

**GEORGE HUNSINGER, *THE EUCHARIST AND ECUMENISM*
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George Hunsinger, Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, is well-known to North American theologians for his penetrating work on Karl Barth's theology. Hunsinger has also made important contributions to his denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), including service as principal writer for a new catechism. More recently, Hunsinger has spoken boldly to wider American society by organizing the National Religious Campaign against Torture. In his most recent book, Hunsinger makes a significant contribution to ecumenical dialogue, offering proposals that he believes can bring divided churches closer to eucharistic fellowship.

Hunsinger's argument has four parts. In part 1, Hunsinger retrieves the patristic notion of "traselementation" to try to break the historical impasse over how Christ is present in the eucharistic elements. In part 2, Hunsinger argues that language of eucharistic sacrifice need not be church-dividing – and indeed is essential for keeping the Christian faith rooted in the Paschal history of Israel – but must be qualified by a proper understanding of Christ's agency. Part 3 explores issues of Eucharist and ministry, and how the priority of Christ's ministry removes any suggestion that the status or work of the priest supplements what Christ is doing at the table. Part 4 demonstrates the significance of the Eucharist for Christian social responsibility and offers a spirited defense of how Nicene Christianity, contrary to its critics, has sustained practices of peace and justice both within the church and in the church's witness to society.

Hunsinger writes primarily to a Reformed audience, urging it to reconsider positions that were forged in reaction to medieval Catholicism.



At the same time, he hopes that Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and members of other Reformation traditions will find his proposals acceptable. He helpfully differentiates “enclave theology” (which argues for the superiority of one Christian tradition over others) and “academic liberal theology” (which in the name of modernism and historical consciousness rejects all confessional norms) from “ecumenical theology,” which asks every major Christian tradition to open itself to insights from other branches of the Christian family, without violating its own sense of theological integrity.

Hunsinger is convinced that church unity is so central to Christian faith that every Christian tradition must rethink or even abandon church-dividing views because they inevitably set up false contrasts and fail to respect the richness of the faith, which exceeds any one Christian tradition yet comes to expression in each. He is nevertheless careful to insist that the search for church unity be more than just a commitment to civil conversation or an appeal to some supposedly common human experience of the divine. Church unity can only be grounded in Nicene theology (specifically, Chalcedonian Christology, although he acknowledges that a longer book could also develop the trinitarian grounding of his arguments). The goal is not organizational unity for its own sake but rather greater faithfulness to the work and person of Jesus Christ, as known according to the witness of the Scriptures and the church fathers.

Hunsinger carefully examines the documents of key ecumenical dialogues, insightfully explicates major theological figures of the past, and draws from an impressive range of twentieth-century and contemporary theological conversation partners. As in his earlier work, he consistently demonstrates a spirit of “generous orthodoxy.” One of his key moves is to demonstrate resonances in the eucharistic theologies of the Reformed and the Orthodox (especially by way of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann). Because the Roman Catholic Church finds the Orthodox understanding of the Eucharist acceptable, a Reformed-Orthodox convergence should help Catholics and Reformed (and presumably other Reformation traditions) draw closer to eucharistic fellowship. Another of Hunsinger’s key moves is to draw on T.F. Torrance’s Christology, including

Torrance's affirmation of transelementation, his insistence on the unity of Christ's person and benefits, and his understanding of the asymmetrical but real union of the living, resurrected Christ and the church.

