

Our Lives Are Hidden in Christ: Interviews With George Hunsinger

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Introduction

This is a transcript of interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 120 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

In ordinary conversations, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in these interviews is Dr. George Hunsinger, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. He received his PhD in 1988 from Yale University. His published works include:

The Beatitudes

Conversational Theology: Essays on Ecumenical, Postliberal and Political Themes, With Special Reference to Karl Barth

Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth

The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast

Evangelical, Catholic and Reformed: Essays on Barth and Other Themes

For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology

How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology

Karl Barth and Radical Politics

Reading Barth With Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal

Thy Word Is Truth: Barth on Scripture

Torture Is a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and People of Conscience Speak Out (editor)

Type of Christian Theology (with Hans Frei and William Placher)

The interviews were conducted by Dr. J. Michael Fezell, then vice-president of Grace Communion International.

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What Christ Did Was Effective for All

J. Michael Fezell: Our guest today is George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary's Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology. Dr. Hunsinger is an ordained Presbyterian minister and a major contributor to the new Presbyterian Catechism. He is author of several books, including *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*, and *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*.

Thanks for being with us today.

George Hunsinger: I'm very glad to be here. Thank you.

JMF: You're part of the Reformed tradition as a Presbyterian minister. Could you tell our viewers something about the Reformed tradition and the role it has played in the history of Christianity?

GH: The Reformed tradition developed in the 16th century at the same time as the Lutheran Reformation. The Reformed tradition originally was based in Switzerland and southern Germany and eventually came to be associated with the name of John Calvin, but there were many different theologians who were founders, so to speak, of the Reformed tradition, and that's why we don't usually hear about "Calvinistic" churches. You hear about Reformed churches or Presbyterian churches.

Then it spread to places like Holland and Hungary and then, in its English language versions, England and Scotland, and eventually to the United States. Our most prominent theologian historically is John Calvin. The Continental version of the Reformed tradition used the Heidelberg Catechism as its basis of instruction, whereas in the Anglo-American version and then coming into the United States, the catechisms and confessions came out of the Westminster Assembly that was held in the 17th century. The Westminster Catechisms were the English language catechisms, as opposed to the Heidelberg that was used on the Continent.

JMF: You're also president of the Karl Barth Society of North America and you're active in the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship. Can you give us some perspective on how Calvin, Barth, and Torrance fit into major theological themes today?

GH: Karl Barth has been described as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas—those were the words of Pope Pius XII. He was a larger-than-life figure who wrote a massive amount. His great work is called *Church Dogmatics*, but he wrote much more than that.

Like Luther and Calvin, he was also a person of affairs. He played a leadership role in church and society in the course of his life. He was born in 1886 and died in 1968.

Barth is often remembered for the role he played in the confessing church, which was that element of the German Protestant Church that stood up to Hitler. Barth was the principal author of the Barmen Declaration, which now has a kind of confessional status in my own church, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. We include that in our book of confessions.

Thomas Torrance was Karl Barth's most important English-speaking student. Torrance went from Scotland to Basel to study with Karl Barth, and when Barth was about to retire, he hoped that Torrance would become his successor. But Torrance wanted to stay in Edinburgh and continue there, so that didn't happen. There are at least three Thomas Torrances. There's Torrance the dogmatic or systemic theologian, there's Torrance the figure who did groundbreaking work in the dialogue of theology and science, and Torrance the historical theologian. He's the one who's least well known, but the one I profit the most from, I think.

Along with being a historical theologian (there's not a single major theologian in the history of the Christian tradition about whom he hasn't written at some length—these things are scattered in journals and anthologies and so on), Torrance was also an ecumenical scholar and devoted a great deal of his career... especially to dialogue set up between the Reformed churches and Eastern Orthodoxy. That's also a part of the Torrance legacy that I try to follow in.

JMF: One of the books that you have written is *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*. I wanted to talk about a few things in here. On page 106 you make this comment, "Two points above all seemed essential to Barth about salvation. First, what took place in Jesus Christ for our salvation avails for all. Second, no one actively participates in him, and therefore in his righteousness, apart from faith." Could you elaborate on that?

GH: That's a very deep aspect of how Karl Barth understands salvation. It's a little simple, but it makes the point... sometimes a distinction is made between the objective pole of salvation and the subjective pole. So the first part of the statement that you read has to do with the objective pole—what God has done for us in Christ apart from us before we know about it, before we receive it, before we make any response to it.

Here, Barth started with the central conviction of the Reformation based on Christ alone and the significance of Christ alone as the exclusive Savior of the human race. He started from there and tried to think it through in a way that had little precedent in the West. In some degree he

ended up thinking himself into the Eastern Orthodox and Greek wing of the church. So (and Torrance has written about this) in many ways, Barth is closer to Athanasius, a great figure in the history of the [Eastern] church, than he is to Augustine, who was formative for the Latin West.

It's not as uncommon in the Eastern Orthodox traditions to give more centrality to the idea of the universal significance of Christ's saving work—especially in its objective pole so that...when the New Testament says all, A-L-L, which it does quite a lot, that shouldn't be marginalized. That has an important place in our understanding of Christ and his saving significance.

But in the West, Augustine started from the bottom up and thought about whether we love God more than ourselves or ourselves more than God. The self-love and love for God were seen as competing with one another, and apart from conversion to Christ, self-love trumps everything and therefore you have the two loves, the two cities. The city of God is composed of people who order their loves properly by subjecting self-love to the control of love for God, if not eliminating self-love completely in its selfish forms. You have the city of God, and you have the earthly city. Augustine, in this bottom-up approach, thought it back into the reality of God. The two loves and the two cities had their eternal foundation in God's eternal predestination of the human race. So this division is thought to be ultimate—it has the last word.

It's not how Athanasius thought about these things. If you go to the great St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, it's a huge structure. They have markers showing where other cathedrals would fit in. You know, Cologne and so on would end here. It's filled with magnificent art. Way toward the front, there are huge statues of four figures of importance to the whole church, and even to the Roman Catholic Church. On the one hand it's Augustine and Ambrose. They're all bishops – Ambrose was important in bringing Augustine to the faith, and Augustine is more the theologian and Ambrose is more the administrative Bishop of Milan.

Then they have two Greek-speaking theologians. One of them is Chrysostom, which means he was a golden-tongued orator, and the fourth statue is Athanasius. If you flee from Augustine to Athanasius, it's not like fleeing from the clutches of the bear into the jaws of the lion—you're going from one great world historical theologian to another.

Athanasius, and the Greeks in general back in the 3rd, 4th, 5th centuries, thought about these matters not so much in a bottom-up way as in a top-down way. Athanasius thought about election beginning with the Trinity and the Incarnation. When you do that, you don't have to

marginalize the passages that say that Christ died for all. Second Corinthians 5:14 was a seminal verse for Athanasius, and then later for Karl Barth and Tom Torrance. It says, “One has died for all. Therefore, all have died.” It goes on that “those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”

That first part, that one has died for all, therefore all have died. That’s interesting because it doesn’t follow. It’s a non-sequitur. It’s not logically the case that just because one died for all, all died. That’s what the death of Christ means according to Paul in that important passage of 2 Corinthians 5. I’ve looked this up—it’s the same verb tense both times—died is aorist in the Greek, which means a completed event. I thought it would be in the perfect tense, which has some kind of ongoing consequences, but it’s the stronger sense. One died for all, therefore all died.

Even though it’s aorist both times, the death of all can’t be exactly the same as the death of the one. But somehow the all are included, not just potentially. This is how Barth read it, this is how Athanasius read it. It’s not *potentially* that all died, or that it’s *sufficient* for all but efficacious only for those who respond in faith. No. In some mysterious way, *all* are included in the death of Christ. That’s the objective pole of salvation.

It means that if someone comes to faith, it’s not a transition from being an outsider to being an insider. We’re all insiders, whether we know it or not. Christians are those who are brought to the point of awakening, of realizing that Christ has already accepted them, has already embraced them, that they may have been resisting their salvation. They may have been resisting their election, but their decision of coming to faith or their being awakened to faith, however that happens, doesn’t bring about the transition from being an outsider to being an insider. That has been accomplished by the grace of God apart from us.

That’s the objective pole of salvation, that has this strong universalistic element. But it’s not fulfilled. It doesn’t reach its goal until each person comes to acknowledge and recognize Jesus Christ for who he is. The way Barth thought this through...is something like that story many of us have heard about the pair of footprints on the beach: at first there are two pairs of footprints and then there was only one pair, and then there are two pair, and where there are only one pair of footprints, that was the most difficult period in my life, and where were you while I was alone? Christ was absent somehow, and the Lord says, “That’s when I was carrying you.”

The Lord is somehow, in an incognito way, carrying all of us whether we know it or not.

There comes that point at the end of all things when who Christ has been for us is disclosed to each one. No one, whether before Christ or after Christ, as Barth understood it, isn't included in the grace of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to whom Christ is not present in mysterious and imperceptible ways that will only be made fully known at the end.

