



## Guests of the Crucified: No Place for Gatekeepers<sup>1</sup>

MARY SUE DREIER

**E**rnst Käsemann's "Guests of the Crucified" articulates a faithful theological argument for welcoming all God's people to the Lord's Supper—people like "Edith." I first met Edith when I was knocking on doors as a mission developer.

A middle-aged woman opened the door a crack, and I slid a small brochure into her tentative hands. A small dog growled warily at her feet. "Church? Never been to one. Don't know anything about them." We chatted through the screen. There was a hungry look about her.

I stopped back a week later. Same crack in the door, same small dog, same hungry look. Over time, Edith became curious about a church whose pastor kept coming back to say, "Hi." Through a dance of stepping forward while keeping her distance, she eventually invited me inside for brief conversations. Then, one day, she came to Sunday worship. I knew what a big step that was for her. So I was really surprised when she came up for communion. She didn't have the training or the background. She had no certified understanding! But she was hungry, she came, and she was fed. She fairly bounded up to me after worship, eyes differently bright. She was excited and said, "And I even took communion!" I must have hesitated. "That was OK, wasn't it?" she said.

At that crucible moment, it seemed my mission developer life passed before my eyes—months of preparing to reach out to the Ediths who weren't part of a church in Rochester, Minnesota; trainings, rental agreements for a publicly accessible office, brochures, strategy sessions, and the neighborhood walks that led me to Edith's door. For me, it all fell into perspective at this moment. "Yes, of course, Edith. Yes, the Lord's Supper is for all of us."

In "Guests of the Crucified," Käsemann bluntly says that "there is no justification and no excuse" for refusing communion fellowship for theological, institutional, or denominational reasons. Whereas congregations and denominations have developed systems for entry *to* the table, "Guests of the Crucified" turns things around: you can't justify exclusion *from* the table.

<sup>1</sup>This article, like its counterpart by Paul Westermeyer, is a response to Ernst Käsemann's "Guests of the Crucified," found on pages 62–73 of this issue.

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## Guests of the Crucified: Still Place for Self-Examination<sup>1</sup>

PAUL WESTERMEYER

**E**rnst Käsemann looks at 1 Cor 11:17–34 and focuses on the “guests of the Crucified.” He sees that some Christians have excluded the world and anticipated heaven as if those who are present at the table are made perfect. He sees “worthy” as having taken on over the years the meaning of proper decorum in frock coat and top hat, soft organ playing, super-consciousness of guilt, and avoidance of Jesus’ concern to gather guests from the highways and byways. The one capital offense at the Lord’s Supper, says Käsemann, is the denial of fellowship; and then he points to the contradiction of closed sectarian societies that shut people out rather than welcoming them. For him either the Lord’s Supper is ecumenical or it is no longer the Lord’s Supper. Not to tolerate all the guests of the Crucified is no longer to tolerate the Crucified himself.

John Calvin included the reading of part of 1 Cor 11 in Geneva when the congregation gathered to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. He ended the passage with verses 27–29.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment to themselves.

Calvin followed the reading with this admonition.

We have heard, my brethren, how our Lord observed His Supper with His disciples, from which we learn that strangers and those who do not belong to the company of His faithful people must not be admitted. Therefore, following that precept, in the name and by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, I excommunicate all idolaters, blasphemers and despisers of God, all heretics and those who create private sects in order to break the unity of the Church, all perjurers, all who rebel against father or mother or superior, all who promote sedition or mutiny; brutal and disorderly persons, adulterers, lewd and lustful men, thieves, ravishers, greedy and grasping people, drunkards, gluttons, and all

<sup>1</sup>This article, like its counterpart by Mary Sue Dreier, is a response to Ernst Käsemann’s “Guests of the Crucified,” found on pages 62–73 of this issue.

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When my husband Gary and I began our work as mission developers, we struggled with this very question. I grew up in the Lutheran church, received parochial education from kindergarten through high school, and loved every minute of it. I wore a little hat and white gloves to church every Sunday and watched enviously as the adults filed up for the Lord's Supper. I looked forward to the day I'd be able to actually sign a communion card, quietly slip it into the usher's hand, and join that line processing up to the altar. At that time, during the heyday of 1960s Midwestern christendom, confirmation was the rite of entrance into the Lord's Supper.

For years I furiously memorized the catechism and supporting Bible passages, sailed through tests and exams (written and public!), and vividly remember my confirmation—May 22, 1966. I still have the certificate from Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, signed by Pastors Blanke and Thomas. Seventy classmates and I were confirmed that Sunday in white robes with red carnations, the girls wobbling forward in our first pair of high heels.

Things have changed significantly on the religious landscape in North America since that time—changes that, some say, reflect those that took place in Europe several decades ago. Käsemann presented “Guests of the Crucified” in Germany in 1979. Yet he provides compelling theological grounds for celebrating the Lord's Supper on the mission field in North America today, particularly as I experienced it as a mission developer of a new congregation. Käsemann presents a theological argument for welcoming the Ediths to the table, invigorates an evangelical spirit of fellowship around the Lord's Supper, and urges us to be open and welcoming communities of faith *precisely on the basis of our understanding of the Lord's Supper*—the supper too often celebrated as the private family meal inside the household of faith.

