



# What is a Lutheran Theology of the Lord's Supper? A Response to the Three Essays

MARY M. KNUTSEN

*Luther Seminary  
St. Paul, Minnesota*

**I**F THE DISTINCTIVE IDENTITY OF A LIVELY THEOLOGICAL TRADITION CAN BE RECOGNIZED not only in the presuppositions shared by its participants but also in the particular questions around which the fiercest debates are waged, then there can be no doubt that a distinctively Lutheran theological tradition is alive and well in the preceding three essays by Gerhard Forde, Carl Volz, and Jane Strohl. Asked to consider "What is a Lutheran theology of the Lord's supper?" all three authors presuppose a broadly Lutheran understanding that the supper is not a propitiatory sacrifice in which Christ is offered up to the Father, but an event which confers a gift to its recipients: the supper is *beneficium*, not *sacrificium*. Passionately contested, however, is just what this gift is and how it is to be most faithfully understood and bestowed.

The differences among the three essays are evident not only in the very different sources they employ and the different foci of their arguments, but also in the directly opposing views they offer on the same topics. (1) Gerhard Forde appeals to what he calls a distinctively Lutheran biblical hermeneutic to argue against what Carl Volz asserts in the first paragraph of his essay: that the supper is an event in which the believer is made contemporary with the event of Christ's crucifixion at Calvary. Forde argues that the supper is not a re-presentation or

MARY M. KNUTSEN is associate professor of systematic theology.

*The three preceding essays are best read in conversation—a conversation richly enabled by Knutsen's essay. Key elements for discussion include the identification of a Lutheran biblical hermeneutic, the nature of the communion liturgy (prayer or proclamation), and the meaning of "real presence."*

making present of Christ's death, but is an event in which the living, risen Jesus Christ extends his last supper to include us; in which Christ both gives us his "last will and testament" and bestows upon us the inheritance promised therein: his very self. (2) In contrast, Carl Volz appeals to article 24 ("On the Mass") of Melancthon's *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* to argue not only that the supper is an anamnesis—a remembering and re-presentation—of Calvary, but also that such remembering is best realized in a eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving, in which the events of Calvary and the Lord's supper itself are incorporated into our larger prayer of thanksgiving for God's self-giving to us in the whole of creation and history. This is in direct opposition to the argument that Gerhard Forde makes here and elsewhere that the words of institution should not be incorporated into the eucharistic prayer, but should be clearly set apart from it as proclamation, as Christ's word and gift to us rather than our words of thanksgiving to God. Finally, (3) Jane Strohl's refreshing reformulation of the assigned topic results in our hearing the voices of those who have not often been heard either in the sixteenth century debates or in the contemporary one: women, both medieval and contemporary. She appeals to Caroline Bynum's studies of late medieval women's sacramental pieties and practices to explore and expand what she calls "some of the key insights of Lutheran sacramental theology" and their importance for a culture marked by intense ambivalence about the human—and especially female—body: God deep in the flesh in Jesus Christ, the bodily presence of Christ in the supper, and the body—both of the recipients and of Christ—as the very locus of the giving and receiving of grace.

It is simply not possible to "paste together" component parts of each of these essays into some putatively more "comprehensive" Lutheran theology of the Lord's supper, nor will I attempt to do so in this response: my respect for each of these authors and for the differences among them is too great for that. Rather, I would like to explore more fully three key points in the discussion, both in order to enable the readers of this journal to understand and enter into the conversation more fully and in the hope of moving us beyond impasse to a more fruitful discussion of where the real differences among us lie. The three key questions I would like to explore are: (1) What is a Lutheran biblical hermeneutic? (2) How should the liturgy of the supper be conducted—eucharistic prayer or proclamation? and (3) What does "real presence" mean? I will then close with a brief consideration of what I understand to be the root issue: our understanding of the person and saving work of Christ and ultimately of the identity and agency of the triune God.

