure Frith: by revealing the evangelical church to be thus divided it undermined his hope of providing a credible challenge to the orthodox church. But either Tyndale’s warning arrived too late, or Frith did not see its relevance to *A christen sentence*.

While Tyndale’s main concern about writing on the sacrament seems to be one of unity, Frith is noticeably less concerned about doctrinal divergence, either between different reformed positions, or between the orthodox and reformed position. While the main thrust of *A christen sentence* is to prove that transubstantiation is both unscriptural and illogical, Frith implies that the matter of Eucharistic presence should still be a matter left to the individual. In his opinion the precise belief concerning the nature of the bread is less important than its effect on the individual taking communion:

> For it is not his presence in the bread that can save me, but his presence in my heart thorowe fayth in his bloud, which hath washed out my synnes and pacified the Fathers wrath towards me. And agayne ye I do not beleue þat his bodely presence is in the brende and wyne that shall not dampne me. For it is not his absence out of the brende that can dampne me, but the absence out of my hart thorowe vnbelene.

* (sigs Aiiv–iiiv)

This passage cannot be explained away as one that is ambiguous or peculiar to this text because Frith asserted the same attitude to the sacrament in both *A boke* and at his trial, as recorded by him in *The articles wherfor Johan Frith died* (which was written in Newgate on 23 June 1533 and published in the same volume as *A boke*). Asked at the trial whether he believed that the real body and blood is contained in the sacrament, he replied that he did not, but that he should not be damned for this belief because confidence in the real presence is not a biblically authorised article of the faith:

> For even as I saye that you oughte not to make any necessary article of þe faythe of youre parte (whiche is the affymratie). So I saye agayne / that we make none necessary article of the fathie of owre parte / but leue yt indiffernt for all men to Iudge therin / as God shall open his harte / and no syde to condempne or dispise the tother / but to nourishe in all things brotheflye loue / and to beare others infyrmytes.

* (STC 11381, sigs Livv–viv)

As he asserts more explicitly in a later part of *The articles*, Frith refused to recant (and ultimately chose death) not because of his belief that Christ is only figuratively present in the Host, but rather because he thought it should not be an article of the faith (sig. Lviiv). But although it appears that Frith was less concerned about projecting a united, reformist front than Tyndale, it is clear that he never intended to make a public stance in contradistinction to Barnes. Indeed, even though Tyndale’s warning did not do enough (or maybe did not come early enough) to stop Frith from ‘meddling’ in the controversy over the sacrament, Frith had imposed a certain level of self-censorship. If we are to take at face value what Frith says in *A boke* about the composition history for *A christen sentence*, then this text was never intended as a written document; rather it began life as a conversation with an anonymous ‘christen broder’ (sig. Aiiiv). But this co-religionist could not keep Frith’s answer to his question in mind, lengthy as it was, and so he requested that it be written down:

> I was loth to take the mater in hande / yet to fullfyll his instant intercession / I toke vpon me to touche this terrible tragedie/ and wrote a treatise whyche be side my paynfull impresenment / is like to purchase me moste cruell deth [...] Notwithstandyngye to say the truthe I wrote yt not to the intent that yt shuld have bryn published for then I wolde haue touched the mater more earnestly / and haue writyn / as well of the spirituall eatynge and drynkynge whiche ys of necessite / as I dide of the carnal whiche ys not so necessarie / for the treatis that I made was not expedient for all men / albeit yt weare sufficient for them whom I toke in hande to enstructe [...] But now ye ys comen abrode
and in many mens mouthes / in so moche that master more which of late hathe busied hym selfe to medle in all soche materes.

(StC 11381, sigs Aii⁶–iii⁶)

In this passage, Frith expresses two reasons why he had not wanted his text to be made available in a written form. The first is that he did not want his opponents, especially his keepers, to see evidence of him writing heretical doctrine, because it would provide them with evidence that would condemn him.8 Second, he was concerned that the content would not be edifying for Protestant readers beyond the closed circle of his intended readership; it was written for a known person (or possibly a group of people), of whom he could assume a certain basis of knowledge. If he had been writing for a general readership, he would have dealt more with ‘the spiritual eatynge and drynkynge whiche ys of necessite’ than ‘the carnal whiche ys not so necessarie’.