But on the subjective side, it's essential that Christ be acknowledged as Lord for who he is. We have the great verse, for example, in the hymn in Philippians 2, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow. Again, it's an "all" passage—*every* knee whether in heaven or on earth or under the earth. I don't quite know what those distinctions are about, heaven or earth and under the earth. It's not crystal clear how to interpret that, but it's perhaps hopefully that even under the earth, Jesus is acknowledged for who he is.

If there's a difference between faith and sight, that final transition from faith to sight, there's also a transition from lack of faith to sight for those who don't come to know Christ and acknowledge him and love him and serve him in this life. At some point, everyone will see him and know him for who he is. His identity will no longer be hidden—he'll be revealed in glory. That's at the end. But here and now, some are called to faith and called to be Christ's witnesses, called to be Christ's servants, called to be the people who know and proclaim him through word and deed here and now. That's the subjective side, and that's what Barth is getting at in that passage.

This is not exactly what Athanasius would have said, but the longest single quotation from any theologian in the *Church Dogmatics*, which is a 10,000 page argument, is from Athanasius. Barth wrote large-print sections and then he wrote fine-print sections where he went into historical matters, like long footnotes or digressions, so they're little essays on their own. In a fine-print section, when he's talking about election and taking this Trinitarian, Christocentric, top-down approach, he goes into a long quotation from Athanasius. It's the longest quotation from any single author, another theologian, in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and it's on this point.

I think what Barth discovered there was that Athanasius anticipated what he wanted to say and Barth took himself 150 pages to do it whereas this is about 3 pages in Athanasius. Athanasius's view is Barth's view in a nutshell. But in the West we are conditioned to think that the Augustinian way of reading the New Testament on these matters is the only way.

There's a rule of biblical interpretation that says that the clear passages should interpret the obscure passages, or the less-clear passages. That's great, that's a good rule, but it presupposes

that you know what the clear passages are and what the obscure passages are. Augustine decided that Matthew 25 was the clear passage. It had the separation of the sheep and the goats. He made that the controlling idea for anything else, and that's why the "all" passages got marginalized in Western biblical interpretation.

Whereas you might think the statement "one has died for all" is clear, but in the West, and this is true of the Reformed tradition also, Calvin and Luther included, it was thought that these "all" passages always had to be read with some kind of mental reservation because the clear passages told us that "all" was not true or it might be too good to be true.

Because of the emphasis on the universal efficacy of Christ's saving death in the theology of Karl Barth, people have thought he's a universalist. He's preaching universal salvation, and if you're a universalist, what does it matter if you come to faith—as if the only reason to come to faith is to save your own skin, there's a kind of the self-serving reason... "you need to turn to Christ to escape some sort of terrible outcome," which is not the best way of preaching the gospel, but it's the Western tradition.

One of the wisest things I ever heard said about Karl Barth's theology...and he's known for representing what's called dialectical theology, which means that you create tensions and you don't resolve them. Somebody once said, "It's amazing how many wheels within wheels Barth's dialectical engine can keep spinning." So you might read him up to a certain point and then stop and say okay, he's a universalist. But no, there's a wheel within a wheel there. The dialectical engine goes on.

Almost all mistakes in interpreting Barth's theology, of which there are many, come down to not thinking dialectically enough with him and not seeing how he doesn't always stop and say, okay, there's a tension here and now I'm going to develop one side of it. No. He just develops one side of it and it might not be for several hundred pages later that you get the wheel within the wheel. It takes a long time to get the overall sweep of it.

Barth takes a position that I call reverent agnosticism. That is, he leaves the question open in hope. He doesn't give up hope for anyone. He thinks we don't have to give up hope for anyone. Think of all the anguish that devout Christians have gone through if a loved one or a parent or a child or someone close to them dies without coming to faith in Christ. It means the only alternative is that they are lost eternally. They're in eternal damnation, eternally cut off from the love and joy of God.

Barth says, “We’re human beings, we’re not God. We have to leave the outcome to God.” He leaves the question open in hope. So if the option is not all are saved (the Augustinian option), or all are saved (which goes back to the theologian Origen and some others in the East, Gregory of Nyssa and so on, although it’s not the standard Eastern view. They don’t embrace universalism outright either, but it’s more prominent in some of the historical sources in the East than in the West). Barth rejects that forced alternative. He won’t say all are saved, he won’t say not all are saved. All are saved *in some sense*, but how that will work out he leaves open.

There’s a wonderful line at one point where he’s talking about that sort of last judgment that each of us will face. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. It’s like that ultimate interview situation, where you’re confronted with Christ and you find out about the footprints in the sand and so on. Barth says, “Perhaps the Holy Spirit will have a little less trouble with the others than he had with us.”

JMF: (laughing). How does Torrance build off of those concepts of Barth?

GH: Torrance seems to position himself somewhere between Calvin and Barth. He doesn’t go as far in the direction of universal hope as Barth does, but he doesn’t retreat from it either. He feels the tug of the historic Reformed tradition a little more strongly—not a lot, but a little more than Barth did. Barth is fascinated and delighted by the passages in the New Testament which use the word “all.” Barth wants to take those passages seriously.

The biblical literalists as we know them in the U.S. and in the English-speaking world, can’t take the word “all” seriously or literally because of this Augustinian... They know that that’s not true, so wherever it says *all* it can’t quite mean *all*. It has to mean all in some qualified sense. Even Aquinas takes that view. Aquinas says that the death of Christ is sufficient for all, but efficacious only for some. It has saving power only for some. That’s the standard distinction. You find that in Calvin, too. Torrance stays a little ambiguous on this point. He doesn’t reject Barth, but he doesn’t depart as much from Calvin and the Latin West as dramatically as Barth did.

JMF: Going back to the statement that Barth made... maybe the Holy Spirit won’t have as much trouble with them... Can you elaborate on that?

GH: Barth was a Reformational theologian. He saw his task as trying to go back to the Reformation and rethink it from the ground up, because there’s a sense in which the Reformation was unfinished and didn’t fully break from, according to its deepest insights, from the penitential

way of thinking about salvation that was established in the medieval church. This medieval penitential view was one of the reasons the Roman Catholic tradition (and I don't think this is a terrible thing, but everything has its downsides) always has Christ on the cross. The Reformed traditions, the Protestant traditions, have an empty cross.

The Greek church doesn't have Christ hanging on a cross, either, but it's a church of splendor and magnificence—usually they've got a gilded cross, with jewels and so on, but not Christ hanging on the cross. That man of sorrows, that sense that Christ sacrificed himself and shed his blood for us, that focus on the moment of the cross, that negative, sorrowful moment, has its place. But it tended to eclipse other aspects of the gospel that are equally, if not more, important.

Barth felt that the East was more correct by putting the accent on joy and resurrection than on the cross, keeping them in tension. No matter how seriously you take the cross, you have to take Christ's resurrection even more seriously—something like that.

JMF: Romans 5.

GH: Exactly. Barth liked the 18th century for its optimism. Even though he thought its optimism at the surface level was off, in a hidden way, it had some insight into Christ's resurrection whether it knew it or not. By going back to the Reformation and trying to think it through again from the bottom up, to get outside this dominance of the medieval penitential tradition and introspection, and having to do penance for your sins, and worrying that your salvation is constantly at stake because if you have a terrible misstep, if you commit a mortal sin in the penitential tradition and in Roman Catholicism to this day, you lose your salvation. So you're the weak link in the chain. You can blow it all no matter what has gone before.

This is not Luther, this is not the Reformation. Part of what it meant for Barth to go back and try to rethink the Reformation on its own terms was to pick up on Luther's insight that all sin is mortal sin. That's what Christ saves us from. It doesn't mean that some sins are not worse than others. They are. But it does mean that sin is categorical first before it's a matter of degree. You can drown in a few inches of water, or you can drown at the bottom of the ocean, but if your head is not above the water line, you can't breathe. Sin is like that—it's like death. You're either dead or you're not dead. Or pregnancy—you're not a little bit pregnant, you're either pregnant or you're not pregnant. You're either a sinner or you're not a sinner.

Some people like Mother Teresa may be close to the top of the water, and others, like

theologians, are down near the bottom of the ocean, and there's a whole gradation in between. But all sin is mortal sin, and therefore when Christ saves us from our sins (Luther says this explicitly in his great commentary on Galatians), it's *all* our sins—past, present, and future.

So the idea that the Holy Spirit might have a little less trouble with *them* than he has with us, is kind of a wry way of saying we're all sinners. It's connected not only to sin being mortal sin, but being *simul justus et peccator*, Luther's great insight that to be a Christian is simultaneously to be sinful and justified, saved, at one and the same time. That's a dialectical or a paradoxical...I think it's a really liberating idea.

We see the consequences of the Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches not having fully grasped or accepted what this is about, because they have to be too holy, they can't allow criticism and divine judgment beyond a certain point. They have to make these sort of qualifications. Even for Protestants, you either have to sort of delude yourself that you're not as sinful as you are, or you fall into despair and you're so sinful that you've blown everything.