#### I. WHAT IS A LUTHERAN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC?

Gerhard Forde argues that the Lord's supper is not a re-presentation or "making present" of Golgotha, but should be understood as Christ's testament. The difference between these two views of the Lord's supper—as re-presentation of Christ's death and as the risen Christ's testament—is the difference, he writes, between two "entirely different hermeneutical schemes." What does this mean?

The author to whom Forde refers at this point is James Samuel Preus, who argues that Luther's reformation insight on the centrality of justification by faith occurred in the context of his discovery of a new way to read the Bible—a new biblical hermeneutic.<sup>1</sup> The beginning of Luther's 1513-1515 *Lectures on the Psalms* is still thoroughly medieval, Preus argues. Medieval exegesis was rooted in an Augustinian understanding of the Bible as a vast system of signs. A sign (*signum*) signifies by pointing to a thing (*res*), and this thing may in turn function as a sign (*signum*) pointing to yet another thing (*res*). What Gerhard Ebeling and others have called Luther's "christological-tropological" interpretation of the Psalms perfectly embodies this medieval hermeneutic, Preus argues, and as such embodies the "Endform" (final form) of the medieval doctrine of justification rather than the "Urform" (first appearance) of reformation theology.<sup>2</sup> In Luther's early "christological-tropological" readings of the Psalms, Luther finds that the textual references to David, Solomon, and the faithful synagogue as the composers and singers of the Psalms are all "signs" pointing to the real author and speaker of the Psalms—Christ. The "sign" may be David but the reality (*res*) is Christ. Hence the still medieval Luther sees Christ everywhere speaking in the Psalms, in suffering and lament as well as thanksgiving and praise. Applied "tropologically" to the Christian reader, the Psalms are then understood by Luther to work through the power of grace to conform the reader to Christ, above all to his suffering and passion, and we get a second *signum-res* sequence: Christ is the sign, and the reality (*res*) is the christological transformation of the reader.

There are lots of problems with this double *signum-res* hermeneutic, Preus points out. On such a reading, the people of Israel, who themselves wrote and sang these psalms, simply could not have understood what they were really about, nor have been grasped by their power, for they lacked both Christ and the power of his grace: they had the bare signs—the "shadow"—but not the reality (*res*). But there are problems for Christian readers as well, Preus observes.<sup>3</sup> If the whole Bible is a system of signs pointing to hidden realities, how can I know for sure what it really means? And worse, if the whole point of the Bible is to conform me to Christ, to shape my life in the likeness of Christ, how can I ever know for sure that I am "Christ-like" enough? If I have not yet suffered as fully as Christ did, don't I need to undergo severe fasting and a variety of other self-penitential programs to try to become more Christ-like—and how, even with these, can I ever be sure that I've done enough? Although medieval theologians argued that the visible signs of the sacraments bear with them an invisible grace—the grace of *intellectus* (understanding) so we can understand the hidden meanings, and the grace of *caritas* (love) to make us Christ-like—the problem was thereby made even worse: how can I know for sure whether I have actually been given these invisible powers of grace and they are actually working to make me wise enough and Christ-like

<sup>1</sup>James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1969).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 233-245.

enough?<sup>4</sup> In short, what this medieval hermeneutic and medieval doctrine of justification utterly undermined is precisely what Luther later came to see as most fundamental: the simple surety of faith in God's promise.

Then, in the course of his Psalms lectures, Preus argues, Luther made a momentous twofold discovery:<sup>5</sup> (1) the people who speak in the Psalms are historical human beings—the people of Israel—just as we are, and they address God in bitter lament and passionate petition because (2) God has made them a promise and they are calling upon God to fulfill the promise; their lament and petition is an expression and embodiment of their faith in the promising God. The faithful synagogue lived by faith in God's promise—and so do Christians! For both faithful Israel and Christians, *sola fide rectificat*: trust in God's promise alone is the right relationship to God.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly, the realities of human history and the existential depths of the actual human characters in the Old Testament emerge in their full richness, complexity, and particularity, as does something even more astonishing to Luther: a God who is a *living* God and actually addresses God's people—both Israel and us—in promises of well-being and woe. Indeed, once he discovers this, Preus points out, Luther can hardly contain himself: "Oh if we were only able to weigh, with the *affectus* that we ought, what it means to be saying 'God is speaking,' 'God is promising,' 'God is threatening'! Who, I ask, would not be shaken to the very depths? This is a great word, a great sound, and one to be feared: 'Behold, the Word of God!'"<sup>7</sup>