This is precisely what he does in A boke. In this, his second text on the sacrament, Frith demonstrates how the outward and the inward man correspond to the literal action of eating the host, and its spiritual significance:

as the outward man dothe eate the materayll brede which conforteth the bodie so doth the inwarde man thorough faythe eate the bodie of christe / belevynge that as the brede ys brokyn / so was christes bodie broken on the crosse for our synnes which conforteth our soules vnto lyffe euerlastynge.

(sig. Avii⁷)

In this example we can see how this latter text makes up for the lacks that Frith feels a general readership would have experienced reading A christen sentence. Frith’s argument concerning his theology of the sacrament is not only strengthened by such self-determined additions and clarifications; after a section in which Frith redefines his position, he then sets about defending it against the attacks that Thomas More had levied against A christen sentence in his Letter [...] impugnyng the erronyouse wrytyng of John Fryth (STC 18090). He does this by systematically quoting Thomas More, and then refuting his logic and beliefs.

Implicit in both Frith’s restatement of his reformed beliefs in the sacrament, and his defence, is that this new text has superseded A christen sentence. And it is certainly clear that Frith intended the new text to function in this way. As stated above in his preface to A boke, he asserts that if he had intended this earlier text to represent his beliefs publicly, he would have composed it in a very different way. Moreover the fact that the new text was published within a year of its composition (Frith saw a copy of More’s Letter at Stephen Gardiner’s house on 26 December 1532, but it is unlikely that he began his reply before January 1533 because of his difficulty in securing a copy for himself), suggests that Frith actively sought its publication.

Yet although Frith’s preface to A boke makes plain many of the reasons why this text should never have been published, it also provides us with an insight as to why it was. The fact that a text, reputedly not intended for general circulation, is subsequently ‘comen abrode and in many mens mouthes’ shows how it had a life beyond the intentions of its author (STC 11381, sig. Ai⁶). The word ‘abrode’ implies that A christen sentence had become available in the public sphere, much in the same way that Frith’s published texts were. It is this kind of circulation that Harold Love is describing with his term ‘scribal publication’: this text may not have been published in the sense that we use the word now, that it was printed and sold, but it was subject to a chain of copying by private individuals, which could have taken the text to an audience almost as wide as that reached through printing. This method of circulation also suggests how, even though Frith did not want A christen sentence to reach a general readership, the nature of scribal culture amongst his co-religionists was such that once the text was released he no longer had any control over how it was circulated and received.9

In most cases this process of circulation is a silent one and we can only hypothesise the course that it took. But in the case of A christen sentence we have a narrative of dissemination provided by John Foxe’s Actes and Monuments, and More’s Letter. In his account of John Frith’s life, Foxe provides an account of how the text initially escaped its closed circle of intended readers:

a London Tailour named William Holt, whiche fayning a great frendshyppe, instantly required of this frende to geue hym lycence to reade ouer that same wryting of Frythes, whiche when he vnaduisedly did, þe other by and by caried it straight wayes vnto Moore.10

Although we cannot verify the accuracy of this narrative, it is certain that someone must have obtained a copy of A christen sentence for More before he could refute the text’s contents; and this would have been impossible if the original recipient had been keenly guarding this text. The fact that others such as William Holt knew of this text suggests that its fame had gone before it, even if it had not been copied at this point. However, the limitation of the text’s availability and
potential circulation is emphasised by Foxe’s reference to ‘frendshyppe’; this reminds us that scribal circulation often coincided with pre-existing networks or communities and that More could probably not have come by this text as easily if he had not had a contact like William Holt infiltrating evangelical communities.11

