

*What Happens in Holy Communion?*, by Michael Welker

Reviewed by [Karen B. Westerfield Tucker](#) in the [February 7, 2001](#) issue

Despite Jesus's petition "that they may be one," all Christians still cannot eat and drink together at the Lord's Supper. In an effort to move ecumenical conversations forward, Michael Welker, professor of systematic theology at the University of Heidelberg and occasional visiting professor at Princeton, sets out a systematic explanation of what happens at Holy Communion. He focuses on biblical texts, principally 1 Corinthians 11:17-34, and integrates into his argument reports and agreements achieved by ecumenical conversations primarily among the "larger" European churches--Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed and Lutheran.

While he makes occasional references to the Orthodox churches and to the World Council of Churches' consensus document "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry," Welker says almost nothing about the "free" churches that in the United States represent the largest Protestant denominations. He gives no attention to the distinct perspectives of Baptists, for example, though they would probably approve of his emphasis upon the fellowship and mutual acceptance realized at the Supper. This limited focus is at odds with Welker's stated intention to "clarify and supplement" ecumenical discussions and to examine how the Supper may be a source of "ecumenical peace."

Welker addresses many of the theological topics disputed since the 16th century and strives to put them to rest within his own systematic approach. When he takes up the perennial problem of the presence of Christ at communion, his own German Reformed background is much in evidence. The real presence of the earthly Jesus, who is now risen and exalted, is at the Supper (in part because of the reconciliation that occurs with God and between human beings), though it is not precisely located in the bread and wine. Welker says that Christ's presence cannot be entirely with the gathered community that dynamically remembers him through the power of the Holy Spirit, since a distance still exists between Christ and his people.

One way this distance is liturgically acknowledged is through the proclamation of Christ's death on the cross, in which the power of sin and the human propensity toward betrayal are recognized. Sin and betrayal are, however, set within the

context of Christ's self-giving sacrifice that liberates humankind from guilt. (Here Welker carefully avoids an atonement theology of divine vengeance and "victimization" that some postmodern and feminist Christians find offensive.) That the proclamation of Christ's death is to continue "until he comes again" reveals another distance: Christ's vital presence and "sensual proximity" at the Supper orients the community toward his "complete" presence to come at the onset of his future reign. On that day the distance will be closed and the entire redeemed creation will gratefully praise and glorify God.

Welker's theological framework also includes practical matters of how communion is to be conducted, though the rationales for his suggestions are sometimes surprising. He decides the subject of frequency by considering whether the Supper was originally a Passover meal (an annual celebration) or a normal Jewish meal (a daily celebration). Since neither would be feasible for the Christian meal, he claims, the most sensible frequency is weekly or monthly. No mention is made of the Emmaus narrative or of the historical and theological linkages between the Supper and the day of resurrection to justify a weekly Lord's Day praxis.

Although Welker cautions against liturgical experimentation at and with the Supper, he applauds the practice of an annual Christian "seder-communion" as a bridge between Jewish and Christian "memorial meals," but without examining how such a celebration might be perceived by the Jewish community. He insists that the Supper is a "symbolic communal meal of a meal community" and that no baptized persons, including children, are to be refused. Yet he also indicates that no one, not even the "enemies of communion with Christ," should be barred from the table. He thus leaves ambiguous the connection of font with table, as well as the ecclesiological issues tied to that relationship.

The translation is heavily Germanic. A more substantial problem is the repeated use of "Creator" for the first Person of the Godhead. Using this functional term to avoid the unpopular "F" word has theological consequences that undermine or raise doubts about many of the author's claims. But Welker's book will stimulate thinking and conversation on an issue that still divides the churches and requires clarification both in denominations and in local congregations. It also serves as a reminder of the distance yet to be covered before "they may be one."