Hence, it is no longer necessary to search for the meanings hidden in the "signs" of scripture or to worry about getting enough grace so that they can have a sufficiently transformative effect on me. Words, Luther has discovered, are not fundamentally "signs" of hidden realities, nor do they need some invisible "grace" in order to have effects. Spoken words—words that actually address someone—do things: they create expectation or doubt, trust or fear, despair or confidence in the one who hears them, not because they bear some "invisible grace" but simply as "naked words." Luther is doing away with the hermeneutical scheme *and* the whole theology of grace that the medieval west had inherited from Augustine, replacing it with the power of God's "naked word" of promise to engender a sure and certain faith in God's promised future for us.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 243-244.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 245ff.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 210.

<sup>7</sup>Luther on Psalm 118, cited in Ibid., 253.

<sup>8</sup>Actually, I suspect that the rhetorical power of this "naked word" of God's direct address also depends on the more encompassing biblical narrative of God's life with us in creation, in the story of Israel, and ultimately in Christ, for it is through this narrative that the identity of the God who addresses us is rendered, as is our own identity as creatures and as part of the people of God. The larger narrative provides the context within which God's direct address to us can be heard *as* God's address to us. For a very insightful proposal about the ways events of God's direct address in the Bible are given meaning and power through the other biblical genres of narrative, law, wisdom, and prayer, see Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977) 1-37. The basic point remains, however: the Bible is not a system of "signs." The biblical God is a living God who speaks and acts in time and history and to us today.

This is also the root, Preus points out, of Luther's redefinition of a sacrament.<sup>9</sup> A sacrament is not a "visible sign" (water, bread, wine) of an "invisible grace" (*intellectus* and *caritas*), as Augustine had taught. Rather, a sacrament is most fundamentally God's own quite clear word of promise to us, accompanied and sealed by a physical sign. Thus, Luther understands the Lord's supper as testament—as the risen Lord's word of promise to us, indeed, his final, eschatological testament: this is my body, given for you. This is not a re-presentation of Christ's sacrificial death at Golgotha, nor are we somehow incorporated into this past event and sacrificed up to the Father with Christ. As Preus points out, Luther has discovered in his reading of the Bible the realities of human history and power of historical thinking, and "is content to leave Christ's death in its irretrievable pastness."<sup>10</sup> Rather, the Lord's supper is the event of the risen, living Lord giving to us here and now both his "last will and testament," and, since the death of the testator has occurred, the promised inheritance itself.

Perhaps now we can begin to understand more fully both Gerhard Forde's essay and the differences between his essay and Carl Volz's essay. In article 24 of the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*,<sup>11</sup> Melanchthon presents an almost textbook example of the christological-tropological hermeneutic which Preus argues that Luther abandoned in his discovery of justification by faith in God's promise. All the elements of this christological-tropological hermeneutic are there. Melanchthon writes<sup>12</sup> that (1) the Old Testament had "pictures or shadows" of what was to come, and so in a symbolic way the Old Testament signifies the hidden reality (*res*) of Christ and his death as sacrificial lamb to propitiate the Father's wrath—though it takes some allegorical ingenuity for Melanchthon to interpret these Old Testament "signs" so as to yield their christological meaning; (2) the Lord's supper in turn is "a memorial of the death of Christ" (a sign) which (3) is effective in us—that is, becomes real (*res*)—only insofar as we too are conformed to Christ and offer up to the Father our sacrificial offering of faith as well as our sacrifice of "thanksgiving, confession, and affliction." This sacrificial offering by believers of thanksgiving, confession, and affliction "must" be offered up in the ceremony of the mass, Melanchthon writes. And no wonder: the believers' sacrificial offering up to the Father is the climax and completion of this christological-tropological schema, and so finally constitutes the entire reality (*res*) of the mass.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Preus, *From Shadow to Promise*, 261ff.