This is the great liberating aspect of putting the primary weight on the objective pole of salvation—that Christ's love for us and grace toward us comes to us as lost sinners. This is Luther. Grace always comes to lost sinners and only to lost sinners. When that is known and understood, that's the liberation of the gospel. This is true even for those who do not *yet* (that's how Barth puts it), know and acknowledge Christ for who he is.

JMF: Like the woman Jesus spoke to—who loves God more? The one who is forgiven more? She knows her sinfulness, everyone sitting around the table...

GH: And is she going to have smooth sailing from then on? No lapses? No, of course not. There's always more grace in God than there is sin in us.

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Our Lives Are Hidden in Christ

JMF: I'd like to ask you to comment on something from your book *How to Read Karl Barth*, page 124: "Salvation is not a process imminent within us in any sense that we can observe or perceive directly from our own experience," and then further down, "The truth of our being in Christ as Barth understood it is not only real and hidden, it is also yet to come."

Then you go on to discuss how we're not only included in his being, and in his humanity, in his history, in his transition from shameful death to glorious resurrection — it is transformation of the old creation into the new. "We're also confronted by his being here and now as the real but hidden future of our own being," and so on. Could you comment on that?

GH: Last time, I began with a verse from the New Testament. I find it helpful to try to peg these difficult and complicated theological ideas to certain verses from the New Testament. So I talked last time about 2 Corinthians 5:14, the first part, "One died for all, therefore all died," as a way of suggesting those parts of the New Testament would seem to lift up some sort of universal hope. Other verses that I didn't mention that we could cluster in like, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," one of the most beloved verses in the New Testament, John 3:16. It's the *world* that's the object of God's love, and it's the world in 2 Corinthians 5 that is reconciled to God in Christ. Part of the genius of Barth's theology is to make those ideas more central to theological teaching than they have been, by putting the verses that suggest some sort of ultimate division between the sheep and the goats, not excluding them, but capping them by this more inclusive hope.

For the passages you began with out of my book, the verse that I think of is Colossians 3:3. I learned to appreciate the significance of this verse from a comment that Karl Barth makes somewhere near the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics*. He says that this verse is decisive not just for Colossians but for the entire New Testament. I had never thought about it that way before, but it turns out that yes, Colossians 3:3, if you watch for it, is really important for Luther, Calvin, and the Reformation.

Colossians 3:3 says, "You have died, yet your life is hid with Christ in God." Where does that link, in a way, with 2 Corinthians 5:14? People who are alive are spoken of, and here addressed, as those who have died. There is some sense in which by the grace of God they have died, because they are already included in the death of Christ.

This is profoundly mysterious, but it is one of the ways in which throughout the New Testament that ordinary patterns of thought about time where things happen one after another in sequence — that's all presupposed, it's never denied, but it's not the whole story. There's another level, there's a higher level, there's another dimension. These sequences are real for God. But God's apprehension of time as we experience it is not limited to these sequences. There's a sense in which — and this is mysterious and there's no way to see *how* this can be the case, but *that* it is the case is affirmed — these sequences are seen by God somehow also as being simultaneous.

You get all that strange language in the New Testament about things having happened “from before the foundation of the world.” In Matthew 25 when Jesus says, “Enter the kingdom that has been prepared to you...,” he says to the sheep, “...from before the foundation of the world.” Or, in Ephesians 1, we are elected in him “from before the foundation of the world,” and then that extraordinary verse in Revelation, Revelation 13:8, “The lamb being slain from before the foundation of the world.”

What's being suggested here? What's being gestured at with this phrase? What kind of intuition? It's the intuition that time doesn't mean the same thing for God as it means for us, or more precisely, it's not perceived by God in exactly the same way as it is for us. Things that are only sequential for us are held together in a kind of simultaneity for God.

I think, and this is sort of Barthian, there's a sense in which the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election from one perspective (not every perspective) are not three different events. They're three different forms of one and the same event. So you get the lamb slain from before the foundation of the world or you get the last judgment occurring on Calvary, which is also a Johannine-type affirmation.

Colossians 3:3 fits into this general pattern of intuitions — that you have died, you're alive, but in this deeper sense, from God's standpoint, God sees you (it's actually plural here, each one individually also) — you have died, and God sees you in and with the death of Christ, as being included in it. Your life is hid with Christ in God. That hidden-ness is from our standpoint. It's not hidden to God, but we don't see ourselves as having died. We don't grasp the full sense of that already.

What has taken place objectively by grace? First, we participate in Christ and his obedience and his saving significance. We participate in him by grace whether we know it or not.

Eventually, whether by faith or by sight or eventually both, it becomes subjective. It becomes a matter of our direct apprehension. But for the time being — the time between the times, as it's sometimes talked about in theology, between the already and the not yet, between what has already taken place in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for the sake of the world (that's the already) and the not yet (when it is fully revealed and actualized and fulfilled) — we live in the time between the times. There's a lot that's hidden to us here and now. But our true selves, our reality, is not what we see and apprehend even by faith directly; it's who we are in Christ in God's sight. God does not look on us except as we are in him because he has embraced us by his grace in Christ already.

So Colossians 3:3 has three aspects. Our life is real (that means eternal life), it's hidden — we don't see it directly, we might get glimpses of it, but the point about not having any direct apprehension of it which you quoted from what I wrote, we don't know about that life — and about our inclusion in it, and about its really belonging to us on the basis of inferences that we can make about what we see in our own lives or on the basis of judgments that we can make in our own case or anyone else's case.

We know about it from the gospel. Where else would you learn Colossians 3:3 except you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in death? This is proclaimed to us, and it's proclaimed to us not necessarily because of the spiritual progress we might think we're making, but very often in *spite* of the progress that we're not making or in spite of the setbacks and falls and the disasters that we're making out of lives. It's real, it's hidden, and it's yet to come. It's a matter of hope.

In order to make this more intelligible, people will sometimes say, "It's just a matter of hope. It's not yet real." But the way Barth reads that verse, and I think this is correct, it's already true in one sense, and it's yet to come as a matter of promise and fulfillment in another sense. Just because it's yet to come doesn't mean it's not already real. Just because it's hidden doesn't mean that it's not already real. We need those three aspects together — real, hidden, and yet to come. You died and your life is hid with Christ in God.

The same thing is true for Luther and Calvin when they're talking about our righteousness. Your righteousness is hid with Christ in God. For Luther, the great summary of the gospel was Christ is our righteousness and our life. Both of those are hid with Christ in God. They're real, they're hidden... We have to take it by faith and not expect to see too much or at least not base

our understanding of ourselves on what we can observe or judge about ourselves. That's the main thing.

There's that hidden element, but it's still a promise that will be brought to its fulfillment either with us or against us or both. Grace works against us as much as it works for us and with us. It has to work against us insofar as we still remain fallen and still remain hostile to the grace of God.

JMF: Which is exactly why we need grace.

GH: Yes. Exactly how grace works is a...there's a great German word, *trotzdem*, in spite of everything. That's the Protestant word "nevertheless." "Nevertheless I am with you always, until the end of the age." I may have fallen into sin — "depart from me Lord, for I am a sinful human being." In and of myself I still remain a sinner. Baptism is supposed to have drowned the old Adam, and a joke that Barth liked to make is, "It turns out the rascal can swim." There's a certain sense in which Adam is drowned in baptism, but in the time between the times, Adam is trying to pull us back under, and it's a matter of hiddenness and tension that sin and grace exist in us in an ambiguous and complicated way until that final resolution.

JMF: Doesn't that give us a sense of rest and peace with our brokenness and our struggle with sin, to know that we have been made new in Christ already and that that is real even though we don't see it?

GH: That's right. The objection coming out of the old Latin theology is "Then it doesn't matter what you do with your life, or there is no necessity for good works." It's taking everything out of the realm of necessity and translating it into the realm of freedom. I like to think of that great hymn by Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." (I think Charles Wesley was the greatest hymn writer in the English language, but Wesley said...this was very moving to me...he would have given every hymn he had ever written if he could have written "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.")

It says in there, and this is exactly right, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." That's the transition from freedom to freedom. The free grace of God, love so amazing, so divine, eliciting the free response of total self giving back to God. This is how much God has loved you. This is what God has done on your behalf. Look to Christ on the cross to see the depth of the love and grace and mercy of God.

It's not what you have to do, what do I have to do... What do you *want* to do? It goes from

the indicative to the imperative [from a statement to a command], whereas the other way is, “*If you do the right thing, you’ll have a good outcome.*” That’s conditional. The hymn is not putting the indicative in the conclusion – it’s in the premise. This is what God has done for you, therefore act accordingly. Therefore, make the proper response – and what response could there be, but a life of total love and self-giving to God in return for so great a love that God has bestowed on us?

JMF: Going back to the earlier comment about the universality of inclusion of humanity in Christ and the idea of everyone participating in Christ because that’s the nature of human existence, to be in Christ, how does that work? What does that look like for someone who is not yet a believer? In other words, how does a non-believer participate in Christ?