Only Catholic and Orthodox theologians will be able to properly judge whether or not Hunsinger's proposals are acceptable to their traditions, but there is no question that the Reformed will benefit greatly from his insights. Especially persuasive is his call for a renewed understanding of the sacrificial character of the Eucharist. Carefully explicating medieval and Reformation positions, Hunsinger makes clear that the eucharistic sacrifice is not a sacramental reenactment or repetition of Christ's death. Nor is it a priestly act that merits grace or whose efficacy depends on communicants' piety. Rather, the eucharistic sacrifice is Christ's act alone, and Christ does not merely invite us to remember it but also enables us to participate in it because he unites us to himself and all that he has done. Says Hunsinger, Christ's "eucharistic presence, under the aspects of his body and blood, includes the real presence of his expiatory sacrifice" (176). The continuing benefits of Christ's once-and-for-all sacrifice on Calvary belong together with the reality of his continuing personal presence to his people as both the crucified and risen Lord. Following Torrance, Hunsinger also argues that the eucharistic sacrifice is a trinitarian act. As we participate in Christ's sacrifice, the Spirit lifts us up as a living sacrifice before the Father.

Hunsinger's discussion of Eucharist and ethics will be of special interest to Reformed theologians. Although these chapters do not always pick up directly on the eucharistic theology that Hunsinger has developed in part 1, they nevertheless demonstrate the integral relationship among theology, worship, and moral practice. A richer eucharistic theology will contribute to a deepening of the church's liturgical life, and this eucharistic theology and practice will inevitably deepen the capacity of Christians to live out their faith in the world.

At the same time, Hunsinger's discussion will likely raise questions for Reformed churches in three areas: (1) the relationship of eucharistic theology and practice, (2) the relationship of the Eucharist to church order, and (3) the relationship of the Eucharist to other means of grace

entrusted to the church. In each case, I wish to demonstrate the significance of Hunsinger's challenge to Reformed churches, as well as particular points at which they may wish to hear more from him. I discuss the first point in greater detail and then turn more briefly to the other two.

Eucharistic Theology and Practice

Liturgical theologians remind us that theology and practice interact in complex ways. New theological understandings can bring about necessary revision of established church practice, and church practice may either block or make possible Christians' acceptance of new theological insights. The church's theology is not only its official doctrines but also – and sometimes more importantly – the functional theology that the church expresses in its actual worship of God or witness to the world. (For a very helpful summary of these issues, see Martha L. Moore-Keish, *Do This in Remembrance of Me: A Ritual Approach to Reformed Eucharistic Theology*, 2008.) Hunsinger recognizes these complex dynamics, and church leaders will need to explore them further if his proposals are to find traction on the ground. A glance at how Hunsinger develops his notion of transelementation demonstrates both the practical opportunities and difficulties.

Hunsinger argues that there is a *koinonia* between the eucharistic elements and the body and blood of the resurrected Jesus. This *koinonia* need not be explained with philosophical categories, such as medieval Catholicism attempted with its notion of transubstantiation. Rather, the transelementation of the eucharistic bread and wine is best understood in analogy to the relationship of Christ's humanity and divinity as defined by Chalcedon. On the one hand, the bread remains bread, the wine, wine – just as Christ's two natures remain distinct. On the other, within the context of the eucharistic celebration the elements become instruments of the Spirit and offer us communion with the living, resurrected Christ – just as those who had fellowship with Jesus on earth experienced communion with him not only as a man but also as the God revealed to Israel. (Hunsinger also notes the limits of the analogy – only the two natures of Christ are hypostatically united.)

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Hunsinger skillfully traces the origins of the term *traselementation* in patristic thinking and its appropriation by Peter Vermigli at the time of the Reformation. Hunsinger shows that for Vermigli, in an analogy also known to Thomas Cranmer,

the image which illustrated traselementation was that of an iron rod thrust into the fire. Just as the iron was transformed by its participation in the fire, so was the consecrated element transformed by its sacramental union with Christ's flesh. . . . Just as the iron did not cease to be iron, or the fire fire, so the bread did not cease to be bread, or Christ's flesh his flesh. In the mystery of their sacramental union they formed a unique distinction-in-unity and unity-in-distinction. (41)

Hunsinger then demonstrates that traselementation is congenial to Calvin's eucharistic thought, even though Calvin himself does not use the term. Hunsinger also shows that traselementation should be acceptable to other Christian traditions that affirm a real encounter between humans and the living, resurrected Christ in and through the meal, as made possible by God's Spirit. Through a careful rereading of Thomas Aquinas, Hunsinger even opens up new possibilities for a Reformed-Catholic convergence in eucharistic theology. Hunsinger argues that the notion of traselementation might enable the Reformed to accept a qualified understanding of transubstantiation, since Aquinas made clear that the presence of Christ in and through the elements does not violate his local presence at the right hand of God.