<sup>10</sup>James S. Preus, "Neglected Problems in the Eucharistic Dialogue," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 3/5 (1976) 282.

<sup>11</sup>In *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (BC)*, trans. and ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 249-268.

<sup>12</sup>*Ap* 24:36-38, in *BC*, 256-257.

<sup>13</sup>This also seems to be at the root of Melanchthon's understanding and translation of "*diatheke*" as "covenant" rather than as "testament": while "testament" is a unilateral act of Christ's gift to us, "covenant" stresses the cooperative action of humans in forming the covenant (*pactum*) with God: the human response of assent and obedience is *necessary*. See Kenneth Hagen, "From Testament to Covenant in the Early Sixteenth Century," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 3/1 (1972) 1-24, and Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed From the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology," *Lutheran*

There are indeed “entirely different hermeneutical schemes” at work in Luther’s understanding of the Lord’s supper as Christ’s testament and in Melancthon’s discussion of the sacrifice of the mass in the *Apology*. What I would like to suggest is that further discussion and theological evaluation of these two different hermeneutics—especially if conducted in a way that is genuinely respectful to all participants—might be fruitful for our ongoing work of developing a more fully shared understanding of the Lord’s supper.<sup>14</sup> We also need to acknowledge that both hermeneutics can be found in the *Book of Concord*, and so the question of which is more “Lutheran”—and the even more important question of which is more true—cannot simply be decided on the basis of quotations. Perhaps a better set of criteria are those the authors of the *Book of Concord* themselves insist on: fidelity to the Bible and to the principle of justification by faith without works of the law. Although more discussion is needed, I will simply confess here that I think Luther’s *promissio* hermeneutic opens up a far richer reading of scripture, both historically and theologically, than is possible with the christological-tropological schema. And I fear that the christological-tropological schema could seriously distort the principle of justification by faith by interiorizing it into the question of whether I yet have enough faith and then compounding the problem by announcing that such faith is given through “grace”—rather than simply hearing and trusting in God’s external word of promise, whatever my inner turmoils might be.

---

*Quarterly* 26 (May 1974) 110-157, especially 152-153. In his understanding of the supper as sheer gift of Christ’s “last will and testament,” therefore, Gerhard Forde emphasizes that “the testament grants the inheritance from the testator Jesus to the heirs. This also should be insisted upon over against...covenantal language.”

<sup>14</sup>Preus’s argument about the shift from a christological-tropological hermeneutic to a *promissio* hermeneutic in Luther’s early *Lectures on the Psalms* has been the subject of much critical discussion. John J. Pilch, “Luther’s Hermeneutical ‘Shift,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970) 445-448, argues that Luther continues to vacillate between the two hermeneutics all the way through his 1535 *Commentary on Galatians*, and Jared Wicks, S.J., in his review of Preus’s book in *Theological Studies* 30 (1969) 712-717, notes that *promissio* is hardly heard from in Luther’s 1515-1516 *Lectures on Romans* and suggests that the 1513-1515 *Lectures on the Psalms* may be more complex hermeneutically than Preus realizes. Moreover, he adds, Preus’s arguments about why the christological-tropological hermeneutic breaks down are not documented from the actual text of Luther’s *Lectures on the Psalms*—although I would add that they are certainly evident in Luther’s other writings. On the other hand, Darrell R. Reinke, “From Allegory to Metaphor: More Notes on Luther’s Hermeneutical Shift,” *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973) 386-395, argues that Luther’s shift to a *promissio* hermeneutic and understanding of faith as “a confidence that the word is reliable, not the humility which conforms to the image of *Passio Christi*” (393) are evident in all of Luther’s discussions of biblical interpretation after the early *Lectures on the Psalms* and reflect Luther’s move into a wider, non-monastic milieu as well as the impact of the printing press. The fullest exploration of the *promissio* motif in Luther is Oswald Bayer, *Promissio: Geschichte der reformatorischen Wende in Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971). Bayer argues that a *promissio* hermeneutic is indeed central to the reformation turn in Luther’s theology. In my own view, Preus is quite right about the significance of Luther’s discovery of this *promissio* hermeneutic for his understanding of justification by faith. What is underdeveloped in Preus’s book, however, is Luther’s vivid sense of the living presence of Christ himself in the word of promise and so also in the faith effected by the word of promise. Preus addresses this in his “From Promise to Presence: The Christ in Luther’s Old Testament,” in Eric W. Gritsch, ed., *Encounters with Luther*, volume 1 (Gettysburg, PA: Institute for Luther Studies, 1980) 109-125, where he argues that, for Luther, “in every age since the beginning of the world, Christ is inseparable from his promise” (117). Nonetheless, the “real presence” of Jesus Christ tends to remain an underdeveloped theme both in Preus’s work and among contemporary advocates of a theology of testament.

