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GEORGE HUNSINGER AS THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETER OF THE SCRIPTURES

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Abstract

After years of studying and expounding Karl Barth, George Hunsinger founded the National Religious Campaign against Torture (NRCAT). Inspired by Thomas Torrance, he moved on to exploring Eucharistic theology; Torrance paid much more attention than Barth to Christ's priestly office. Hunsinger has turned to interpreting theologically the Scriptures, and published books on Matthew's version of the Beatitudes and Paul's Letter to the Philippians.

Keywords: Barth; Beatitudes; Eucharist; Hunsinger; Interpretation; Philippians; Priesthood; Torture

In a significant article, Myk Habets has presented a theological interpretation of the Scriptures; he ends by concentrating on the approach of a Reformed theologian of Princeton Theological Seminary, George Hunsinger.¹ Habets's article is rich and well

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¹M. Habets, "Theological Theological Interpretation of the Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23 (2021) 235-58; see Tim Meadowcraft, "Wisdom and Theological Interpretation: A Biblical Studies Response to Myk Habets on Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23 (2021) 259-78.

documented. Inevitably lack of space has left more to be said—in particular, about Hunsinger’s own work and development.

Born in 1948, Hunsinger studied at Stanford University, Harvard Divinity School, and Yale University, where he took a PhD under the supervision of Hans Frei in 1988. Since 2001 he has been professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. A visiting lecturer at many universities and colleges, in 2019 he spent a semester in Rome as professor of ecumenical theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome).

This article raises the specific question: What formed the particular background to Hunsinger’s theory and practice of theologically interpreting the Scripture?

Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance

Through years dedicated to the critical study and exposition of Karl Barth, Hunsinger has established himself as one of the leading interpreters of Barth’s theology in the world. He has been president of the Karl Barth Society of North America since 2003. In 2010 he received the Karl Barth Prize awarded by the Union of Evangelical Churches in Germany. From his many books, articles, and book chapters on Barth, we might pick out *How to Read to Karl Barth* as his major study of the great Swiss theologian.²

As Barth had famously done in a world threatened by the curse of Nazism, Hunsinger believed that theologians should speak out prophetically and act in the public sphere. In January 2006, he founded the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT), a broad coalition of interfaith leaders. They were reacting to the US-sponsored torture, practised in the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp and elsewhere.³

At the Parliament of the World’s Religions that met in Melbourne in early December 2009, Hunsinger denounced state-sponsored torture. By that time his theological focus had been moving to the Eucharist. A number of theologians, myself included, acknowledge a certain continuity between the tortured Body of Christ and the tortured bodies of the innumerable people victimized in political, economic, and religious causes.

Prompted by the liturgical writings of another Reformed theologian, Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913–2007), Hunsinger

²G. Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

³G. Hunsinger, ed., *Torture as a Moral Issue: Christians, Jews, Muslims and People of Conscience Speak Out*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006.

produced a Eucharistic theology developed from and responding to the Scriptures, the Christological councils of the Church, and teaching inherited from the Reformation and the Council of Trent.⁴ Torrance himself had been encouraged by the liturgical studies of the Austrian theologian, Josef Andreas Jungmann (1889–1975) to set out the triple office of Christ as priest, prophet, and king/shepherd and, in particular, to give much more substance to his human priesthood. It is to this priesthood that the ordained priest and the assembled believers join themselves in celebrating the Eucharist. Synthesizing the witness of Hebrews and the Gospels and respecting the mission of the Holy Spirit allowed Torrance to understand the Eucharist as the priestly presence of the sacrificial self-offering of the incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ in which the faithful share.⁵ Hunsinger valued Torrance for paying “much more attention to Christ’s priestly office” than did Barth.⁶

Following up insights from Torrance, Hunsinger wrote of the action of the Eucharist not being “another action than that which Christ has already accomplished on our behalf.” It is “the very same action” performed by Christ but now in a “sacramental form.”⁷ At every Eucharist, Christ is the Offerer, the One who invisibly but truly presides at the visible, sacramental celebration of his once-and-for-all sacrifice. He takes up into his self-offering the visible priest and the assembled faithful.

