
This volume conveys to us the 2005 Drew University dissertation (now revised) for which its author gained a doctorate in liturgical studies. Since 2007 the assistant professor of worship at Columbia Seminary, Decatur, Georgia, Kimberly Long researched and wrote on this subject out of a concern that the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, while administered with increasing regularity in her communion (the PCUSA), is not accompanied by the earnestness, fervor, and spiritual passion associated with it in earlier periods of the Protestant era. Her lament might easily be raised in other evangelical and Reformed settings.

Identifying herself with the Reformed theological tradition as represented by Geneva, and mediated through Scottish Presbyterian (later transplanted to this country), she also discloses an admiration for the representatives of this theological tradition who exerted themselves in the era of spiritual awakening that appeared in the decades following 1730 and into the early nineteenth century. She shows herself to be conversant with the growing body of literature that has highlighted the transmission of Scots-Irish Presbyterian outdoor communion festivals across the Atlantic to America and argues that both in the old world and the new, these festivals were the seedbeds out of which some manifestations of evangelical revival emerged. Significantly, she early on discloses that she took special note of the allegorical use of the Song of Songs in preaching about the Lord’s Supper in the 1620–1800 period. Her quest seems commendable; who will dismiss it?

Yet, hers is a quest fraught with grave challenges. Long’s special interest is in worship and liturgy. If the Lord’s Supper has been celebrated with greater fervency in some past times than at present in seasonal outdoor festivals, and if communion sermons preached in such settings have used the Song of Songs with some frequency, can those times simply be ransacked for precedents that, when collected, will suggest to us some present course of action? Commendably, Long acknowledges the actual complexity of her task. She admits that liturgical study must follow a more rigorous methodological framework than the heaping up of precedents. She quotes with approval the dictum of Geoffrey Wainwright (14) that liturgical theology is best done in the “borderlands between theology and some of its neighboring human disciplines.” The question is: How well is this advice heeded?

This reviewer concludes that this wise counsel has not been heeded adequately. The quest Long has undertaken would seem to have required on her part a greater homiletical curiosity; she needed to ascertain what range of biblical passages from both Testaments were selected by fervent preachers of communion sermons in the era under review. She tipped her hand, however, as early as page 11 by indicating that she meant especially to explore “the marriage bed (as) a lively and frequently used metaphor for the eucharistic meal.” It is hard to avoid the impression that the undertow of the study is in fact something akin to “the Song of Songs as a quarry for communion texts in the Reformed tradition [from] 1620–1820.”

Her quest would seem to have required on her part a greater hermeneutical curiosity regarding legitimate pastoral and theological appeal to Solomon’s Song—whether in pursuit of fervent sacramental piety or for any major tenet of our Christian faith. She acknowledges, in reliance on the standard commentaries on the Song of Songs by Marvin Pope (1977) and Roland Murphy (1990) that in the centuries under review, the Christian study of, and subsequent use of, Solomon’s Song was dominated by the allegorical approach. This, however, is to admit that the homiletical appeals to the Song of Songs that she finds so fascinating in sacramental contexts in this period are premodern and now largely discredited. None who share her valid concern for the restoration of more fervent participation in the Lord’s Supper (and this reviewer is certainly one such) is likely to embrace the use of allegorical biblical interpretation as the means to that desirable end.

The quest also required greater theological rigor than was brought to the task. While certainly in sympathy with the main thrust of Reformed sacramental theology, Long’s suggestion that mystical elements in Calvin’s sacramental theology and Beza’s published series of sermons on the Song of Songs (chap. 3) somehow predisposed the Reformed theological tradition to perpetuate these approaches is extremely tenuous. Calvin’s own theological influence had clearly peaked by 1630; Beza’s theological influence had never equaled that of the senior Reformer. In her consideration of the relationship between Word and Sacrament, Long’s own view (48) is that these two means of grace are somehow co-ordinate, with one as likely to be the means of divine blessing as the other. This, though, is to misconstrue the historic Reformed understanding, which is to understand the efficacy of the sacrament as dependent on the prior enunciation of the Word and its purpose as that of confirming and elucidating what the Word has already promised. Furthermore, Long anachronistically refers to the Lord’s Supper regularly as Eucharist and in doing so seems quite unaware that the Reformed theological tradition in the period under review steadfastly avoided the use of this terminology (despite its biblical usage and on account of its theological associations with ritualistic thinking).

Most especially, this quest required greater historical rigor than has been utilized. I have acknowledged (above) Long’s capable overview of the literature of the last thirty years. Yet, Long descends into a systematic over-equation of the communion festivals with religious revivals. She regularly terms the festivals sacramental revivals, as though every extended communion season intended to eventuate in revival, or came close to it. Here is an unfortunate collapsing of categories.

This grasp of literature that touches on the transmission of Scots-Irish practice to America is not matched by any deep familiarity with Scottish
theological literature apart from the writings of John Willson (1680–1750). A grave weakness in handling this matter is her neglect of the dark side of the communion festival phenomenon as enumerated by warmly evangelical Reformed writers such as John Erskine (1721–1803). Erskine, followed by others, argued that this practice—adopted in the early seventeenth century as an expedient measure when ministers were scarce and the population too slow to relinquish old habits of annual participation in the Catholic Easter Mass—only pushed the achievement of the Reformed ideal of at least quarterly communion farther off into the indefinite future. When this larger picture is sketched out, the much lauded annual communion season, whose heyday endured for about two centuries (traces of it still remain in some Highland Scottish parishes) comes into focus as an ad hoc measure. It was designed to cope with the territorial Protestantism that followed the legislative introduction of the Reformation to a whole nation, only a fraction of whose population was earnestly Christian and prepared, by prior catechesis and profession of faith, for participation in the Supper.

Manifestly, the conundrum of such territorial Protestantism is not the pastoral and theological dilemma we now face. Today, our churches have access to the Lord’s Supper more frequently than two centuries ago; our church memberships are rather more carefully defined now than then. Yet, as Long acknowledges in closing (143–44) too much of our preaching in connection with the Holy Meal tends to the cerebral and too much participation tends to the perfunctory. Prayerful reflection on our current challenges will require deliberate changes on our parts. Liturgical remedies cannot be simply borrowed from an age of premodern exegesis, of territorial Protestantism, and of agricultural harvest cycles.

—Kenneth J. Stewart


Good scholarship builds on the foundation of what has been done before and takes a conversation a few steps farther. Good scholars, therefore, stay modest in trumpeting their findings, aware that great paradigm-shifting scholarship is rare and is often a collaborative affair. The two volumes under review that adjust our understanding of Herman Bavinck in an important way are meant to be read together; it took this reviewer the combined contribution of both to fully gauge the import of the change.

Ever since the deaths of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, in 1920 and 1921 respectively, the Dutch Reformed theological and philosophical