## II. HOW SHOULD THE LITURGY OF THE SUPPER BE CONDUCTED— EUCCHARISTIC PRAYER OR PROCLAMATION?

As Carl Volz points out, Luther himself removed the eucharistic prayer from his masses in favor of a clear proclamation of the words of institution, though he also clearly thought that prayers and hymns of thanksgiving were appropriate at other points in the service.<sup>15</sup> It is in this sense, I believe, that Luther acknowledged that the entire service could be understood to *include* our “sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise”—though I have as yet nowhere found in Luther anything akin to Melancthon’s “*must*.” Unlike Carl Volz, however, I don’t think that Luther’s establishment of a clear distinction between our prayers to God and Christ’s testament to us was simply due to the particular exigencies of his time, which have now passed; it is much more fundamentally rooted in his new hermeneutic of scripture and understanding of justification by faith in God’s word of promise. For Luther, it appears, the “one thing necessary” in the liturgy of the supper is the clear proclamation and distribution of Christ’s testament; everything else is *adiaphora*.

Does this settle the question in favor of separating the words of institution from the eucharistic prayer so that they stand alone as Christ’s testament to us? No. Even the fiercest advocates of an understanding of the Lord’s supper as Christ’s testament need to acknowledge, on their own grounds, that spoken words have effects on their hearers—they *do* something—and so we need to attend to those effects. I suspect that the narrative of God’s works in creation, in the story of Israel, and in Christ which is embedded in the eucharistic prayer actually *functions* for many hearers as proclamation,<sup>16</sup> lending richness and power to Christ’s direct address to us in the supper: this is my body, given for you. Though this direct address is the central event, the surrounding narrative is important both in (1) identifying who it is—Jesus Christ, the Son of God—who addresses us, and in (2) opening up an imaginative space among us in which this direct word of address can come to us with power. Too often, I believe, those who stress the power of God’s direct address to us and so rightly advocate an understanding of the Lord’s supper as Christ’s testament fail to acknowledge that the power of a spoken promise is also dependent on the hearers’ perception of the identity and character of the promiser as well as an understanding of themselves in relation to the promiser and to the larger world. As classical studies of rhetoric point out, effective communication involves not only *logos* (word) but also *pathos* (the character of the speaker) and *ethos* (the culture of the community addressed).<sup>17</sup> Inclusion in the

<sup>15</sup>For a very clear and helpful study of Luther’s reforms of the mass, as well as a clear overview of the work of contemporary Lutheran scholars who argue for an understanding of the supper as Christ’s testament (Oliver Olson, Paul Rorem, Gottfried Krodel), see Bryan Spinks, *Luther’s Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Bramcote, Nottingham, England: Grove Books, 1982).

<sup>16</sup>Many of the Psalms actually function this way as well in worship, i.e., both as prayers of thanksgiving and praise to God and as proclamation to the assembly and to the world of God’s creating and saving acts.

<sup>17</sup>For an interesting exploration of these three dimensions of rhetorical performance in relation to Christian theology, see David Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991).

liturgy of the supper of the larger narrative of God's life with us in creation, in Israel, and in Christ plays an important role, then, in shaping an understanding of Christ's direct address to us *as* Christ's personal promise and gift to us, rather than as a set of "magic words" said over the elements in order to transform them. Hence, I also agree with Carl Volz that in employing *only* the words of institution, one "runs the risk of suggesting that these words...have special qualities to 'consecrate,' perhaps even suggesting to some of the faithful a moment of 'change.' Strictly speaking, there is no consecration, for we rely solely upon the promise of God that we are receiving Christ's body and blood."

