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978-0-521-71917-9 - The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us Keep the Feast

George Hunsinger

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## The Eucharist and Ecumenism

The theology of the eucharist has long been the subject of heated debate, particularly since the Reformation. George Hunsinger's book explores ways in which Christians might resolve their differences in this area. With the aim of fostering ecumenical convergence, he tackles three key issues dividing the churches about the eucharist: real presence, eucharistic sacrifice, and ordained ministry.

Hunsinger, a Protestant theologian in the Reformed tradition, brings Eastern Orthodox views more systematically into the discussion than has been common in the West. He also discusses the social significance of the eucharist. His detailed conclusion summarizes and clarifies the argument as a whole with an eye to explaining how the views proposed in the book could lead the churches, beginning with the Reformed church, closer to the day when obstacles to eucharistic sharing are overcome.

GEORGE HUNSINGER is Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is author of *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (2000) and *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (1991).

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Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.  
Therefore let us keep the feast.

*The Book of Common Prayer*  
(1 Cor. 5:7–8)

*In memoriam*  
Thomas F. Torrance  
*doctor ecclesiae*  
*honoris causa ad gradum*  
with heartfelt thanks for his life and work

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## Acknowledgments

As an undergraduate I took a course on the Ecumenical Movement from Robert McAfee Brown, who had been an observer in Rome during Vatican II. It was Brown who first made me see that a divided church was intolerable, though I remained skeptical about solutions. When I went to seminary, the Jesuits saved my theological education. Frs. Gerald O'Collins and George W. MacCrae of the Weston School of Theology combined piety and learning in a way that often seemed lacking in the ethos across the commons at the divinity school where I was enrolled. For a young Presbyterian ministerial student, it was an exercise in practical ecumenism. Then during my doctoral studies, by the sheer force of his example and teaching, another former observer in Rome, George A. Lindbeck, made the ecumenical agenda seem inescapable, though for me it remained a matter of peripheral vision, as I was more preoccupied in those days with the sorrows and outrages of an unconscionable war.

The virtues of Mercersberg theology for the Reformed tradition, with its effort to retrieve a more catholic understanding of the eucharist through the work of John Nevin, were kept before my eyes by Howard G. Hageman, president of New Brunswick Theological Seminary, where I obtained my first academic post. Of course I had no idea at the time that these influences might be leading anywhere. Looking back, it seems that the turning point came in 1995 during a Lenten Bible study in my local congregation. Feeling that my New Testament Greek, never very good, was getting ever more rusty by the day, I took an interlinear volume with me to one of the sessions. To my surprise the word *koinonia*

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showed up in 1 Cor. 10:16. Could it be, I wondered, that the relationship between the bread and Christ's body might be one of mutual indwelling? Over time my hunch was reinforced by Luther, confirmed by Vermigli, and validated by Käsemann. I was headed down the trail that led to this book.

Through the kind invitation of Iain R. Torrance, later to become president at Princeton Theological Seminary, where I had joined the faculty, I was asked to lecture on the eucharist to the School of Divinity at the University of Aberdeen in 2003. Those lectures became the core of this volume. Great kindness was shown to my wife and me during our visit to the campus. I would especially like to thank John Webster, along with all the others, as well as Nicholas Thompson, whose guidance on the vexed matter of eucharistic sacrifice was most valuable. For assistance at various stages I would also like to thank my colleagues Sr. M. Paracleta Amrich, Brian Daley, Ralph Del Colle, Dawn De Vries, Theodor Dieter, George Parsenios, Michael Root, Bryan Spinks, Geoffrey Wainwright, Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, Randall Zachman, Philip Ziegler, and members of the Duodecim Theological Society. Kate Brett and Gillian Dadd, my savvy editors, oversaw the publication process with grace and seasoned judgment. Kathy Whalen aided greatly in the preparation of the diagrams. Finally, this work could never have been completed without the loving support and encouragement of my friend and colleague Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, with whom I enjoy the added blessing of being married.

Three special influences stand out for me. Though I have remained only on the periphery of their work, the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology served to concentrate my mind. The interventions of Carl Braaten in particular helped me to see that Christian worship is essentially eucharistic worship or it is not Christian worship at all.

The Episcopal Church at Yale, through the innovative ministries of Richard Fabian and Donald Schell, enhanced my



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love for *The Book of Common Prayer* while also expanding my horizons about what a liturgy could be. The work they began in those days later morphed into San Francisco's St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church, where I was happy to rediscover them after a lapse of many years. Their insights, which have graced me with the richest eucharistic experiences of my life, are described in the conclusion.

Finally, towering in my mind above all others is Thomas F. Torrance. Without him I suspect that as a Reformed theologian, I might never have seen how to get from there to here regarding the eucharist, namely, from Karl Barth to something like the ecumenical center. Many of the leading themes in this book – *koinonia* relations, their formal structuring by the Chalcedonian pattern, transelementation, eucharistic sacrifice as the exclusive work of Christ, the dimension of depth, the imperative of women's ordination, the paschal mystery, the preeminence of Eastern Orthodoxy, and more – all have their roots in his work. The book is dedicated to his memory.

The Eucharist and Ecumenism is a book someone needed to write, but it was not clear that anyone would know how to write it. Hunsinger shows us that it can be done. - -Stanley Hauerwas, Duke Divinity School --The Christian Century, October 20, 2009.Â I will use it with my students, since it is one of the most reliable and thought-provoking studies on the eucharist. - -Risto Saarinen, Pro Ecclesia, Summer 2010. Read more. 'The Eucharist and Ecumenism is an ambitious project, the product of a deeply eirenic mind with a capacity for detail and attention to the positions of others. It reflects the author's conviction that visible - that is, structural - unity of the Church is its Lord's will for it, and therefore worth working for, in spite of contemporary discouragement. To read it has been a reminder of the riches of the whole Christian tradition, and a challenge to the comforts of denominationalism into which we so easily slip.' The term "ecumenism" refers to efforts by Christians of different Church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings. The term is also often used to refer to efforts towards the visible and organic unity of different Christian denominations in some form. The adjective ecumenical can also be applied to any interdenominational initiative that encourages greater cooperation among Christians and their churches, whether or not the specific aim of that effort is full, visible unity

The theology of the Eucharist has long been the subject of heated debate, particularly since the Reformation. George Hunsinger's book explores ways in which Christians might resolve their differences in this area. With the aim of fostering ecumenical convergence, he tackles three key issues dividing the churches about the Eucharist: real presence, Eucharistic sacrifice, and ordained ministry. In response, this article focuses on the sacrament of the Eucharist, especially in terms of the notion of prophetic solidarity that Vosloo illuminated. In particular, this response article is informed and shaped by liberation theologians. The Eucharist and Ecumenism is a book someone needed to write, but it was not clear that anyone would know how to write it. Hunsinger shows us that it can be done. - - Stanley Hauerwas, Duke Divinity School --The Christian Century, October 20, 2009. I will use it with my students, since it is one of the most reliable and thought-provoking studies on the eucharist. - -Risto Saarinen, Pro Ecclesia, Summer 2010. Read more. The term "ecumenism" refers to efforts by Christians of different Church traditions to develop closer relationships and better understandings. The term is also often used to refer to efforts towards the visible and organic unity of different Christian denominations in some form. The adjective ecumenical can also be applied to any interdenominational initiative that encourages greater cooperation among Christians and their churches, whether or not the specific aim of that effort is full, visible unity

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