More’s Letter tells the story of the text’s circulation subsequent to its initial leak, combining hard evidence with anxious imagination of the extent of the evangelical textual community. In the opening passage of the letter, which is addressed to the friend who sent the first copy of the text, he says that he has ‘ben offred synnyes a couple of copyes mo in the meane whyle […] wherby men may se how gredly pat these newe named bretherne wryte it out, and secretly sprede it abrode’ (STC 18090, sig. AiiIi). As in Frith’s Preface to A boke, we see use of the word ‘abrode’ to describe the availability of A christen sentence. The fact that More is aware of more than two copies of this treatise confirms that the text was being copied, and leads him to suggest that there exists an organised network of evangelicals working together to produce and disseminate texts:

the deuyll hath now taught hys dysciples, the dyuysers of these heresyes, to make many shorthe treatises, whereof theyr scoler may shortly write out copyes, but in theyr treatyses to put as mych poyson in one wryten lefe as they prented before in fyftene.

(sig. Aivv)

He imagines this model of dissemination as a canker spreading through a body, or a fire laying waste to towns and countries, and fears the effect if it is true that Frith has numerous other texts circulating ‘huker moker’ within the closed community of the brethren (sig. AiiIi). There is a notable tension in these fearful words, between the public and the private: although More stresses that the texts are only circulating amongst the brethren, he is anxious that they will lay waste to the whole country or body.

Although the accuracy of Foxe’s account is difficult to verify, and More’s is an almost entirely imagined process of dissemination, the fact that the text’s circulation is discussed in this way suggests that A christen sentence had become a fetishised object. More subsequently sought to limit any help he may have given the creation of a reputation of uncontainability for this text by trying to suppress the publication of his Letter.12 But even though More’s hysterical imagination of this text spreading like a canker perhaps exaggerated the extent of A christen sentence’s dissemination, we might deduce that there were a good number of scribal copies in existence at this time. From this it is also possible to see how a copy might have been available to the publisher Richard Wyer when the restrictions on the printing of unauthorised religious texts were removed at the beginning of Edward’s reign. His publication of A christen sentence was part of an explosion of reformist texts onto the market during the years 1547 and 1548. Andrew Pettegree has shown that these texts mainly fell into three categories: reprints of Reformation classics, giving Tyndale’s works a new lease of life, for example; translations of the continental reformers, especially those who had not been readily available in the past; and writings of the emerging leaders, which mainly focused on the subject of the Catholic mass.13 This printing boom presented the opportunity for the likes of John Day and W. Hill to put into print those texts of Frith’s which had not yet been published: Day published A myrroure or lokyng glasse wherin you may beholde the sacramente of baptisme in 1548 (STC 11391), and Hill printed A letter [...] wryten vnto the faythful followers of Christes gospell in 1548–9 (STC 11385.5).

Due to the fact that A christen sentence was published anonymously it is impossible to tell whether Wyer chose to print it because it was written by the martyr John Frith, or whether he did not know who the author was and printed it because of its subject matter (so hotly debated at this time by the emerging leaders of the reformed church). Even the fact of anonymity itself defies any useful hypothesis because of the ubiquity of such cases; as M. Channing Lenthicum aptly notes ‘the research student has […] poor help in the controversial religious literature of the reign of Edward VI, for much of it was published anonymously or pseudonymously, without date or printer’s name’.14 Neither should the fact that Wyer normally does identify the author lead us to conclude anything about his intentions or knowledge about the authorship;15 for we cannot know how many texts Wyer might have published in addition to these without his name or the author’s.

In the midst of this uncertainty, what is clear is the strange fittingness that it was A christen sentence – the only text that Frith ever expressed dissatisfaction with – that was the one that became detached from its author’s name, and was later overlooked in Foxe’s edition of Frith’s ‘whole workes’. But even though events conspired to separate this text from its author, who judged it ‘not expedient for all men’, it was nevertheless sufficiently valued by Richard Wyer and those individuals that retained copies (as well as all those who made and kept scribal copies before this) that we still have the opportunity to make this judgement for ourselves (STC 11381, sig. AiiIi).

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