Does this mean, then, that I would advocate incorporating the words of institution within the eucharistic prayer? No. Rather, I'd like to propose both that we include the larger narrative of God's works in creation, in Israel, and in Christ in the liturgy of the supper—especially in a North American context in which even baptized Christians may not know the basic story—and that the best way to do this is in the form of narrative proclamation, not in the form of prayer. Thus, I would propose that a clear distinction be made between our prayer of thanksgiving and praise to God (the *Sursum Corda*, *Eucharista*, and *Sanctus*) and the narrative proclamation to the assembly of God's works in creation, Israel, Christ, and the supper. The point of transition from prayer to proclamation could be the last line of the *Sanctus*: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Now, here, is the event of Christ's coming to us. Everything that follows that would then be addressed as narrative proclamation and direct address to the assembly rather than as the assembly's prayer of thanksgiving to the Father. As a proposal which acknowledges some of the most persuasive points made on both sides of this ongoing debate, I hope this is at least worth some further discussion.

### III. WHAT DOES "REAL PRESENCE" MEAN?

Thank goodness for Jane Strohl's essay. In refusing to abide by the terms of the original assignment, she has in fact focused, more than either of the other two essays, on a major theme in the Lutheran confessions as well as the culmination point of every Lord's supper: (1) the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, and (2) our participation in this through actual eating and drinking. Moreover, she has done this in a way that simultaneously takes us out of intra-Lutheran debates and into a larger catholic reality, enables us to hear the often unheard voices of women (both medieval and contemporary), and suggests the supper's importance for ministry in a contemporary culture marked by deep ambivalence about the value of the human—and especially the female—body and by virtual epidemics of anorexia and bulimia. To recognize anew through Strohl's essay that the body (both Christ's and ours), "with its ability to bleed and suffer, to bleed and die, to bleed and give birth, to bleed and nourish," is "not an obstacle to the knowledge of grace but the very locus of its realization," is indeed to receive a gift that "strengthens and deepens some of the key insights of Lutheran sacramental theology": the reality of God "deep in the flesh" in Jesus Christ, the bodily presence of Christ in the supper, and



the body—Christ’s and ours—as the very locus of the giving and receiving of grace.

Nowhere in the history of Christian theology is there a more thoroughly bodily God than Luther’s, for at the heart of Luther’s theology is the reality of Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and bodily risen. In contrast to a more Nestorian understanding of the person of Christ, which tends to draw a sharp distinction between the “human nature” and the “divine nature” of Christ, Luther stressed the unity of the person of Christ and argued that there is in Christ a twofold “communication of properties” (*communicatio idiomata*).<sup>18</sup> First, in the incarnation in Jesus, the divine fully partakes in the reality of human life: God truly incarnate, “deep in the flesh” in this tiny baby with dirty diapers lying in a manger and in this man hanging helpless on a cross. Second, in Jesus’ resurrection and ascension to the “right hand” of the Father, the human, bodily reality of the resurrected Jesus fully shares in the divine power to be everywhere in creation—which is what the “right hand of God” means in the Bible: the power and active agency of God. Hence Luther taught the ubiquity of the risen body of Christ: Christ’s bodily presence everywhere.<sup>19</sup> The Lutheran confessions therefore affirm that the presence of Christ’s body and blood “in, with, and under” bread and wine is not according to the mode of a physically localized and limited presence (as it was at Calvary) but is a bodily presence of the risen Christ “according to the mode and property of God’s right hand.”<sup>20</sup> The difference between the risen Christ’s ubiquitous bodily presence “in, with, and under” all that is and his presence in the Lord’s supper is simply that in the supper, Christ actually addresses us and actively gives himself to us: this is my body, *for you*. What a difference that makes, however: the difference between a mute presence with only its “backside” to us, and a presence that turns to address us and give himself to us! Perhaps it is no accident that Luther’s favorite way of talking about the ubiquity of the body of Christ is in terms of the way the physical reality of a voice can saturate a huge space with its tone and rhythm and words, physically permeating the whole space and everyone in it.<sup>21</sup> It is the risen Christ’s word to us that makes this supper into a sacrament, an event of Christ’s actual personal and bodily self-giving to us.

