



The Body of Christ, Holy Communion, and Canonic Memory

MICHAEL WELKER

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AS THE “BODY OF CHRIST”—THIS IS CERTAINLY A GREAT and appealing image, particularly in late or post-modernity. Forcefully explained by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12, the image offers orientation for those who want to leave behind monistic or dualistic forms of imagining the church without adopting either a vague “plurality” or a diffuse “diversity.” The image of the body of Christ suggests a free community of human beings, all of them related to Jesus Christ as their “head,” but with no fixed and permanent monohierarchical structure among themselves. Not a chaotic plurality but a “structured pluralism” is characteristic of this God-honoring and freedom-loving community.

The church as the “body of Christ”—is this more than a great image or icon that stimulates our thinking about the church? Is it a reality? And if so, how is this reality to be understood? How is it brought forth? The Reformation claimed that time and again the church has to be born from the proclaimed word of God (christologically and biblically grounded) and the adequately celebrated sacraments. The last thirty years have brought a lively ecumenical discourse (from local dialogues to consultations on a world level), particularly on the Lord’s Supper, with many seminal insights into how to conceive of the church as the body of Christ in light of this sacrament.¹ What can we learn from this discourse and in what respect must a

¹Many documents of this discourse can be found in *Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level*, ed. Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist, 1984). See also *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer, and William Rusch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

The body of Christ is nourished and constituted by the triune God in the Lord’s Supper, but also in the church’s living cultural memory—its canonic memory, nourished in witness and proclamation.

Protestant position move beyond it in order not to weaken the impact of the word of God when proclaimed in a purely sacramental orientation?

I. HOLY COMMUNION AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

Without losing the concentration on the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the ecumenical discourse of the last thirty years has progressed to a stronger trinitarian orientation: In holy communion the presence of the living triune God is acknowledged in a differentiated way. The community that celebrates the Lord's Supper

- gives thanks to the God of creation, preservation, and new creation (*eucharistia*)
- enacts the memory of the saving, crucified, resurrected, and coming Jesus Christ (*memoria, anamnesis*)
- invokes the enlivening, liberating, and uplifting Holy Spirit (*epiklesis*).²

Particular attention has been given to what could be called the "symbolic realism" of the sacrament. Holy communion is—not only, but essentially—the symbolic celebration of a community meal. Although it is a symbolic celebration, the character of a community meal must not be lost. Following Vatican II, we have seen a growing ecumenical agreement that the Lord's Supper cannot adequately be celebrated without the really assembled community. The Protestant churches, with their insistence on the scriptural orientation ("Take and eat"; "all of them drank from it") here served the true "eucharistic succession."

The emphasis on sacramental realism also sensitized us to the importance of the elements, bread and wine, as gifts of creation and, thus, the importance of our thanksgiving for them. Gratitude for the good creation, represented by the elements bread and wine, is an important (though partial) aspect of holy communion. Bread and wine are not just gifts of nature. They are gifts of creation, that is, of the successful interplay of nature and culture. That these gifts are present and that people can come together in peace and mutual understanding, willing to celebrate together and to share God's good gifts—all this is already plentiful reason to give thanks to God and to be grateful for the mighty working of the Holy Spirit among us.

However, important as this aspect is, if this remains the *only* dimension acknowledged, people do *not* celebrate the Lord's Supper. They celebrate just a symbolic meal of religious sociability, at best an *agape* meal. In circles of some socially active or liturgically experimenting groups this reduction has happened time and again in recent years: Let us celebrate creation, let us celebrate peace and fellowship, let us express crucial concerns for justice, sharing, mutual acceptance, etc.! Many good reasons were given for this concentration. Yet such use of communion rightly caused tensions in the life of the church and in the ecumene. This reduc-

²For more detail on this and what follows, see Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* trans. John Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

tion—well-meant and honestly felt as it may be—blurred or even blocked any insight into the relation between the celebration of holy communion and the constitution of the body of Christ.

At the center of holy communion are the “night of betrayal”³ and the horror of the cross. The good creation is overshadowed by the power of sin. The self-endangerment and the self-jeopardizing of creation comes into view. The cross reveals the corruptedness of religion, the corruptedness of the law (both Jewish and Roman), the corruptedness of politics, and the corruptedness of morals. The “night of betrayal” and its contexts (Judas’s betrayal, Peter’s denial, and the sleeping and fleeing disciples) show that not only the “principalities and powers,” but also the closest friends and followers of Jesus are dominated by the power of sin. God and the world seem to fall apart. The world seems to be left to religious, social, and cultural chaos. Forseeing this, Jesus Christ offers his presence in bread and wine and in the celebration of table-fellowship—“in remembrance” of him.

