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[Review of] J. Todd Billings, Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table

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J. Todd Billings, Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018. Pp. xx, 217. Pb. £20.99. ISBN 978-0-8028-6233-4.

At a time when many churches are rightly focusing on social engagement, the Eucharist can seem to be just one activity amongst others, and fresh expressions of church can sideline eucharistic worship altogether. However, in this timely book Todd Billings argues that its 'renewed practice . . . can be an instrument for congregations to develop a deeper, more multifaceted sense of the gospel itself' (p. 1).

Billings is one of a growing number of Reformed theologians in the United States who are open to catholic theology and practice. In the British context, his work may well have greater relevance than he realizes. Adopting a phrase from Robert Webber and Lester Ruth, he states his desire to distance himself from the 'Canterbury trail' that some of his colleagues are currently following towards high church Anglican traditions and liturgy (p. 3). However, via Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* and the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Anglican settlement was profoundly shaped by spiritually serious Calvinism, and much liberal Anglican theology and practice, as well as that of other parts of the Protestant spectrum, evinces similar ambivalence about just these things.

In worship, Billings rightly urges his Reformed colleagues to counter an excessive reliance on the spoken Word and on cerebral engagement. Actions and symbols need to become more prominent, engaging the five senses and renewing the worshipper's capacity for spiritual sensation. Personal desires and affections need enlivening, so that love finds at least as much a place in faith as propositions. To advance these goals, Billings undertakes a retrieval of elements of his own Reformed tradition. These include the 'holy fairs', which were a feature of church life in both Britain and the United States until their decline in the face of charges of irrationality, superstition and immorality. A fair comprised an outdoor festival of singing, feasting and fasting that lasted several days and culminated in the celebration of communion. Yet in affirming feeling and affection, Billings is aware of the danger that these come to be regarded as necessary signs of individual conversion or assurance, rather than features of the ongoing spiritual life of the whole Christian community.

This theology is at the high end of Calvinism. Billings persuasively exegetes Calvin's work to present robust understandings of spiritual ascent, real presence and participation. Calvin made extensive use of Cyril of Alexandria and other patristic theologians, and advocated weekly communion. Billings defends him against the stock charge that he denied the sacraments were divine instruments through which God acts. Furthermore, he argues that on participation, some of Calvin's key successors, such as Daneau and Beza, were closer to Aquinas, who viewed earthly realities as analogies for heavenly truths, than to Scotus, who seemed to regard both as different aspects of a single, comprehensible category of being.

The book's title indicates the topics on which it offers constructive proposals. Under remembrance, the Eucharist should not be understood as no more than ritually facilitated mental memorialization. This conception is standardly described as Zwinglian, but Billings contends that this is simplistic: whereas Zwingli accepted a sacralized universe in which God is active, the secular context of modern worship denies even this. It is therefore more urgent than ever to restate that, in the Lord's Supper, Christ is really present, through the Spirit. Communion should be understood as embodied, both for the individual and for the community. Individually, the Spirit dwells in Christians and, strikingly, they are spiritually married to Christ. Corporately, the requirement that communicants be baptized better expresses this commitment than an 'open table'. Finally, communion needs to be rediscovered as an anticipation of the future, general resurrection in which believers will see Christ face-to-face. Although those who have died may be in paradise, this is only preparation for the hoped-for ultimate restoration of all things in Christ, rather than a final destination. Similarly, the spiritual union of communicants with Christ is part of this wider and grander drama of history. Billings's ability to combine such well-judged

doctrinal theology with practical theological reflections on his experience of church life makes this an important book that deserves a wide readership.

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