And the way we receive this gift is through actual eating and drinking, in our bodies. The bread and cup are our “participation” (*koinonia*) in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 10:16). Against those who argued that Paul was speaking only of a spiritual participation in the body of Christ through faith, the Lutheran confessors insisted that the body and blood of Jesus Christ are actually received by all who eat

<sup>18</sup>See Martin Luther, “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528) in *Luther’s Works (LW)*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-86) 37:161-372, at 209ff.

<sup>19</sup>See Martin Luther, “That These Words of Christ, ‘This is My Body,’ Etc., Still Stand Firm Against the Fanatics” (1527), *LW* 37:13-150, at 55-78; and “Confession Concerning Christ’s Supper” (1528), at 37:214ff.

<sup>20</sup>*Formula of Concord, Epitome* 8:17, in *BC*, 489. See also the *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* 7:98-106, in *BC*, 586-588.

<sup>21</sup>See, for instance, “That These Words, ‘This is My Body,’ Etc.,” *LW* 37:225.

and drink of the Lord's supper, whether believers or unbelievers.<sup>22</sup> Christ is bodily present in the supper because he promises to be; it is not dependent on our faith. And our participation in his bodily self-giving to us is through eating and drinking, through which we simultaneously incorporate the body of Christ and are incorporated into the body of Christ as members of his body: our *koinonia* in Christ is both corporeal and corporate.<sup>23</sup> Jane Strohl underscores the importance of this when she points to the contrast between a focus on the priest's consecration and offering of the sacrifice, and a quite different understanding of the sacrament that "focuses on reception of the elements rather than consecration and gives the status of lay communicant a spiritual importance equal, and at times superior, to that of the ordained celebrant."

The ultimate purpose of the sacrament, however, is the awakening and strengthening of faith: that we might trust Christ's word that he is here with us and for us in the supper, bestowing upon us his very self and so the fullness of forgiveness and life, and so also that we might trust that Christ is with and for us in our daily lives as well, where we often perceive only his "backside." It's in this understanding of the ultimate purpose of the sacrament that I think a distinctively Lutheran understanding of the Lord's supper is not only strengthened and deepened by Strohl's discussion of these late medieval women, but also has a corrective and liberating gift to bring to this medieval piety, and to us. For, as Strohl herself points out, intertwined with these medieval women's profound sense of the body—Christ's and theirs—as the very locus of the giving and receiving of grace is the theme of participation in Christ through *imitatio Christi*, and above all through imitation of his suffering. It is not just that Christ joins himself to them in their bleeding and suffering, but that they believe that they in turn must actively scourge their bodies and practice the extremest forms of self-denial in order to become more fully joined with him, more fully "Christ-like." It is not difficult to recognize here something very like the christological-tropological hermeneutic that Luther abandoned when he discovered the theology of promise. Nor is it difficult to recognize in such a christological-tropological hermeneutic the roots of what Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker have argued is the scourge that Christianity has laid upon the bodies of women: the glorification of suffering.<sup>24</sup> Luther's *promissio* hermeneutic and understanding of the Lord's

<sup>22</sup>FC, SD 7:56, in BC, 579.

<sup>23</sup>As Luther put it, "as we eat him, he abides in us and we in him" (LW37:132). Luther's fullest discussion of the corporate dimension of this *koinonia* in Christ is in "The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and Blood of Christ, and the Brotherhoods" (1519), LW 35:49-73.