The commission given to my husband and me as mission developers was to establish a congregation west of Highway 52 in Rochester, since that area was growing rapidly and the other seven ELCA congregations were east of the highway. Additionally, this was intended to be a fresh outreach, seeking those who were not already members of another congregation. So here stood Edith, no longer a nameless, faceless outreach goal, but a real person, with real hunger, and now with the body and blood of Christ residing transformatively within her. “Yes, of course, Edith. Yes, the Lord's Supper is for all of us.”

Edith and others like her actually taught me that Christ's “real presence” in the Lord's Supper is more than a theological interpretation. It is its central, inviting reality. Christ is really present! People are hungry and not particularly interested in theological formulas or debates. Käsemann cautions those of us who love theology not to busy ourselves with determining the “nutritional value” of the Lord's Supper and forget to feed the hungry.

The Lord's Supper offers Christ, directly and simply. This meal is the Lord's Supper in every way—Christ is the host, Christ is the meal, Christ is “all in all.”

Our job is to set the table and extend Christ’s invitation, not to serve as gatekeepers. Put simply, in Käsemann’s words, it is not meant to be a “barricade against the world God wants to bring home.” That always includes each of us. That first Sunday Edith took communion, she and I were *both* invited guests at the supper that neither of us owns. This is so much more than a private family meal inside the household of faith.

Edith’s story is not unusual today. It is similar to the story that Sara Miles relates in her popular spiritual memoir, *Take This Bread*—a story of coming hungry to the table, being fed on Christ, and Christ becoming a real part of her.<sup>2</sup> Diana Butler Bass in her recent book, *Christianity after Religion*, reflects helpfully on this as a sociological reversal in the process of religious affiliation.<sup>3</sup> She suggests that, until recently, people looked for a church in alignment with their beliefs, learned its behaviors, and then became members: believe-behave-belong. However, today, according to Bass, people search for a community in which they experience belonging, learn Christianity through its behaviors, and then explore beliefs: belong-behave-believe.

Edith demonstrated this. She came primarily for community and, in the process, came to faith. Like Edith and Sara, people are wandering into worship services with vague spiritual hungers that compel them to the Lord’s table. Once there, they take us dead seriously when we offer them bread and wine and say, “The body of Christ broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you.”

The theme of coming home, as in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–32), threads its way through Käsemann’s article. Most of the sermons I heard on this parable while growing up focused on the waywardness of the son, but what if we look instead at the father? This father did not wait for the son to make the last leg of the long journey home while rehearsing his alibi. This father ran to his son on the road and embraced him. No alibi was needed. His father wanted to touch him, hold him as he had done so often before—flesh-to-flesh, old to young—sharing in the gift of human life returned to each other. The physicality of the scene is wrenchingly beautiful. “My son was dead, and is alive! Was lost, and is found!” This is the scene enacted again and again in the Eucharist. God’s flesh reunited with ours—the lost ones renewed by the real power and presence of God in, with, and under the meal.

The notion of inclusion at the Lord’s Supper is not simply a matter of handing a stranger a morsel of bread and a sip of wine. It is ultimately about inclusion in the community of faith. And it is in that community where repentance and discipline of the sinner take place. I imagine that’s exactly what happened in the household of the extravagantly prodigal father, around the kitchen table, after the scraps from the fatted-calf banquet were cleaned up and real life together ensued. This

<sup>2</sup>Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

also happens in the community of faith where the word is proclaimed and the sacraments are shared, where the reality of the law disciplines us and the promise of the gospel frees us to live new-creation lives. Edith's communing began such a journey among the people we served, as complicated and complex as life in the community of faith always is.

"Guests of the Crucified" fuels a vision much like that at the end of Flannery O'Connor's short story "Revelation."<sup>4</sup> Many of the people who flit through my mind—some who became part of that new church we served—are more in line with O'Connor's characters dancing and singing to heaven than those with orchestrated steps from my white-gloved past. This is a line in which those like me who were schooled in the orderliness of the Lord's Supper *follow* the exuberant whooping and hollering of those who surge forward ahead of us—rumbling, shouting, clapping, and "leaping like frogs" into heaven.<sup>5</sup>

This is such a contrast to the line of certified participants whom I eyed with envy from the pew as a child. Käsemann's vision risks institutional messiness and disorder. But I delight in such a line proceeding up to the Lord's Supper. And I find myself lifting my own steps a bit more lightly and swaying with a bit more enthusiasm as the enthusiasm, gratitude, and joy of those in this line invigorate my own journey as well. ⊕

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<sup>4</sup>Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

those who lead a scandalous and dissolute life. I warn them to abstain from this Holy Table, lest they defile and contaminate the holy food which our Lord Jesus Christ gives to none except they belong to the household of faith.<sup>2</sup>

