

Gathering in expectation: Worship:

Act one

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 5, 2005](#) issue

On the night before he died, Jesus gave instructions for how the church was to stay together and remember him. His instructions were these: eat together.

In learning to eat together, the early Christians discovered they had to learn other skills of common life. They had to learn to greet one another, to be honest with one another about their faults, to celebrate and give thanks for what they had been given. They learned to remember the truth and to pray, and in praying they learned to recognize their dependence on God. The eucharistic liturgy, born of Christ's direction to share a meal, honors and teaches these skills. The essay below is the first in a series focusing on moments in the liturgy: gathering, hearing, responding, sharing, going.

A pastor noticed that Sunday morning worshipers had become lethargic—they were slow and quiet in their responses, reluctant to stand to hear the Gospel and hesitant to come to the altar rail to share communion. Then one man explained that he needed more time “alone.” “We come to church to be able to lose ourselves in our own thoughts in a worshipful atmosphere,” he said.

The pastor, eager to give worshipers the time they needed, asked them to arrive at the service ten minutes early. “By all means lose yourselves in your own thoughts for ten minutes before the service,” he said. “But once the service starts, we serve God and each other by doing a series of things together, and if you have reflections, they should be in response to those corporate actions, not your own musings.” Gradually worshipers grew more in touch with one another—and more in touch with God.

At the moment of greeting the assembly becomes the church. At this moment members become aware of three things. First, they are in the presence of God, and may experience the sense of fear and joy that this entails. One of the best tests of the health of a church is whether there is a sense of expectation at this moment.

Second, they are in the presence of one another. These are the people among whom God has chosen to make himself present today. As Jesus took loaves and fish and made an abundant supper out of humble resources, so God makes the worship he requires out of the gifts he has given to each humble congregation. Third, some members are missing. It is the time to wonder: Has there been death, estrangement, sickness? Is the family on vacation? This is the beginning of pastoral care and evangelism.

One small congregation, meeting in a modern building, decided to change the way they arranged the chairs for the Eucharist. After several years of looking at a blank white wall, they moved their chairs into a sequence of horseshoe-shaped rows so they could see each other. As a result, they realized that in most churches the most one worshiper sees of a fellow member is the back of his or her head! In other words, we see worshipers as if they are obstacles to worship. Because members of this congregation had little in the sanctuary that was beautiful to look at, they decided to meditate on the human forms around them.

On one occasion, worshipers in this congregation were challenged to discern the gifts God had given to them. After a period of silence, each person was to identify a gift that had been given to the person next to them. In the intimacy of the worship setting, they discovered that God could speak “even” through them. After years of regretting what they could not do because the congregation was small, they were able to articulate positive virtues. One person said, “You know, some of the things we do, we could not do if we were bigger.” It was the first time someone had articulated a sense that that church was not a failure, but could be something that no other church could be.

Before proceeding, the congregation allows God to dismantle the wall of sin that keeps the people in prison. There are four dimensions to the treatment of sin. The first is the invitation. The invitation does not isolate certain activities as being inherently bad and requiring immediate repentance. Instead it portrays a true story, and pleads with the members of the congregation to consider whether their lives reflect this story truthfully. Then comes a pause for repentance, a pause that is not so much an opportunity for cataloguing particular sins as a moment to contrast the glory of the true story with the meagerness of the false ones. Repentance means naming and stripping away the fear that distances the disciple from the gospel, and recalling the nakedness of baptism.

In corporate confession, members of the congregation name sin. They recognize that they have participated, even during the past seven days, in the catastrophe of discarding God's invitation into his eternal companionship. In promising to sin no more, to cease from the thoughts, words and deeds that have been unworthy of God's company, the congregation take on a burden whose weight it will not be able to bear. There can be no repentance without a resolve to stop sinning; but there can be no self-knowledge without the recognition that temptation, in some form, will be too much. Thus confession is the moment when the congregation discovers the meaning of freedom. Freedom does not mean dependence on the resources and capacities of the self—that is what has been exposed and renounced in repentance. Freedom means dependence on the grace of God.

Then comes the absolution. The most important feature of the absolution is its finality. These sins are forgiven, expunged. They are not forgotten, but their power to ruin and destroy, their power to have any eternal effect, is taken away. They do not need to be confessed again. They do not need to, indeed they must not, overshadow the rest of the service. Thus the absolution makes the rest of the service possible.

What follows must include silence. There is a story of a group of sherpas in the Himalayas who walked and climbed with a group of Western mountaineers for several days and nights. After a long period of almost continuous journeying, they abruptly halted, put down the equipment and rested, not going to sleep, but sitting up alert, as if waiting for something or someone. When the Westerners asked, the sherpas explained simply: "We have traveled a long way; we are waiting for our souls to catch up with our bodies."

This is the silence after praise. God has given to his people identity, and to the church, authority, freedom and joy: all this in about ten minutes. Now God's people wait—silent, ready, grateful, expectant. What will happen next?