<sup>24</sup>Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim, 1989) 1-30. It might be noted here that Luther's theology of the cross is not about suffering in imitation of Christ, but about faith—trusting that God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ even when all the appearances are to the contrary, and even so fully trusting in God's promise that we'll storm heaven's gates and do battle with God as well until we finally get the blessing, as the Syro-phoenician woman battled with Jesus. Luther's theology of the cross is finally about the fierceness of such faith in God's promise.

supper as Christ's testament gain even more significance in this context. Understanding and administration of the Lord's supper not as a re-presentation of Christ's sacrificial death in which we too are sacrificially offered up, but as the risen Christ's "last will and testament" and bodily self-giving to us may be particularly good news for women.

Contemporary works on the Lord's supper as testament have at times been marked by an underdevelopment of the themes of real presence and bodily participation, and even at times by hints of an iconoclastic denigration of the use of richly material realities in Christian worship and ministry; they need the strengthening and deepening of insight into the particular themes in Lutheran sacramental theology provided by Jane Strohl's essay and the women's voices therein.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the particular limitations of the hermeneutic and theology at work in these medieval women's piety also suggest the importance of its correction and transformation by the themes developed in Gerhard Forde's essay on Christ's supper as testament and bestowal, not repetition and imitation. The essays yield their best fruits, in short, in conversation with each other.

#### IV. CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

As the conversation continues concerning a Lutheran biblical hermeneutic, the form of the liturgy, and the significance of "real presence," we will also need to begin to grapple with the deeper theological issues involved. One of the major underlying sources of these essays' differences, I suspect, has to do with the variety of understandings of the person and saving work of Christ at work in them and in the Lutheran confessions themselves. Gerhard Forde has argued, for instance, that vicarious satisfaction and vicarious punishment models of atonement are neither biblical nor characteristic of Luther's atonement theology, and that both models are disastrous theologically and pastorally because they "get the directions wrong" in conceiving Christ's work as directed toward changing God rather than toward changing us and our situation in sin.<sup>26</sup> Hence, when Carl Volz writes that there is "no dispute" that Christ's saving work consists in his death as "a sacrifice of propitiation for us sinners, acceptable to God," one may agree that this is certainly true of *Apology* 24, but it is less obviously true for Luther, the other Lutherans writing the essays here, or indeed even for contemporary scholarship on

<sup>25</sup>For instance, Oliver K. Olson has been a particularly important contributor to a recovery of Luther's understanding of the supper as testament, e.g., in his "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy," cited above. Although he acknowledges in this essay that "proclamation alone produces only 'burned over' churches" and urges the use of rituals and other materials taken from broader life (154), at other times the force of his opposition to any form of "imitation of Christ" can also lend a perhaps unintended iconoclastic tone to his essays, e.g., in his "How to Be Evangelical and Catholic," *Lutheran Forum* 26/2 (1992) 56-62. If used evangelically, in the service of God's creation and in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ, what's wrong with using "synthetic oil of cinnamon" or indeed anything else that God's bountiful creation provides us?

<sup>26</sup>For Forde's discussion of classical atonement theories and of Luther, see his "Second Locus: The Work of Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) 2:5-76.

the Bible.<sup>27</sup> Among these, it is rather strenuously disputed. How we understand the person and saving work of Christ makes a lot of difference not only for our understanding of the supper but also for Christian ministry and life more generally. And it makes a great deal of difference for our understanding of God, the ultimate issue at stake in this conversation. Simply constructing a liturgy in which one part involves God the Father, another the Son, and another the Holy Spirit does not necessarily mean that the resulting liturgy is true to the reality of the triune God. Much more important is understanding who the active agent really is in the liturgy and the movement of that agent in the liturgy: God coming to us in Jesus Christ who is alive, the crucified one now bodily risen from the dead in the power of the Spirit, and bearing toward and to us his final future for us. The root issue, finally, is the identity and agency of the triune God, and the Lord's supper as *missio trinitatis*. ⊕

<sup>27</sup>For a concise summary of contemporary New Testament scholarship on the topic, see C. M. Tuckett, "Atonement in the New Testament," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (6 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:518-522. For a much fuller exegetical study, see Kenneth Grayston, *Dying We Live: A New Inquiry into the Death of Christ in the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University, 1990).