As Bard Thompson observed, “While Luther emphasized the consolations of grace, Calvin dwelt upon the demands of grace.”<sup>3</sup> Käsemann follows on Luther’s train while Calvin, with his emphasis on the third use of the law, rides on another track. Hospitality and discipline name the engines that drive these trains. Sara Miles was knocked over by the first one. “Early one winter morning,” she says,

I walked into St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco. I had no earthly reason to be there. I’d never heard a Gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian—or, as I thought of rather less politely, a religious nut.... I’d passed the beautiful wooden building, with its shingled steeples and plain windows, and this time I went in, on an impulse, with no more than a reporter’s habitual curiosity.<sup>4</sup>

After sitting and standing, singing and sitting, waiting and listening, standing and singing, a woman announced, “Jesus invites everyone to his table.” “And then,” she continues,

someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying “the body of Christ,” and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying “the blood of Christ,” and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me.

I still can’t explain my first communion. It made no sense. I was in tears and physically unbalanced: I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over, painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening—I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening—the piece of bread was the “body” of “Christ,” a patently untrue or at best metaphorical statement; and what I *knew* was happening—God, named “Christ” or “Jesus,” was real and in my mouth—utterly short-circuited my ability to do anything but cry.<sup>5</sup>

Some people, unlike Sara Miles, are not moved by the church’s paschal feast. Very few people are bowled over as she was. Most of the church discovers what is going on in quiet, less dramatic ways and over much longer stretches of time. But the church tastes and sees that the Lord is good, and gradually the implications become clear. They are not always as dramatic for everyone as they turned out to be for Sara Miles and her vocation, but dramatic or not, they point to what Käsemann is getting at and to the faithful church’s invariable discovery of where the Supper leads. This is where it led Sara Miles.

<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, “The Form of Church Prayers,” in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, ed. Bard Thompson (New York: World, 1961) 205–206.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>4</sup>Sara Miles, *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007) 57.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 58–59.

I had to trudge in the rain through housing projects; sit on the curb wiping the runny nose of a psychotic man; stick a battered woman's .357 Magnum in a cookie tin in the trunk of my car. I had to struggle with my atheist family, my doubting friends, and the prejudices and traditions of my newfound church. I learned about the great American scandal of politics and food, the economy of hunger, and the rules of money. I met thieves, child abusers, millionaires, day laborers, politicians, schizophrenics, gangsters, and bishops—all blown into my life through the restless power of a call to feed people, widening what I thought of as my "community" in ways that were exhilarating, confusing, often scary.<sup>6</sup>

Are Käsemann and Miles right, then, not only about where the Supper leads the church, but in the sense that Calvin's discipline or any fencing of the table is wrong? Does discipline invariably lead to what is ingrown, or what some people call Calvin's power trip or his excesses? Who is left to come to the table after his admonition? Are abuses of power (not only in Calvin) so inevitable when any kind of discipline is introduced that we simply have to be done with it altogether?

Well, we're dealing with potent stuff here. You can eat and drink judgment to yourself. "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died," says Paul (1 Cor 11:30). It is hard to see how discipline can be avoided. As to the ingrown concern, it may be that Calvin's discipline is as evangelical as Käsemann's and Miles's hospitality, since Calvin apparently went to the house of the excommunicated on Monday morning to seek out the sinner.

Two things, however, do seem clear. One is that our sectarian denominational divisions and exclusions are exactly the problem that Käsemann points to. When I was younger and did not have the theological tools to sort these things out, I found myself at a Roman Catholic Mass, sitting next to a priest whom I had just met at a conference where the Mass was being celebrated. In the middle of the service I leaned over and said to him as quietly as possible, "May I receive communion?" He turned to me and said, "Paul, Christ is the host at this table. Of course you can receive communion." That is Käsemann's point: all are guests of the Crucified; all are welcome—period, end of discussion.

But that does not do away with examining ourselves individually or communally. Individually, we are expected to live lives on behalf of the other. If we break the commandments and do the things Calvin's admonition lists (yes, we have to interpret it sanely with grace so that we are not driven to untenable requirements and concomitant corners in mental institutions), we need to be fenced from the table until we confess our sins and are forgiven.

The communal problem for us is as great, if not greater, than the individual one. It is our temptation as the institutional church to turn everything into sales techniques, to turn Christianity into a product to be sold, and by clever euphemisms to pretend we are engaging in evangelism. This is works righteousness in the

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, xiv.

key of the commercial culture's addictions. In this case the Lord's Supper on a twisted hospitality rail is the ploy by which we assume we can count outcomes that get more people in our pews and more dollars and cents in our coffers. The ploy may or may not work momentarily, but it will fail miserably over the long haul because it skews the gospel and tells a lie. The problem is subtle: we don't even know we have sinned because the cultural addiction is so strong. The Lord's Supper is not a gimmick or a sales ploy. There is no gimmick or sales ploy. We are all guests of the Crucified at the banquet freely given for all—period, end of discussion. ⊕

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