

EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- Topic:** Early Christian Perspectives
on David N. Power's *Eucharistic Mystery*
- Convener:** John J. O'Keefe, Creighton University
- Presenters:** Kenneth Snyder, University of St. Thomas
Michel Barnes, Marquette University
Charles Bobertz, St. John's University, Collegeville
Alexis Doval, St. Mary's College, Moraga, California

Twenty-one people were present at this discussion of David Power's recent book, "The Eucharistic Mystery." The session this year collaborated with the Medieval Theology group to offer various historical theological perspectives on Power's work. Three of the four presenters were respectfully critical while the fourth, Alexis Doval, offered a more positive assessment.

Kenneth Snyder commended Power for recognizing the importance of historical analysis in any assessment of the history of the Eucharistic tradition. Given this, Snyder found it puzzling that Power did not actually spend much time with the historical material. Various periods, authors, and texts tended to be lumped together, losing their particular character and, at the same time, their ability to serve as a useful device in Power's project. Moreover, Power seems to make no effort to evaluate the quality of a given historical source. Snyder ending his comments by suggesting that, from the early Christian perspective, Power's project of revitalization might be helped by reflecting more deeply on the ancient notion of "communio."

Michel Barnes offered a particularly challenging critique of Power's use of historical material. In general Barnes is concerned that systematic theologians attend to historical material with the same care that they do biblical material. Barnes noted a general lack of secondary literature supporting Power's historical claims. As an example, Barnes analyzed Power's use of the category "platonism." According to Barnes, Power conflates middle and Neoplatonism, two distinctly different philosophical schools. Power's use of the category "Neoplatonism" to describe aspects of the pre-Nicene church's eucharistic theology is misleading and weakens the credibility of many of the book's other historical claims.

Charles Bobertz focused his comments on Power's analysis of New Testament material. Bobertz is generally critical of the work of the Jesus Seminar and is himself more sympathetic to postmodern theological readings of the text.

Bobertz suggested that Power's reading of the Marcan material in particular was overly influenced by the work of exegetes like Crosson. The result is that Power misunderstands the priestly nature of early Christian worship and the strong cultic agenda of much New Testament literature. In Bobertz's view, the New Testament cannot support Power's claims. Bobertz also wondered at Power's introductory remarks. In that section he suggests that the book will have a postmodern thrust. Yet, despite this claim, Power steadfastly advances a tried and true modern agenda, including the rejection of early Christian typological interpretation and the acceptance of the so-called "historical Jesus."

Alexis Doval offered the most irenic assessment of Power's book. He remarked that reading *The Eucharistic Mystery* gave him a chance to leave the detailed historical analysis that characterizes his own work for the broad picture that a work like this is able to provide. Doval was disappointed that Power did not develop the connection between eucharistic theology and the doctrine of the atonement.

The discussion following the presentation was stimulating and ran past the end of the session. Most agreed that more research and study was needed on basic Christian concepts like atonement and sacrifice. All also agreed that it is much easier to critique a book like *The Eucharistic Mystery* than it is to write one.

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