This remembrance is not just a thinking back and a reimagining. It is a reenactment that shapes common and individual memory, experience, and expectation. In this remembrance, the pre-Easter person and life of Jesus Christ, his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his parousia are remembered and imagined. The presence and the life of Christ surround—so to speak—the celebrating community. The mutual indwelling between Christ and the believers, Christ and the community, of which the biblical traditions speak, can now be imagined. This remembrance, however, is not just an imaginative construction. It responds to Christ, to his life and his promise, and it proclaims his presence and his promise.

At this point it is crucial to state that holy communion is never celebrated by one single assembled community alone. Communion is always the celebration of all Christian communities of all times and spaces. This insight—emphasized more strongly by the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches—is all too easily overlooked in the Protestant insistence on the real assembled community. Without giving up the important point that the Lord’s Supper can only in extreme cases of diaconal need be celebrated without the assembled community, this presence of the ecumenical church of all times and spaces as the body of Christ is most important to note.

Not only “we” (those concretely present at the Lord’s table here and now) but also “the many” (those present at the table in other times and parts of the world) witness *his* presence as his post-Easter body. It is his presence that constitutes the church—both the concrete community and the ecumenical church of all times and spaces. Here the invocation of the enlivening, liberating, and uplifting Holy Spirit becomes crucial. The celebrating community is no longer just nourished (symbolically) by bread and wine as gifts of creation. In the face of the deeply endangered creation under the power of sin and on the ground of Christ’s promise of his pres-

³Celebrators of the creation-oriented sociability meal tellingly prefer the phrase “in the night before his death.”

ence in bread and wine, it is now nourished by bread and wine as gifts of the new creation (bread and wine “from heaven”). By the power of the Holy Spirit the members of the celebrating community become members of the resurrected body of Christ and gain a share in his eternal life. Although the reduction of holy communion to a celebration of good-creation fellowship is fatal, it remains important to treasure and to care for the connection of the down-to-earth assembled community and the good gifts of creation with the working of word and Spirit in the constitution of the body of Christ. It is also most important not to disconnect the working of the Spirit from the word and promise of Christ.

As an abundance of both Old and New Testament witnesses makes clear, the working of the Holy Spirit always unites a *differentiated* community. The Spirit relativizes and eliminates unjust and distortive differences; however, it sustains and cultivates creative differences.⁴ As the account of Pentecost emphasizes, here a new communality arises in the midst of preserved differences of culture, nation, and language. The long list of groups of people is meant to represent all peoples or illuminate the horizon of the Jewish world of those days: “Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt...” (Acts 2:9-10). Although these people do *not understand* each other, although the world in all its differences of culture, nation, and language is gathered, they understand “the great deeds of God” when they are overcome by the Holy Spirit. The differences marked in the promise of the prophet Joel are taken up as well. To the differentiation of the many peoples, cultures, and languages, to the differentiation of Jews and gentiles, the emphasized differentiation of men and women, the young and the old, of maidservants and menservants is added (Joel 2:28-29).

The working of the Spirit transforms and relativizes these natural, cultural, and political differences. But it does not create homogeneity. The natural, cultural, and political differences are transformed into different gifts of the Spirit, with all their creative interaction. The different gifts of the Spirit and their creative cooperation are characteristic of the body of Christ. In the context of our topic, Paul’s strong emphasis on proclamation, on witness and teaching in relation to the gifts of the Spirit, leads to the question: If the body of Christ is constituted and nourished by the working of the triune God, does this working occur primarily in the sacrament, even in the sacrament alone? Or does it occur in many more contexts?

II. CANONIC MEMORY AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

Not only Orthodox and Roman Catholic, but also many Protestant churches agreed in the consultations on a world level over the last decades that the Lord’s Supper is “a high point of Christian life.” They agreed that the supper is the highest expression of the unity of the church, that it can rightly be called “source and sum-

⁴See Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

mit of Christian life” and “foundation and criterion for the renewal of the church.” This might give rise to the impression that in the supper alone the communion of the faithful with Christ is renewed, that in the supper alone the unity of the members of the church is renewed in the Holy Spirit, that in the supper alone the body of Christ is constituted and sustained. However, the abundance and richness of the working of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s own multifaceted life do not allow us to reduce the edification of the body of Christ to the sacramental event. But how can this richness and its communication be understood? How can we understand the presence of the resurrected Christ in his post-Easter body outside his sacramental presence?