GH: There are no formulas. There’s just no one way. That’s hidden with Christ in God, I think. But Nietzsche for example said, “Why don’t the redeemed look more redeemed?” That’s a good question. Sometimes people who are not redeemed look more redeemed than the redeemed do, and they set a standard that the redeemed would do well to live up to.

Sometimes there are incognito ways in which the grace of God seems to be at work, and if we have this concept of the church militant... sometimes the Holy Spirit is more militant than the church, and if the church is not ready to move, the Holy Spirit will move somewhere else... I think in general this is true of the Enlightenment. There are ways in which the Enlightenment has taught the church to be more truly the church than was happening out of the church’s own traditions. Many of the things that the Enlightenment stood for have their proper grounding in the gospel.

The Enlightenment sometimes had trouble hanging onto them indefinitely. But there are ways in which grace is operative outside the church. How do we know that? We know it when it seems to be at least compatible with the gospel — an expression of things we wish the church were doing, if the church isn’t doing it.

Bonhoeffer once went to a student evening... Karl Barth used to have gatherings of students in his home from time to time, and they would talk about some theological text or events of the day. It was called an open evening. Dietrich Bonhoeffer never had Barth formally as a teacher, but he was visiting, and went there. He caught Barth’s attention by quoting from Luther when Luther said, “There are times when the curse of the godless is more pleasing to the ears of God than the hallelujahs of the pious.” The grace of God will work outside the walls of the church in

ways where people who are not yet Christians will recognize injustices and try to do something about it, or will raise a cry of protest that also needs to be incorporated by the people of God. Sometimes their piety is really a form of unbelief, a form of evading the grace of God.

Barth liked to say that Christians go to church to make their last stand against God. This is what was at stake in the idea of “the religion” as sin. The religion becomes a form of self-justification. It becomes a way of defending ourselves against the threatening apprehension that we are sinners deserving to be rejected by God — that God’s love takes the form of wrath whenever it’s resisted, whether in subtle ways or blatant ways, and certainly including religious ways. God doesn’t compromise with sin. God doesn’t call sin good. God does not turn a blind eye toward it. The wrath of God is a very important part of the gospel, but it’s not split off from his love. It’s the form that God’s love takes. It’s the wrath of God’s love when God’s love is resisted, and God’s wrath overcomes all forms of resistance, but finally in such a way that the sin is removed and God’s purposes are fulfilled even for the sinner in spite of the sin.

JMF: The only source of anything good is God. So anytime we see good things in anybody, whether it’s any form of love, any form of courage or sacrifice, or self-sacrifice, every good virtue and every good thing can only have one source, which is God, and it seems that they would be God’s love and grace working itself out in humanity even though a person may be an unbeliever and may not know the source of every good thing. But every good thing does come from God.

GH: How could it be otherwise? Yeah. Hegel has this wonderful phrase about the divine cunning that is at work in history. These unexpected moments of goodness or grace in unexpected places, this is the divine cunning in history. The difference between believers and unbelievers at this point might be that believers are equipped to see it for what it is.

JMF: At least a little better.

GH: A little better sometimes than the others. They have the key because they have Christ. Whenever it’s Christ-like, we know that somehow this... You wouldn’t preach it, but you could perceive it and hope and pray that this seems to be some sort of work of God. It could be in ways that don’t make sense from more worldly ways of thinking. Somebody who thinks that mercy toward a wrongdoer is preferable and more God-like than vengeance and exacting retribution. I would see that, and it happens sometimes, as a Christ-like occurrence, whereas other people might feel that no, that’s not what justice requires, no, that will jeopardize our security somehow

and we can't take those kinds of risks, it's naive to try to implement the concerns and values of the gospel in a hostile world. God and God's grace have a way of prevailing even when it doesn't always seem immediately to make rational sense.

JMF: On page 154 in *How to Read Karl Barth* you write, "In Jesus Christ we see that God does not exist without humanity and that humanity does not exist without God." It's a great quote, and I'd like you to expand on it.

GH: There is such a thing as a godless human being — that is, a human being who tries to live as if God does not exist, and in that sense God is not real for them or acknowledged by them. It's one of the great quotations from Barth, and it's difficult to put into English. But if you're a godless human being it would be *Gottlosigkeit*, godlessness of the human being.

Barth says there's no humanity-less-ness of God, no *menschenlosigkeit*. English would require us to say something...there's no such a thing as a God without humanity. Even though there are human beings who are godless, there's no human-less God, because God has made the world, and God has made humanity his own in the Incarnation. God has made the sufferings of the world and the sin of the world his own, irrevocably, in and with the Incarnation as it reaches its fulfillment in the cross and the resurrection. God has committed himself to being God with us, and therefore there's no such thing as a God who does not have humanity by the grace of God. This is God's free decision; there's no human-less-ness of God.

JMF: Just as there's no Father without the Son and the Holy Spirit, and no Holy Spirit without the Father and the Son.

GH: But that's true by nature, but this is true by grace.

JMF: Yes. So we can't think of God in any other way except as the God who has included humanity in himself.

GH: Right, and that means we can't think about God except in terms of the covenant as it reaches its fulfillment in the Incarnation and death and resurrection of Christ.

JMF: I think Tom Torrance said something similar to that when he said in *The Mediation of Christ*, "God has bound himself to us in such a way he will never let us go."

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Focus on Christ

JMF: I'd like to talk about one of the subjects you brought up in your book, *How to Read Karl Barth*, and that is *ordo salutis*, and how that plays out. Could you begin by talking about or by telling us what it means in English, and then about the history and...

GH: *Ordo salutis* means order of salvation. This term comes from the 17th century. I tend to think about these things more from the standpoint of Calvin and Luther and the original Reformers, and not what the later more scholastic theologians did 75 to 100 years later. Is there a temporal sequence in which things have to fall, or, if not, are there ways in which one thing necessarily presupposes something else first? Like, can I have faith without having first repented? That might be temporal, but it might also be logical. The very idea of faith presupposes that I have repented. Calvin thought repentance, for example, was a lifelong process.

Sometimes it's related to how justification and sanctification are related. First you would be justified in point of time and then that would kick off a process of sanctification. But it might be not temporal, but logical. You couldn't be in the process of sanctification if you had not logically already been justified. And where does adoption fit in? Do you have to be adopted first in order to be justified and then sanctified?

One that is pretty important and is (not always but sometimes) brought out in this idea of ordering is: when do you enter into union with Christ? Calvin's idea was that the person is brought into union with Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit who creates faith. So Calvin taught that faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit and faith joins us to Christ. Then Calvin would use the word *simul*, and then simultaneously out of union with Christ, there's a "double grace" he put it, *duplex gratia dea*, a two-fold grace of God, justification and sanctification. Calvin did not make sanctification dependent upon justification. He made justification and sanctification dependent upon union with Christ. That's the order that I would hold to.

There's another order in some later Lutheran theologians, that you have to be justified first in order to enter into union with Christ and to participate in Christ. That almost seems contrary to Luther to me, insofar as I understand it, because of Luther's emphasis that grace comes to lost sinners. Grace brings us into union with Christ, Christ enters into us, we enter into Christ, there's a kind of mutual indwelling. You don't have to be made holy or righteous in order to have union

with Christ. Union with Christ brings about justification and sanctification, righteousness and life. That is one way the question of the order of salvation is still important.

Does union with Christ depend upon repentance or justification or some other thing, or is it the foundation of everything else? Calvin and Barth, and also Luther, all believed that union with Christ was bedrock and was given by grace through faith. Every other aspect of salvation, whatever it might be, comes out of that. But from that point, on it's a kind of a hodgepodge. There's no clear order. There's no logical set of ordering principles, no temporal order.

The important thing is union and communion with Christ by grace through faith. After that, the idea of *ordo salutis* becomes a kind of a distraction. It directs your attention to how you're doing when living out the Christian life, as opposed to keeping your focus on Christ alone. It's almost like Peter being out there on the water, and he's looking at Christ, but all of a sudden the question of *ordo salutis* arises and he looks to himself and starts sinking. There's a way in which Christian piety can become too preoccupied with itself, and the *ordo salutis* concept is perhaps one way in which that is fostered. The important thing is to keep our focus on Christ.

JMF: In your recent book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you have a passion for unity in Christ between churches and the ability to take communion together. What triggered that? What lays behind your interest in the topic and the development of it?

GH: It's profoundly disordered that we should have so many separate churches and denominations. Jesus came that we might all be one. If we have reached the point where some Christians are excluded from the Lord's Supper or the Eucharistic celebrations of other Christians, this is not only wrong in itself, but it's a terrible testimony to the world. I read a story recently about a man in India who was a Dalit, a member of the untouchables, and he became a Christian. He had been a leader among the Dalits, and he said, "Christianity recognizes the dignity and the full humanity of all human beings and therefore of the untouchables. We should all become Christians."

The response he got was, "We can't become Christians because if we did we would lose our unity as Dalits." A lot of them have become Christians anyway, but it's a sign of how the missionary movement imported the divisions that had grown up in Europe to the rest of the world by reproducing those divisions in the mission field. The ecumenical movement in recent times has come out of the missionary movement in the great conference that took place in Edinburgh in 1910. It was missionaries gathering together to see what could be done to try to

recover some more robust expression of Christianity so that it wouldn't be undermining the efforts that they were engaged in around the world.