In his dialogue with the work of Barth and of Torrance, Hunsinger constantly set himself to cite and expound the inspired Scriptures. But in the latest stage of his work, he has been doing that by interpreting theologically a central passage of the Gospels, the Beatitudes (Matt 5:2–12), and Paul’s Letter to the Philippians.

The Beatitudes

Hunsinger rightly offers a Christocentric interpretation of the Beatitudes, understanding them to be the classic self-interpretation offered by Jesus which carry enormous consequences for human and Christian life today. Hunsinger offers this “Christological

⁴G. Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. The cover reproduced a chalice used by Torrance when celebrating the Eucharist, and so revealed his growing influence on Hunsinger.

⁵For a fuller account of Torrance’s contribution, see Gerald O’Collins and Michael K. Jones, *Christ Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 224–9.

⁶G. Hunsinger, *Philippians*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020, xx.

⁷Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 17; he quotes T. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, London: Lutterworth, 1960, 152.

interpretation” after “preliminary standard exegesis has been carried out.”⁸

Christological interpretation takes “the total relevant context” to be “Jesus Christ himself, incarnate, crucified and risen.”⁹ Here Hunsinger attaches himself to the tradition that goes back through the twelfth-century Augustinian canon, Hugh of Saint Victor to the origins of Christianity: “all divine Scripture speaks of Christ and finds its fulfilment in Christ, because it forms only one book, the book of life which is Christ.”¹⁰ From this point of view, the crucifixion and the resurrection determine the reality of the needy and their being blessed by God. The beatitudes apply to everyone, and not merely to those who are conscious followers of Jesus.

Philippians

In Paul’s Letter to the Philippians, the Father and Jesus are identified as sharing the same divine name, *Kurios* (Phil 2:11). Hunsinger’s theological reading of the whole hymn (Phil 6–11) becomes informed by the teaching of Nicaea I (AD 325) and the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). The statement that Christ Jesus was ‘in the form of God (*morphē theou*)’ finds an appropriate interpretation through the Nicene term *homoousios* and the Chalcedonian term *phusis*.¹¹

Hunsinger constructs a theology of atonement that involves a merciful substitution rather than penal substitution and sets his face against allowing the idea of a forensic declaration to eclipse union with Christ. The atoning exchange of the *admirabile commercium* is cultic, and not to be severed from its priestly roots in Christ. That happens “when imputation is reduced to a juridical declaratory act” and salvation “is invested with an inveterate individualism.”¹²

Conclusion

A few years ago Angus Paddison edited a valuable book on the ways in which theologians understand, interpret, and draw on the Scriptures.¹³ In the commentaries produced by Hunsinger on the

⁸Hunsinger, *The Beatitudes*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015, xx.

⁹Hunsinger, *The Beatitudes*, xx.

¹⁰*De Arca Noe Morali*, 2.8–9; PL 176, cols 642–4; for similar views from William Tyndale and others, see G. O’Collins, *Inspiration: Towards a Christian Interpretation of Biblical Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 2021, 137.

¹¹Hunsinger, *Philippians*, 38–70, 175.

¹²Hunsinger, *Philippians*, 202.

¹³A. Paddison, ed., *Theologians on Scripture*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016; see Habets, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” 15–16.

Beatitudes and the Letter to the Philippians, we have a theologian doing more than that. He is directly engaged at length with the exposition of the Scriptures. This was a work taken up by the Fathers of the Church, Thomas Aquinas and other medieval theologians, Jean Calvin, and many other leading figures of the past. Like Hunsinger, we need more theologians to follow Hunsinger in pressing beyond merely citing and applying the Scriptures to directly expounding them.

At the end of my *Inspiration*, I set out ten principles for theologians when interpreting the Scripture.¹⁴ At the moment I do not have the time to examine how Hunsinger's two volumes of commentary embody those principles, and/or whether he seriously challenges some of them. Either way, this investigation looks like a rewarding task.

What I do already know is that an elderly friend who had engaged herself for years in the serious service to the needy, when she approached death used to great spiritual advantage Hunsinger's book on the Beatitudes. His words threw much comforting light on what she had been doing for years in her following of Jesus.

¹⁴ O'Collins, *Inspiration*, 166-94.