The New Testament texts speak of the presence of the resurrected Christ in a “spiritual body” or “in faith and in Spirit.” This is hard to understand for people who have been trained to look at reality in a naturalistic, scientific, or commonsensical way. In answering the questions concerning the reality of the body of Christ in a clear and honest way, the return to the “memory of Christ” has proved to be most helpful.⁵ How is this memory to be understood if it is not a mere individual or collective re-collection? In his book *The Cultural Memory*⁶ the Heidelberg Egyptologist Jan Assmann offers an impressive examination of the culture-shaping power of *communal memory*. Taking up ideas from Maurice Halbwachs, Claude Levi-Strauss, and other theorists of the culture of memory, Assmann shows that memory is not just an individual or a communal mental phenomenon. It is a power that gives us access to a common world. Assmann differentiates “communicative memory,” which always remains fluid, which is continually being enriched, and which is also continually vanishing and disappearing, from formed, stabilized, and organized memory, which he calls “cultural memory.” Events such as the French Revolution, the Civil War, and those of September 11, 2001, mark our cultural memory, giving it enduring contents, bases for orientation, and directions for learning.

Taking up Assmann’s insights into the genesis of the biblical canon,⁷ I have proposed to discover and to investigate a third type of memory, namely, the “canonic memory.” Canonic memory is a *living cultural memory* that should be of the greatest interest to theology and Christian faith. It is characteristic of the biblical canon that much of its cultural memory is codified in a specific plurality of different interpretations. A specific set of different perspectives on the traumatic event of the exile is codified; and likewise a specific set of textual witnesses to the life, cross, and resurrection of Christ is codified in the New Testament. The cultural

⁵Two discourses between theologians and scientists on questions of eschatology and resurrection underscored this approach: see *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 2000), and *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, ed. Ted Peters, Robert Russell, and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁶Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992; 2d ed., Munich: Beck, 1997).

⁷Michael Welker, *Fünf Schritte auf dem Weg zum Kanon* (Münster: Lit, 1999).

memory, I have argued, achieves a potentiation and becomes a “canonic memory” as soon as a structured and limited pluralism of interpretations leads to a necessarily restless memory. The canonic memory continually opens itself to its content and source and calls forth new interpretations without losing its centering.

In the form of the canonic memory the communal memory is challenged to remain in constant search for truth without losing its focus. The sustenance of truth claims and self-critical, communicative evaluations of certainties and insights go together in this type of memory. Truth and mere certainty, truth and mere insight are differentiated. The co-enhancement of certainty and insight in the search for truth becomes crucial. In this way of a continuing search for truth, the canonic memory is a *responsive memory* to its content and, in the case of Christ, to his person, his life, and his presence. This is expressed by the Christian faith in its affirmation of the vitality and inexhaustibility of the canonic memory of the risen Christ and by its desire to cultivate this memory until Christ’s parousia.

In one perspective, the body of Christ lives in a constant stage of recovery “until Christ comes” (“We are treated...as dying, and see—we are alive,” 2 Cor 6:9). But it also lives in a stage of “being transformed...from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18) and toward the full revelation of its very identity. The canonic memory of Christ, nourished in witness and proclamation, is oriented toward a future that remains beyond its control, because it moves toward that future out of many temporal contexts concentrated on it. The coming Christ is by no means exhausted by our spiritual and ecclesial enterprises and achievements. Even the most worthy of them are at best “members of the body of Christ.” An anti-ideological and anti-triumphalistic power lies in this canonic memory as it grows ever anew out of many testimonies. This memory needs the constant reorientation toward Christ’s pre-Easterly life and toward the biblical witnesses that lead us to an understanding of the revelation of God in this very life. The body of Christ gains an understanding of its own life, purpose, and destiny by seeking to understand and to explain its own memory and hope, resting in and radiating from its cornerstone, head, and eternal future. ⊕

MICHAEL WELKER is professor of systematic theology and director of the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum at the University of Heidelberg, Germany. His most recent book, written together with John Polkinghorne, is Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue for Troubled Friends and Cultured Despisers of Christianity (Fortress).