It seems profoundly wrong to me that Christians have allowed things to get to the point that there's not Eucharistic sharing. This is something that is perceived in some sectors of all Christian traditions and communions. Vatican II has a very strong decree on ecumenism, the Vatican has been very dedicated in doing what it can, within limits, to overcome the divisions, especially in the outreach to Eastern Orthodox Christians. There's a new openness on their part to trying to work together to see if we can't live more faithfully in accord with Christ and the gospel, because there's this perception that there are true Christians in all the different denominations and traditions, and yet we're divided at the point where we ought to be the most united. So it's a matter of faithfulness to Christ and obedience to the gospel that we should all strive to do what we can from our side to make sure that we are all one. There's a scandal to this wound, around the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

JMF: In the book *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, you say this, "The Christian community is called to attest, mediate, and anticipate the unity of Christ in the Eucharistic assembly." Can you expand on that?

GH: We talked once before about Colossians 3:3, "You have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." There's a sense in which that's true of our unity in Christ. It's hid with Christ in God. We are one, and we need to become one — we need to become what we are. Attesting that unity means attesting it in its reality as it exists in Christ with God. That can't be undone, even by our divisions. But it also needs to be anticipated. There will be a day when these divisions will be made to seem ridiculous and indefensible, but they won't be in force anymore.

I like to think of the promised future in terms of a meal, in terms of the Messianic Banquet or the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. I think the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist is the present tense form of that final meal. It's the presence of that future here and now. I've talked before about the last judgment, the cross of Christ, and pretemporal election as being three forms of one and the same event, the Messianic Banquet, the Last Supper, and Calvary together in a complex unity — these are three forms of one and the same event. So the Lord's Supper also mediates that unity.

The present tense form of that unity is most significantly and intensively expressed when the church gathers together around the table in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. That's bringing you Christ in his saving significance into the present from the past where his once-for-

all sacrifice was accomplished, and it's also anticipating that which is yet to come. We are attesting something, something that has taken place in its perfect and definitive sense, the finished saving work of Christ, that once-for-all aspect of it. The only thing we can do in that respect is to attest it.

We can't add to it, it doesn't need to be added to. We can't possibly add to it, it's a finished and perfect work, but we're called to be witnesses to Christ and his once-for-all obedience and saving sacrifice. We attest it, we anticipate that future form that it will take in the kingdom of God, and it should be mediated here and now, which means that we shouldn't be excluding one another from our individual denominational celebrations of the Lord's Supper. If we're doing that, we need to dig into the roots of what's behind these divisions and ask what can be reasonably and faithfully done to overcome them, so that that invisible unity which already exists can be made more fully visible for what it is here and now.

JMF: So, ironically, for a church that doesn't have communion with other churches or share communion with other churches, when they partake of communion, they're actually attesting and anticipating the day when that very attitude and exclusion will not exist anymore.

GH: I think so. But the people who have these exclusions think that they're the only true church and that the ecumenical solution is that we should all join *their* church. Every denomination has people like this. It just can't be true. There are real Christians spread throughout the churches, and it needs to be worked out that these sinful divisions are suffered and overcome and not just tolerated and written off as if they're insignificant.

Another thing to keep in mind is the shape of world Christianity. There are about 6 billion people in the world, roughly. How many of them are Christians? A third of them are Christians. So there are about 2 billion Christians in the world. Let's just stick with that, and that's a pie-shaped graph. How many of those 2 billion are Roman Catholic? About half of them. Half of the pie-shaped graph are Roman Catholic.

What about Eastern Orthodox churches? It's hard to find out. I wrote to some Eastern Orthodox scholars, and it depends on how you define Eastern Orthodox churches and are you talking about active members or people just on the rolls, and you get these kind of problems with statistics, but as a ballpark figure, 15 to 17 percent more. So we're looking at almost 70 percent of the world's Christians that have this high sacramental understanding of the church and the Christian life.

What about Protestants? Protestants as a whole, including Anglicans and Episcopalians, they might be another 20 percent. But they're fragmented among themselves. There are more Anglicans than there are Lutherans, they're within this little piece of the pie, and there are more Lutherans than there are Reform. I'm a Reformed theologian, I'm a Presbyterian minister, but I represent one sliver of world Christianity, maybe leaving one or two percent in there, and then, where things are burgeoning is with the Pentecostal and the charismatic churches.

But the Roman Catholic Church also is growing rapidly in the global south. My little sliver there is (where I have my home, so I think about that), you know how many different Reform denominations there are? The World Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches did a study. They were shocked. There are 750 Reformed denominations. So it's like we've got this little sliver of pie...you have to be like a Japanese chef, you've got to divide that little sliver up into 750 pieces.

From a Catholic standpoint and an Orthodox standpoint, that's what they would expect. They thought, "you get rid of bishops, you get rid of any institutionalized form of authority, you're going to fragment, you're going to disintegrate." We're not in the 16th century anymore. The evidence is in. Protestantism is fissiparous, as they say. It breaks up into parts.

You may know the little book by C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. Lewis's idea of hell is that nobody can get along with anybody else, so they're constantly moving away from one another. This is almost an image for Protestantism. Every time somebody does something that you think is wrong, you do what's right in your own eyes, and you form your own little new denomination. There's something wrong with this picture. We need to give serious thought to what it would take to bring the church into some sort of tolerable unity. To me, that means Eucharistic sharing. It doesn't mean one monolithic church structure, but the Catholics and the Orthodox, they have their own set of criteria about what would be necessary if the divisions in the church were to be healed and overcome.

Here I have to be pragmatic as well as principled, because I'm thinking we've got 70 percent of the world's Christians that we need to bring into some sort of reconciliation along with all these Protestants. I don't know what to do in my book about Pentecostals and Anabaptists traditions, so I just sort of factor them out for the time being (and finally that will be a work of the Spirit and not the work of the theologians, so I figure I'll just leave that to one side). We're not going to achieve consensus.

In the ecumenical movement, it's understood that visible unity in the form of a single church structure is not only not going to be achieved, it's not necessary. One of the terms that is used is "reconciled diversity." The project in my book, in part, is how can we widen the circle of acceptable diversity? I've tried to go back to some little-known developments from the time of the Reformation that I think would be fruitful for the Reformed tradition to adopt, and that might have some appeal across the board.

I've gotten favorable reviews so far from Roman Catholic writers. The Orthodox are a question unto themselves. They think they have the true church and they won't... When I would talk to people about my book and I'd say, "I think the divisions about the Lord's Supper as they developed in the West have a lot to do with the absence of an Eastern Orthodox voice. At the time of the Reformation things split apart and polarized in the history of the Western churches that the Orthodox have had together."

I thought they would say, "This is great, you want to make ecumenical progress and you want to draw upon the Orthodox traditions." No, it's like, "So what?" My words fall to the ground. The average view is they don't need us, we're very problematic, and the solution is that we should all become Orthodox. Even when the Orthodox participate in the World Council of Churches events, that's kind of the underlying attitude. They're waiting for the rest of us to find our way back to Eastern Orthodox. I don't think that that's the solution. I think the Catholics will actually bear the burden of achieving that reconciliation with the Orthodox.

But meanwhile, in my hope of expanding the circle of acceptable diversity, I had to figure out some way of determining what views are church-dividing, that's the way they talk ecumenically. What views are church-dividing, and what views aren't? How do you know what views are church-dividing and what aren't? Vatican II decided, so this is an official Roman Catholic position. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles...

JMF: Vatican II being the church council.

GH: Of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1960s. Vatican II decided that there are no obstacles in principle (you have to state this carefully) from the Roman Catholic side to Eucharistic sharing with the Orthodox, but the Orthodox hold views that are different from Roman Catholic teaching. If there are places, as there are, where Eastern Orthodox views are more possible for Protestants than Roman Catholic views as we're familiar with them, then if we can adopt those views without compromise, as I think we often can, there's an ecumenical

imperative that we ought to move in that direction for the sake of achieving unity and Eucharistic sharing.

So I argue that nobody has to give up anything that is essential to them, but everybody has to stretch to accept some things that they thought they had to reject. The history of the Eucharistic controversies has largely been the history of false contrasts, and an important part of the argument in my book is trying to show that things can be held together that were split apart.

I'll give you a simple example, not a terribly complicated one. In my tradition we talk about the Lord's Table. There was a professor in a previous generation at Princeton Seminary who used to tell his students it's a table and not an altar, and it's not a table unless you can put your feet under it. So "table" is good and "altar" is bad, and if you read Luther's catechisms and so on, he's constantly using the phrase "the sacrament of the altar." He gets this phrase from Augustine; to me there's nothing wrong with it. But when Luther starts using it and then as the Lutheran tradition developed, there's a kind of hardening. It's not just a rhetorical term anymore, it becomes more of a semi-technical term. It's an altar.

