

Broken and shared: Worship: Act four

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

When the Eucharist is served, a reshaping of human society begins. Each member of the congregation offers different things to the table, offering all that he or she uniquely is. This begins a reordering of society: members of the congregation come and in return receive from God everything they need to follow him.

Communion is a microcosm of the service as a whole. The elements of bread and wine are taken, blessed, broken and shared just as Jesus was taken, blessed, broken and shared. In a similar way the congregation as a whole is *taken* out of its ordinary pursuits; *blessed* with the grace and truth of forgiveness and scripture; *broken* in the disciplines of intercession, peacemaking and food-sharing; and *shared* with the world in love and service. As the bread and wine are offered, transformed and received, the congregation, and through it the whole creation, is offered, transformed and received.

The significance of these four actions becomes clearer in the light of Jesus' story. He took human nature in his incarnation. His human flesh bore the divine character in material form in his ministry. Through words of wisdom, question and command, and through gestures of compassion, challenge and miracle, he blessed humanity and the whole creation. In his agonizing death and the harrowing exposure of human sin that it entailed, he was broken for the life of the world. And in his resurrection, and perhaps most especially in the coming of his Holy Spirit, he gave and shared new life with all who trusted in him.

There are strong hints in the resurrection appearances—at Emmaus, in the upper room, by the Galilean lakeshore—that it was in this fourfold action in relation to food that the identity of the risen Jesus was made known to the dumbfounded disciples. These definitive actions identify the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ and affirm his presence with the church as its living Lord. They define what the church understands by prophecy, the practice of drawing on the revelation of God in the past to identify his action in the present. Out of the treasure house of God's story, the prophet brings fresh discoveries of God's revelation for today. This may be

in the form of words, or in the form of actions or gestures. The Eucharist is the definitive prophetic action because it identifies the whole life and work of Christ in a way that declares Christ's living presence today.

When the gestures of a community point back to the transforming events of Christ's death and resurrection and also forward to the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises, the gestures may be described as prophetic. The point of a prophetic action is not to change the world but to display the manner in which the world is changed by God.

During the 1940s Vichy regime in France, for example, villagers in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon took in Jewish escapees from across central Europe, gave them hospitality and found ways to send them along the perilous journey to Switzerland. The point was not that such actions would end the Holocaust or win the war; the gestures demonstrated the self-giving love of God revealed in Christ and offered a foretaste of the fellowship to be perfected in heaven.

Likewise under the Pinochet regime in Chile, members of the Sebastian Acevedo Movement Against Torture performed impromptu street liturgies, gathering outside a known place of torture and reciting names of the torturers and their victims. Again, the point was not to end the torture or bring down the regime, but to identify the courage of the oppressed, express the anger of God against their oppressors and point to the day when all secrets would be revealed.

On a more modest level, one church in a deprived neighborhood in Britain found that it was attracting four times as many children as adults in a culture where children were accustomed to being on their own, without the company of their parents. The church decided to give its principal worship area to the larger group, the children, and take the adults into a side room. The adults rejoined the children after about 45 minutes, and the children would ask the adults what they had done in their group. Visitors noticed that instead of the children feeling patronized or uncomfortable, it was the adults who felt they had to learn to accommodate themselves to the change. The point was not to solve the social problems of the area, but gently to alert the neighborhood to the God who displaces the mighty and exalts the humble.

The breaking of the bread may be the most poignant act of worship. At this moment in the liturgy wrath and mercy meet. On one hand, we break the bread of scarcity—of limited resources, of selfish greed, of cruelty, of breaking the bodies of

others, of misusing the gifts of creation, of murder, of raging hatred and bitter enmity: the bread of sin. On the other hand we break the bread of abundance, of limitless love, of unending forgiveness, of ceaseless forbearance, of steadfast endurance, of relentless delight, of the tender embrace of the beloved child: the bread of grace. At this moment the anger and the love of God break God's heart, as they did on the cross. And this is how God's people come to share his life: they enter the broken heart of God and become his companions in the breaking of the bread.

The broken body of Christ crystallizes both the manner of God's sovereignty over his creation, and the ultimate purpose of that sovereignty. If God's sovereignty is the grain of the universe, the whole orientation of creation, then God's love is the most powerful force of all. The power of violence and of money are revealed for what they really are, not dominant but ultimately weak. The love displayed on the cross and enacted in the breaking of the bread becomes the most powerful force in the universe, because it is the way the sovereign God chooses to make his character known.

The portrayal of this sovereign love in the breaking of the bread at the Eucharist discloses the ultimate purpose of that sovereign power: to call his people to worship him, be his friends and eat with him. At this key moment in the liturgy the church understands the ultimate purpose of creation, and responds.