

Kimberly Bracken Long. *The Eucharistic Theology of the Holy Fairs*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 198 pages. \$26.60.

By examining sermons, devotional writings, and catechetical materials, Kimberly Bracken Long invites us into the Eucharistic theology operative in the Presbyterian expression of the emotional and enthusiastic—and sacramental—hallmark of American revivalism, the camp meeting. Dr. Long asks how seventeenth and eighteenth pastors explained and worshipers understood the Sunday communion service that culminated the “Presbyterian sacramental occasion” or “holy fair.” As one who views liturgy as “event” and not solely as “text,” I am especially grateful that in the introductory chapter, Dr. Long provides a vivid description of the ritual Eucharistic pattern of the “holy fair” brought from Scotland to America. Preparation included pastoral examination of those intending to commune, a congregational time of prayer and teaching, “Preparation Sunday” with preaching on the Lord’s Supper, and a Wednesday of fasting and humiliation, all augmented by family devotions, individual meditation, and self-examination. The congregation then came together on Saturday for preaching on who was—and was not—worthy to come to the table; the pastor then distributed “admission tokens” to the worthy. The week culminated in the Sunday communion service, followed by a Monday service of thanksgiving before everyone headed for home.

Dr. Long carefully and effectively employs medieval writers’ use of spousal and sexual metaphors to describe believers’ relationship with Christ in the Eucharist. She also uses Calvin’s understanding of mystical union and a comparative analysis of the American sources with their Scottish antecedents to persuasively demonstrate that the Eucharistic theology at work in American revivalism is firmly Reformed—justification by grace through faith, real presence of Christ, and worthy participation—albeit with a mystical strain.

I was surprised and delighted to learn that the operative Eucharistic theology is “patristic” in that it draws upon language from the Song of Songs and biblical marital imagery to describe the believer’s union with Christ in Holy Communion. For example, St. Ambrose uses the bridal imagery of the Song of Songs to describe the intimate relationship that the communicate shares with Christ in the Eucharist (*De mysteriis* 9.55-58). Dr. Long argues, “for American Presbyterians of Scots-Irish descent, the marriage bed is a lively and frequently used metaphor for the Eucharistic Table” (11), because the Lord’s Supper is where Christ, the bridegroom, is wedded with the believer, the bride. The language of the Song of Songs, together with Scriptural images of marriage, speak of love and desire emotionally, evocatively, even erotically, wooing worshipers to the Table to seal the marriage covenant for which they had longed and prepared.

In the first part of the book, Dr. Long lays the foundation for her analysis. In chapter 2, she surveys the broad range of sources from the medieval period to the eighteenth century in which the metaphorical language of mystical union and spiritual marriage is found. In chapter 3, she considers Calvin’s theological understanding of the Eucharist, union with Christ, and practical preparation for communion, and demonstrates that Calvin’s theology is evident in the sermons and devotional writings of Scots-Irish Presbyterians in both Europe and America. In the second part of the book, Dr. Long examines American sacramental revivals and the Scottish events that preceded them by analyzing the sermons and writings of three key figures—Presbyterian ministers James McGready, Gilbert Tennent, and John Wilson.

Originally Dr. Long’s doctoral dissertation, the book employs careful scholarship with both liturgical and homiletic analysis in a most readable and enjoyable manner. Yet, this is more than a study in liturgical history. The richest part of this work comes in the concluding pages, in

which Dr. Long sketches out implications of the study for the renewal of Reformed worship in the twenty-first century, suggestions offered by one who obviously loves the church. Dr. Long alludes to the more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper and invites the church to imagine how our celebrations might be enriched so that communicants experience spiritual vitality, emotional fervor, and physical engagement, as well as intellectual understanding. Chiefly, Dr. Long invites Presbyterians to embrace the mystical strain of Reformed theology and reclaim a sense of mystery in worship. Finally, Dr. Long invites the church to come to the Table as marriage bed and rediscover the passion that is union with Christ, which leads to passionately living out God's love in the world. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book, not only for the joy of liturgical history but because it does what it sets out to do—make me hungry for the Eucharist and eager to spend a day at a “holy fair.”

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