Altar has its metaphorical home in priestly and cultic activities. *Table* has its home in thinking about the royal office of Christ — Christ as the Messiah, the Messianic Banquet. The priestly office of Christ and the royal office of Christ can't exclude one another. These are two different ways of talking about one and the same Jesus Christ and his work of salvation. It's not like a pie where you divide them up into parts — these are two ways of looking at Christ as a whole.

There is a term in the tradition, and I learned about it from reading an Eastern Orthodox writer, Alexander Schmemmann, who has this wonderful book called *The Eucharist*. In that book, even though he primarily talks about the sacrament of the kingdom, and he uses table imagery and so on, so royal. In a way, the Eastern Orthodox ethos (even though it doesn't exclude the priestly), is oriented toward the splendor of the kingdom of God. The goal, the icons and the precious gems and so on...there's something royal about this. Schmemmann uses the term "altar table."

I was at a conference, I was asked to speak in Strasbourg...all these ecumenical figures from across Europe were there. I said Schmemmann has this great phrase that he uses that shows how we bring things together that in other places have been split apart. So my tradition will say table, but it won't say altar, Lutherans tend to say altar but maybe not so much table. It's a false

contrast. You don't have to polarize around this. So Schmemann has this great term.

The next day the Eastern Orthodox speaker from Romania got up and said, "I have to correct one thing that Professor Hunsinger said the other day. It's not just Schmemann who talks about altar table. We all talk this way." This was simultaneous translation; he was speaking in German and he had a German text and photographs of Eastern Orthodox liturgies and so on. Right there in the German text was "*altar tisch*," there it was.

So I started watching for it. This term has deep historic roots. I've seen it in some Roman Catholic writings, and in the Reformation there was a figure named Martin Bucer who was the reformer of Strasbourg. There was a period when Calvin had been called to Geneva and then he ran into conflict with the city fathers and he had to leave Geneva. He went to Strasbourg. Martin Bucer became Calvin's mentor, and later Calvin went back to Geneva. Bucer is an important figure, that's what I'm getting at. He was also very ecumenically-minded and even in that period was striving to do what he could to hold the Reformation together and to make sure that there weren't these divisions about the Lord's Table. Bucer also knew the term "altar table."

So there's no good reason, it seems to me, why Reformed Christianity or Protestants in general can't develop this vision that we need both the priestly and the royal aspects. This perception has a lot of implications that we might want to talk about, but the priestly side has been lost by much of Protestantism. We have an atrophied understanding of the priestly elements of worship and of the Eucharistic liturgy.

The Catholics have priests, the Orthodox have priests, the Episcopalians have priests, but we don't have priests anymore. We have ministers and the priesthood of all believers, which is great, I think that's important, but what does that mean? It's almost a priest without a portfolio. It doesn't have a great deal of meaning, and while each person is a priest to every other person, fine, we intercede for one another, fine. But it doesn't have a lot of development and currency. Recovering that priestly side of things... it's not just the Messianic Banquet, which would be royal, it's the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which is priestly and cultic. These are two different...

In the book of Revelation, what's happening? It's the lamb who is sitting on the throne...well, who is beside... The royal aspects, the royal activities and offices are somehow assimilated to the lamb. To me this suggests that there's something central to this priestly complex of images that we need to recover. Liberal Protestantism had an aversion to all things priestly. I read something recently by H. Richard Niebuhr (who I have a lot of respect for); he

talked about sacrifice and love, and these “primitive” ideas. They thought they could move beyond all that... Expiation and propitiation, and who needs that?

We need to find a responsible way of recovering these ideas without theological compromise, because they’re essential to reestablishing the Eucharistic unity of the church. So I’m looking for ways in which we can stretch to accept things we thought we had to reject without theological compromise. We’re going to have to tolerate a fair amount in other traditions and communions that we’re not entirely comfortable with. But if we can just reach the point where we’re not excluding one another from our celebrations of the Eucharist, that would be huge. That would be the correct thing to do in its own right, but it would also have great implications for the church’s witness to Christ in the world.

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The Eucharist and Ecumenism

JMF: I'd like to talk about a couple of terms that our viewers might be familiar with, but maybe you could define them and then move on to a third term that you put forward in your book, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*. Many of our viewers are familiar with "transubstantiation" and "consubstantiation" and that there has been controversy, but they may not remember what the controversy was, and what the definitions are. You introduced the concept of "traselementation," so could you describe those and move on to transelementation and the potential you see for that term?

GH: Thank you. There are three main issues that need to be addressed if we are to get beyond the impasse in ecumenical discussion about the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist. One has to do with the real presence of Christ. That's where your question about those terms comes in. Then there's the question of the Eucharistic sacrifice, and finally there's the question of the ordained ministry. I address all three of those areas in my book.

The churches have divided historically over the question about how are we to understand the idea of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. It has to be given a special formulation. It can't just be that Christ is somehow really present with the Lord's Supper. It has to do with the bread and the wine as consecrated elements, and in what sense are the body and blood of Christ present *in* and *through* and *with* the elements of bread and wine.

The historic Roman Catholic answer to that is *transubstantiation*. This term has been defined by a church council for them. The Council of Trent gave a technical definition to transubstantiation, so that's the one we have to look at. The word was around much longer than that, but it didn't have a technical definition prior to the 16th century. The Reformation forced the Catholic Church to come up with a more careful definition of what they meant. That then divided the Protestant churches from the Roman Catholic Church. The Council of Trent drew largely upon the definition that Thomas Aquinas had developed in the 13th century.

Transubstantiation involves conversion and containment. The bread and the wine are somehow converted so that they become the body and blood of Christ in a particular form, and the body and blood are then contained in the bread and the wine, respectively. So transubstantiation is, in a sense, a theory of descent and containment. The grace of God descends from heaven, and when the priest or the bishop presiding at the Eucharist says the words of

consecration, the words that Jesus is recorded as having said at the last supper, “This is my body, given for you, this cup (in the New Testament) is my blood, shed for you.”

When the priest says that in the Catholic liturgy, a bell is rung, because that’s where you’re supposed to pay attention — that’s where the miracle and the wonder takes place that the bread is no longer merely bread, the wine is no longer merely wine, but is the body and blood of Christ. But the outward form, called the *accidents*, remains. This distinction about substance and accidents comes from Aristotle, was used by Aquinas, and the Council of Trent changed it just slightly and instead of talking about accidents, they used the word *species*, but it was the same thing. It’s form and content.

The outward form remains the form of bread, and the outward form remains the form of wine. But the inner content, the inner substance, has been converted and transformed into the body and blood of Christ, which are then contained by the elements. The Reformation felt that this was a terrible idea, and it made no sense, so they didn’t want to have anything to do with it. Whether they had a suitable alternative or not is another matter. The Lutherans and the Reformed within the Reformation split apart over this question. In the first generation of Reformers, the Reformed were from Switzerland and southern Germany, but especially Switzerland, led by the Zürich Reformer Ulrich Zwingli. The Lutherans were led by Martin Luther from Wittenberg.

Zwingli had what is thought of as a very low understanding of how the bread and the wine function in the Lord’s Supper. They are merely symbols of something that is not necessarily present. There’s more than one way to work this out. What happened in the past, in Christ’s once-for-all saving work, that is symbolized and remembered in the Lord’s Supper — that was Zwingli’s basic view. What the Reformed tradition was especially concerned to protect was the integrity of Christ’s human body after his resurrection and ascension. They thought if Christ was somehow substantially present in the Lord’s Supper, it was impossible to maintain the full integrity of his human body in heaven.

Calvin, who modified Zwingli’s views considerably, still had that as a primary concern. One reason they had that conviction was that they believed salvation was at stake. If Jesus’ humanity ceased to be real humanity in its full integrity as a human body, as a part of his humanity, then the ideal of our salvation was destroyed. He had to remain a real human being, even after the ascension.

The Lutheran view is sometimes called the *consubstantiation*, the term you mentioned, and

some Lutherans are okay with that term, but some aren't. Some Lutheran documents from the 16th and 17th century deny that this describes the Lutheran position. Some still use the term. Partly it's a matter of definitions. Consubstantiation can mean more than one thing. If it means that you just have two substances together — the substance of the bread and the substance of the body of Christ (whatever "substance" means... even for Catholics this substance/ accidents scheme is perplexing today; nobody quite knows what to make of these Aristotelian terms).

A dictionary definition view of consubstantiation has the two substances coexisting together. The bread remains bread, but the body of Christ is joined to it mysteriously. Maybe it's not taken any further, but you get the impression sometimes that they're externally related — they're coexisting side by side. I don't think that was Luther's view, but it is a view that is ascribed to Luther and accepted by some Lutherans.