Having made his theological case, Hunsinger demonstrates that traselementation has practical consequences for the church's eucharistic liturgies and liturgical gestures. One of his concrete proposals is for an epiclesis in which the church prays for the Spirit to bless not only those about to communicate but also the very elements of bread and wine. In addition, he demonstrates how traselementation could support gestures of revering the elements, at least during the eucharistic celebration and perhaps even after it ends (as in reserving the elements for the sick).

I fear, however, that Hunsinger's proposals, as necessary as they are theologically and liturgically, will find limited resonance among the

Reformed, given their churches' actual eucharistic practice: infrequent Communion, abbreviated liturgies, lack of preparation for receiving the elements, and a perceived time crunch on Communion Sundays. The problem is that North American Reformed churches are largely Zwinglian in their practice, with the meal as remembrance and thanksgiving but not as means of grace whereby the Spirit lifts us up to the risen Christ. Hunsinger himself acknowledges that he may be better able to convince the high sacramental churches of his position than his own Zwinglian Reformed brothers and sisters, no matter that their churches' official teaching is often closer to Calvin (and Hunsinger).

A richer eucharistic theology and practice somehow depend on, even as they point to, a deeper experience – or what previous generations used to call a deeper *piety* – of the Lord's Supper. It is striking that Calvin sometimes steps away from theological explication of the Lord's Supper and instead offers sheer confession of the mystery that he experiences when he receives the Eucharist:

For, whenever this matter is discussed, when I have tried to say all, I feel that I have as yet said little in proportion to its worth. And although my mind can think beyond what my tongue can utter, yet even my mind is conquered and overwhelmed by the greatness of the thing. Therefore, nothing remains but to break forth in wonder at this mystery, which plainly neither the mind is able to conceive nor the tongue able to express. (*Institutes* 4.7)

I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and with Paul am not ashamed to acknowledge in wonder my ignorance. . . . Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that communion. (*Commentary on Ephesians* 5.32)

The challenge for Reformed churches is how to recapture the divine mystery of the Eucharist. Hunsinger's theological proposals make a critical contribution to a new piety of the Lord's Supper. But, paradoxically, for his proposals to make sense on the ground, Reformed churches will also have to make the actual celebration of the Eucharist more central to their life again. They must pray rich eucharistic liturgies (recent denominational

worship books provide good models) and perhaps even explore liturgical gestures that do not come naturally to them.

Here Hunsinger touches on tough questions that church leaders must think through further. How might the Reformed show respect to transelementated bread and wine in a way that resists what the Reformed have traditionally viewed as superstitious adoration and yet recognizes the elements' unique status? The eucharistic piety of high sacramental churches includes gestures of bowing, crossing, and prostration before the consecrated elements. What might the Reformed learn from this piety? Where can such practices help us acknowledge the mystery of the Eucharist, and where will we necessarily raise critical questions about them?

Similar issues arise around the question of how to dispose of eucharistic elements after Communion, or of how to respond to accidental spilling of the elements during the eucharistic service. Hunsinger argues that the notion of transelementation provides for Christian unity while allowing individual traditions appropriate latitude in these questions. But on the ground it is not always clear when divergent eucharistic practices are a matter of adiaphora and when, by contrast, they express divergent theologies that make eucharistic unity elusive. (Anyone who has seen what happens when the elements are accidentally spilled in a Russian Orthodox Church will know what I am talking about. An emergency situation ensues that is scarcely imaginable to a Calvinist, let alone a Zwinglian.) Theology shapes practice, but practice also shapes theology, and the Reformed (as well as other churches) will want further discussion of the implications of Hunsinger's proposals from both angles.