Luther said different things in different writings. He's not an easy theologian to pin down, because he's so situational and he'll say one thing here and another thing there — it's like a bell-shaped curve, one or two standard deviations... In his treatise of 1520 called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, one of his most widely read treatises, he takes a position that was somewhat neglected, or put to one side, in the heat of Reformational controversies between Luther and Zwingli and their colleagues. In *Babylonian Captivity*, Luther focuses on the verse 1 Corinthians 10:16. That verse says "the bread that we break, is it not a (blank) in the body of Christ." In English the word that I left blank is often translated as "participation." Luther knew it in the Greek — *koinonia*. One way of interpreting the verse (there's more than one way) is to say that the relationship between the bread that we break and the body of Christ is a *koinonia* relation. It's some kind of participation of the one in the other. The idea of participation is not always kept in mind when the term consubstantiation is used. But consubstantiation can be used to cover this other case where there's a more intimate kind of indwelling, at least of the body in the bread.

The Eastern Orthodox view that I have found to be helpful as a way of moving beyond the impasse ecumenically...it's not called consubstantiation by them, but Luther's view in the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, based on 1 Corinthians 10:16 and other verses, is not far from that ancient Orthodox view. The Orthodox have several terms that they will use, and it makes it hard to find out what they actually think, but if you read long enough, you can see that there's one term that stands out among the rest. That is what I put forth in my book as

transelementation, *metastoicheisis*. It's a deep interpretation of 1 Corinthians 10:16.

What is a *koinonia* relation? There's more than one way to work that out, but it can be a relationship of mutual indwelling. If you take that view, then the bread can remain bread (without any loss of its definition as bread — it's not substance and accidents), and it somehow participates in the body of Christ. It's not just that the body of Christ participates in the bread, but there's a relationship of each being in the other.

For the Catholics and for the Orthodox, and for this view that Luther espoused, it's not just the body and blood of Christ that are thought of in detachment from the rest of his person, this is the form in which he's present to us — this sacrificial form...in and with the sacramental form of his body and blood, the whole person of Christ is present. He offers himself to us under the sacramental form of his body and blood. He gives himself to the church in that form, and in the same way he unites the church to himself.

As in the incarnation, he assumed human flesh, he made himself one with us...even though he was God, he emptied himself and took the form of a servant even to death on a cross, as we read in Philippians 2. He took that flesh, he made himself one with us in order to bear our sins and bear them away — the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He makes us one with himself through that same body and blood, that same sacrificial death. There's only one body of Christ, it is definitively present in Christ's life and death there and then, but then it becomes sacramentally present. It's here and now under the forms of bread and wine.

The image that was used in the ancient church to bring out this idea of transelementation was the image of the iron in the fire. They used that image both for the incarnation and for the relationship between the bread and the wine and Christ's life-giving flesh. There's an important incarnational analogy here. In the council decision at Chalcedon in 451, the fifth-century decision defining the person of Christ (this is a decision that's definitive for Catholics, for Orthodox, and for Reformation Protestants), they had to give some account of how Christ's deity and humanity were related. They said that they were related "without separation or division."

That meant there was, to put it more positively, an inseparable unity between them... "without confusion or change." The deity of Christ in the union remains deity, the humanity of Christ in the union remains humanity. How can they be together in one person? That's the mystery of the incarnation. If God by nature is immortal, how can the immortal God assume mortal flesh? Questions like that. That's the mystery of the incarnation.

There's a third element here that's implied, a kind of a symmetry... Deity and humanity are not on a par with one another. They wouldn't balance the scales if you could put them on some kind of scales. None of these images would be perfect then. Let me use another one that has real limitations: Gregory of Nyssa, the great Cappadocian theologian from the fourth century, said that deity and humanity in Christ were something like a drop of water in the ocean. The deity of Christ has this immensity to it and the humanity has a kind of smallness, and, relative to his deity, a kind of insignificance. The problem with that image is that it loses the idea of "without confusion or change." If you put a drop of blood into the ocean, it disappears. But in the scale that we're talking, or the *incommensurability*, the absolute difference between deity and humanity — it helps us imagine that.

We need three things to think about the person of Christ, and this carries over by analogy to thinking about the bread and the wine. You need asymmetry. You need the priority of one over the other. You need unity, you need an inseparable unity of these two that would not otherwise come together except for the miracle of grace, and in that unity, you need an abiding distinction. This is the model that the Orthodox have used for thinking not only about the incarnation, which is true of all Nicene Christians and Chalcedonian Christians, but they use this incarnational analogy to think about how Christ's life-giving flesh is related to the Eucharistic gift of bread and wine without separation or division, without confusion or change.

This is what's missing from transubstantiation, this element of asymmetry which gives the precedence to Christ and his body. It's not just that the body is contained in the bread, it's that Christ in the power of the Spirit takes these Eucharistic gifts and joins himself to them in a certain respect so that he, not the priest, is the acting subject in the working of this sacramental miracle in order to offer himself through the priest to the people in these sacramental forms.

Transelementation involves an explicit place also for the work of the Holy Spirit. The Orthodox have this wonderful idea, in the Greek it's called *epiklesis*, invocation, the Spirit is invoked while celebrating the Eucharistic liturgy. But the Orthodox don't pin it down to a particular moment in the liturgy. There's no bell that is rung when the transformation takes place. In a sense, the whole liturgy is one long *epiklesis*, one long invocation of the Spirit. The Spirit is thought to take the bread and the wine into the presence of Christ, who then joins himself to the elements and offers himself in a sacramental form through the bread and the wine to the faithful.

So the bread remains bread, and the body of Christ remains the body of Christ, but that iron in the fire image is something like that Chalcedonian pattern that I was laying out. It's an impersonal image, it has its limits, but the iron remains iron. It doesn't cease to be iron. It doesn't lose anything of what defines it as iron. It doesn't lose its substance. The fire remains fire, and yet the two become one. As long as the iron is in the fire, there's this inseparable unity, so there's an abiding distinction and an inseparable unity.

If you push the analogy a little bit, there's also that asymmetry. There's a way in which the iron is in the fire in a different sense than the fire is in the iron, because there's more to the fire (if you think of a campfire situation) than the iron itself. So you get that sense of something larger entering into the iron, the fire being like the deity or being like the glorified body of Christ joining itself to this more ordinary element, as it were, of Christ's flesh in the incarnation or the bread and the wine in the Eucharist.

The image that illustrates this mutual indwelling in the idea of transelementation is the iron in the fire. But it turns out that not only did Luther essentially have this idea (without making it as explicit as I make it), but he actually had the image of the iron in the fire. I don't know where he got it, but maybe he got it from reading ancient theology.

The Orthodox are out of the picture. The church split apart in the 11th century and the East and West had gone their separate ways. One of the reasons things polarized so badly in the West is because the Orthodox were absent. They didn't have a voice at the table. They managed to hold some things together that entered into one of those either-ors, one of those false decisions that have characterized Eucharistic controversy in the West.

But there are some Protestant Reformers, not just Luther, who knew about this idea, and for my purposes the important thing in my book is not that they took this idea of the iron in the fire or the idea of transelementation and made it central to what they wanted to teach about the Lord's Supper. The important thing is that they knew about it and didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it. That's all I need in order to make my argument that we need to take every step we can toward achieving unity in the church around these divisive issues as long as it doesn't involve us in theological compromise.

So here's a view that's different from the Roman Catholic view but that the Roman Catholics don't reject. The Roman Catholics, at Vatican II, the official church council in the 1960s called by Pope John the 23rd, decided that from the Catholic side there's no reason not to

enter into Eucharistic fellowship with the Orthodox. The Orthodox don't, as a rule, subscribe to the technical definition of transubstantiation that is official Roman Catholic teaching. They have the iron in the fire idea, transelementation, and there were Reformed theologians, not just Lutherans, who knew of this image and this idea and talked about it, sometimes used it in argument, and they didn't reject it. They didn't see anything problematic with it.

The important figure here is not very well known; his name is Peter Martyr Vermigli. He was an associate of John Calvin. He is one of the few Reformers with whom, as far as I know, Calvin never entered into any serious disagreement. They were not in the same place at the same time; they just had a correspondence. Calvin said once, "Nobody has a better understanding of the Lord's Supper than Peter Vermigli." Vermigli discovered this idea of transelementation, which is how I learned about it. But I didn't know what it was until I was able to connect it with the image of iron in the fire. Vermigli found it in an Eastern Orthodox theologian from the 11th century (because in those days the Reformers wanted to show that their ideas were not coming out of nowhere, that they had backing in the tradition. The patristic theologians often said things...or theologians in the church wanted to say that the Catholics were the ones that had gone off the rails and the Reformers were recovering the authentic traditions).

Vermigli, more than any of them, because he wasn't a Reformer who had a city and church to superintend, was a scholar (this is my supposition) ...he had time to dig around in the library, and we now have a fair number of his writings in English in the last decade or so because there's a Vermigli industry that has sprung up centered in Orlando, Florida, and all these people are busily translating Vermigli and putting his works out there. One of them is called the *Oxford Disputation on the Eucharist*. Vermigli is debating a high-powered Roman Catholic theologian, and he needs all the ammunition he can find. So I imagine him having the time that Calvin didn't have, or that Martin Bucer didn't have, or that even Thomas Cranmer in England didn't have, to find out about these precedents. He's the one who gave this term "transelementation" prominence.