Eucharist and Church Order

A second major area for reflection relates to Hunsinger's proposal that the Reformed rethink elements of eucharistic ministry. Specifically, he says, the Reformed should require ordination in the apostolic succession that Catholics and Orthodox (and some Protestants) claim to have maintained, recognize the unique authority of the pope, and affirm three ordained offices: bishop, presbyter, and deacon. Hunsinger rightly notes

that these issues have proved even more contentious and intractable in ecumenical dialogues than questions of “real presence” or eucharistic sacrifice, and his own proposals in this area are more tentative than elsewhere.

In brief, Hunsinger argues that the cause of church unity should take priority over organizational distinctives that can be modified or abandoned without violating Nicene trinitarian theology or Chalcedonian Christology. Not only would the Reformed have to make major concessions; but also for their part, the high sacramental churches (and especially Rome) would have to agree: (1) that the need for ordination in the apostolic succession neither disqualify the ordination of those who currently serve without it, nor reduce their churches to defective ecclesial communities; (2) that the Christian churches make decisions in a conciliar manner, with the bishop of Rome leading by example of service rather than by universal jurisdiction; and (3) that each of the historic three offices be open to women as well as men, and indeed to any whom the church sets apart for these functions, for all Christians are called by virtue of their baptism to participate in Christ’s ministry.

Hunsinger’s proposals about eucharistic unity will help the Reformed take his proposals for church unity more seriously than they might otherwise. Yet, as Hunsinger himself acknowledges, obstacles remain. Reformed churches will likely want a fuller rationale than Hunsinger is able to provide here for just why the laying on of hands in a (supposedly) unbroken apostolic succession; or the unique status of the pope as the head of the church; or three ordained offices of bishop, presbyter, and deacon are more biblically warranted and theologically responsible than other historical patterns of ordination and ministry. Of particular concern to the Reformed will be the status of the ruling elder.

Eucharist and Means of Grace

The third area for reflection can be stated more briefly. In taking steps toward church unity by emphasizing the Eucharist, Hunsinger necessarily pays less attention to the role of the church’s other ministries in setting forth the living Christ (although in part 3 he does offer insightful

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reflections on how Word and sacrament complement each other). Reformed churches will likely want to know more from Hunsinger about the place of the Eucharist alongside and in the context of these other ministries. The Reformed tradition has emphasized not only Eucharist, and not only Word and sacrament, but also prayer and practices of disciplined life in community (what Bonhoeffer called “life together”). Each is an essential instrument whereby the Spirit deepens our life in Christ. Each is a form of church ministry that draws us more deeply into life in Christ, just as each calls us to witness to him as Lord and Savior.

All three of these points – eucharistic theology and practice, the Eucharist and church order, and the Eucharist and other means of grace – ultimately raise the question of what makes the church the church. Here the ecumenical challenge squarely stands before us again. Catholics and Orthodox ask Protestants to revise their understanding not only of the Eucharist and ordained office but also of the very nature of the church. Is it true, as John Henry Newman claimed, that the Catholic Church with its development of doctrine has best preserved the theological legacy of the early church? Or is it true, as Alexander Schmemmann believed, that the Orthodox churches have best preserved the gospel by means of their rich and ancient liturgies? Or did the Reformers recover essential gospel truths that Catholics and Orthodox continue to obscure? Such questions move us beyond Eucharist to discussion of Marian devotion, the cult of the saints, prayers for the dead, and doctrines of justification and sanctification, among other matters.

These areas for further discussion nevertheless confirm just how rich and provocative Hunsinger’s presentation is. Catholics, Orthodox, and Reformed alike will learn from his arguments even as they wrestle with them. And more: his irenic spirit, nuanced analyses, and commitment to a generous orthodoxy teach all of us something about the possibilities of an ecumenical theology that brings glory to God and invites different churches into deeper conversation – and even *koinonia* – with each other.