Then it shows up in the most important, the most lengthy and important writing on the Lord's Supper by Thomas Cranmer. People have had trouble figuring out where Cranmer finally comes down. Some think he's close to Zwingli, which would give him a low view — others try to see him in a different light. In Cranmer's treatise, there's not a page where he's discussing the same figure... I think it was Vermigli who must have discovered... it's an enigma wrapped in a

mystery again and again.

This guy I had never heard of named Theophylact from the 11th century was a distinguished theologian, kind of on a par with Anselm in the West. He became the Archbishop of Bulgaria and was in exile there. He was constantly longing for the society and the theological conversations and the libraries of Constantinople, but his bishop made him go to Bulgaria, so he lived out his days in Bulgaria. He wrote commentaries on Scripture. Vermigli found in Theophylact the term transelementation, so he used it. He didn't know that it went all the way back to Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria and the most seminal and important patristic theologians on the Greek-speaking side of things. It has a heritage, a lineage that even the Reformers didn't appreciate when they embraced this idea.

Here's Cranmer, writing this treatise, which some people think is basically Zwingli, but he'd come to Theophylact. He has Theophylact by name, he has the image of the iron in the fire, he says the bread and the wine become infused with the body and blood of Christ so that they are the presence of the body and blood of Christ in sacramental form. This might look like transubstantiation, says Cranmer, but it isn't. It might look like a problem, but it isn't, he says.

Calvin's mentor Martin Bucer also has the term transelementation. So here's Vermigli, Cranmer and Bucer, each of whom is making use of this idea that has its roots in the Greek Church and in Greek-speaking theologians that go back to very ancient times, and they don't find anything wrong with it.

There's even one little passage in Calvin's *Institutes*, not very explicit, it doesn't have the image of the iron in the fire and it's an overlooked passage, but Calvin says the ancients... (every time I read that, until I started working on this book, I thought he must mean the Latin theologians, but I think he means the Greeks). The ancients had the idea that the bread and the wine are elevated into a different domain. This is (I'm being a little more explicit than Calvin was) so that they don't cease to become bread and wine, but they're converted. He has the idea of conversion. They're converted into the body and blood of Christ. This is not an idea that Calvin does anything with, but he says, explicitly, of this, "to this, we have no objection."

So insofar as this Eastern Orthodox understanding was known by the Protestant Reformers, it was embraced in various ways and not rejected. I think this is a way that we could reach convergence on this historically divisive issue. I find it to be a very deep and rich idea that Christ's body and blood, without ceasing to be definitive in their historical enactment in his life

and death on earth, can assume a sacramental form. It means that Christ is not separable from his saving significance or from his work and benefits. If he's present, his work is present, his benefits are present. And in the Lord's Supper, they're present in this unique and miraculous way that the bread and the wine, without ceasing to be bread and wine, come to enter into an inseparable unity with his body and blood so that he gives himself to us under the forms of bread and wine.

George Herbert, the 17th-century Anglican minister and poet, has a line that says, "Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine, which my God feels as blood and I as wine." That's compatible with transelementation.

So it's not descent and replacement, which is what you get in transubstantiation – it's elevation and enhancement, where the bread and the wine are enhanced by being joined into a mystical union with the body and blood of Christ. (It's odd to do all this focusing on the elements and so on, but it's necessary, because that's where the divisions have arisen.) The mystical union with Christ with the bread and the wine becomes the means by which we enter into mystical union with Christ. He gives himself to us and we enter into union with him through his self-offering under the forms of bread and wine, which are the sacramental forms of his body and blood.

That's roughly the way I try to work things out in that part of my book, and I don't see any losses here for the Reformation church. This is no compromise. None of the Reformists... I could say in principle there's no compromise, and make a case, but I don't even have to do that by myself, I've got Vermigli and Cranmer and Bucer doing the same thing, and maybe Calvin... he's not explicit enough for me to rely too heavily on him, but he has a very promising idea that could help get us beyond this impasse around how to think about the real presence of Christ. There's a non-church-dividing alternative to the Roman Catholic view, that is, not church dividing from a Catholic standpoint.

This is part of a more general strategy in my book. There are often places that the Orthodox don't agree with the Catholics that are more congenial to the Reformation. Insofar as we can move closer to the Orthodox and go on their coattails, so to speak... because remember, we Protestants are little slivers in the big pie that comprises world Christianity, and Catholics are 50 percent, and Orthodox are 17 or so percent. That's a big chunk. There are other questions that I wouldn't think would need to be considered so intensively if they weren't important to the

Catholics and the Orthodox. But if they think they're important, and if we're striving for church unity, then we have to make a good-faith effort to try to find a way that we can approximate what they're calling for without compromise.

At every point, as far as I can see, this leads to an enrichment for Protestants — and not losses, which is what the Reformers always feared — that if we came too close to the Catholics and we did not know much about the Orthodox, it would just be compromise and loss. Well, there's another way of trying to work this out that doesn't lead to losses. We're recovering elements of the ancient tradition which would only be to our well-being and the well-being of Christianity.

JMF: Do you see progress along these lines being made yet?

GH: Nobody has come to terms with the argument I make in my book, because it's too new. By and large, Catholic reviewers have been favorable. Orthodox, being Orthodox, they're not going to embrace it with open arms, but they're not hostile. It's a kind of parallel movement that I don't engage with very much, but that I need to give some more thought to now that I've gotten things to this point in my own mind with the book.

Let's say we want to do something with this idea of transelementation. You have to figure out what kind of language you would want to incorporate into your worship. How would you express that? What difference would it make liturgically? This can be incorporated without anything terribly extensive or elaborate. You don't need the kind of arguments, you don't need the kind of explanations that I need to give to back it up at a theological level. On this parallel track of thinking about liturgy and the language of worship, yes, progress is being made. Insofar as a theologian can give good reasons for why this liturgical progress should continue, that's where it finally has its payoff. How does it show up in the language of worship?

JMF: The average Christian who comes to the Lord's Table and partakes of the Lord's Supper knows ...if anything, very little about all this kind of discussion and meaning. All they know is that this is what Christians do, and so they do it. It's the hierarchy and the government of a given denomination, church, or whatever who decides they're not going to have communion with someone else because they don't understand it the same way. But in the case of the believer, it seems that this idea of the iron in the fire is what's going on with the believer. They're participating with Christ and it happens regardless...

GH: Yes, that's right! That's another application of the word transelementation. It's used to

cover that case, what's going on with the believer.

JMF: As we talked about, I think in a previous interview, the irony of the fact that your taking of the Lord's Supper is expressing in that participation in Christ, in his body and blood (regardless of how you interpret or understand it or describe it or how your superiors do in the church), it is pointing to the unity that exists in spite of all of our...

GH: To a large degree. There are people, though, who think...when Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," there's a Protestant perception that this is a mental event. As you are receiving the blood and wine, you're supposed to remember something.

JMF: Yes, so you're thinking about that as a...

GH: A better translation is, "Do this as my memorial." I don't have time to work this out, but it's like Passover. The original Passover becomes present in celebration of the Passover, and the people who are celebrating here and now are in some sense incorporated into the original Passover so the boundaries between past and present are transcended in the celebration.

JMF: They're taking part in the deliverance that occurred originally.

GH: Yeah. The enactment is the memorial. It's not a second mental event along with it. Apart from all this theoretical work that I've outlined, the ecumenical minimum has to be there to overcome these divisions, because we have to be able to say, regardless of how we get there, without crossing our fingers, that this is the body of Christ, this is the blood of Christ shed for you — that it is the case that this bread and this wine are the body and blood of Christ.

Luther uses the incarnational analogy. He says, just as we can point to this man and say this man is the Lord, and we don't mean that his humanity is his deity, but by virtue of the union this man is the Lord, or the Lord, the man on the cross, is God. By virtue of the union we say these things that would not otherwise be possible. By virtue of the relation, we can say this bread is the body of Christ because of that *koinonia* relation, because of that mutual indwelling, because of that mystical union accomplished not by the presiding minister, not by the priest, but by Christ himself in the power of the Spirit through the priest and with the congregation. That's the breakthrough that the Reformation needs in order to be able to say, without crossing their fingers, this is the body of Christ, at least the Presbyterians.

JMF: It's a "so what" until someone partakes of it.

GH: Exactly. But the communion in the elements is what brings us into communion with the living Christ, and he's not absent. I hate this term that is sometimes used, the real absence of

Christ — the real presence and real absence. There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ — I mean, "Behold I am with you always, until the end of the age." He's present in some sense where two or three are gathering together, which is probably a Eucharistic passage. "I am in the midst of you." There's no such thing as a real absence of Christ.

He's present in this mode — he's present under the forms of his body and blood, the sacramental union of the body, the life-giving flesh with the bread and the wine. That's crucial, that's ancient, that's deep, that is not just a "so what" kind of perception — that Christ is with us in this palpable way that brings his sacrificial death to us and him in his sacrificial significance so that we are renewed and nourished by our participation in what he did there and then. It becomes present to us sacramentally here and now so that we are given an active share in it by grace through faith.

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