

Proclaiming the Lord's death

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [March 3, 1999](#) issue

High view of the ministry of the Word and pronounced free church sensibilities notwithstanding, I finally caved in. I sought refuge from bad preaching in the celebration of the Eucharist.

My gripe was not with the oratorical skills of preachers in the churches I frequented, though many would have done well to add some rhetorical polish. My problem was not even that sermons were "unbiblical" in the sense that ministers failed to seek inspiration in the scriptures, though some seemed to be commenting on the biblical texts in order to drape their own opinions with the mantle of the prophets' and apostles' authority. More than with rhetoric or the use of the scripture, I was disturbed by the failure of many preachers to make the center of the Christian faith the center of their proclamation. Except in superficial ways, they often kept silent on the topic that should have demanded all their eloquence-Jesus Christ crucified for the ungodly.

Writing to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul noted that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Today, however, the message of the cross seems just as foolish to those who should be helping the perishing get saved as it is to the perishing themselves! Many preachers are hesitant to follow the great apostle who decided "to know nothing among" his listeners "except Jesus Christ, and him crucified." Instead, to those who seek wisdom, they offer sapiential musings; to those who demand signs, they give advice on how to transform the world.

Forget about "God's foolishness" which is "wiser than human wisdom," they say implicitly, as they concentrate, say, on putting yesterday's news into perspective or on helping people understand this or that psychological hang-up. Forget about "God's weakness" which is "stronger than human strength," they suggest as they zero in on alleviating pressing social needs or curing physical ailments.

My point is not that physical, psychological and social well-being is unimportant or that the church should remain uninvolved. To the contrary. But if the church were

primarily about these issues, a perfectly good argument could be made that on a Sunday morning, instead of going to church, one should get cozy in one's armchair with the New York Times in hand and a large mug of cappuccino close by. A morning spent with a good newspaper or book would certainly better prepare one to engage the problems of the world than sitting at the feet of preachers who talk about "wisdom" and "signs."

Fortunately, the choice is not between going to church to hear a sermon or staying at home with a newspaper or book. In church one can also receive the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus Christ (and pray for a good sermon in addition). Some time ago, Emil Brunner suggested that the sacraments are the best antidote to a minister "who lives by his own wisdom rather than from the scriptures. Even the most audacious minister has not dared to lay hands on the sacraments."

Brunner continues, "One may so interpret the words of Scripture that the words speak the opposite of their intent; but the Sacraments, thank God, speak a language independent of the language of the Pastor. They are a part of the message of the Church least affected by theological or other tendencies; and that is their special blessing." Brunner may have underestimated the audaciousness of some ministers who feel as entitled to redesign the sacraments as they feel inclined to avoid the cross of Christ. But where the sacraments are left intact, they point straight back to Christ's self-giving on the cross.

Dissatisfied with ministers who live by their own wisdom, I turned to the Eucharist. Its celebration takes the participants back to the night in which the Lord of Glory was betrayed and to the day on which his crucified body was suspended between the heavens and the earth. Its "special blessing" lays in not letting us forget that Christians' lives rest on Christ's body broken and his blood spilled and that their calling is to "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." In the Eucharist the church receives itself anew by the power of the Holy Spirit as that which it is and ought to be—the body of Christ given for the salvation of the world. Augustine put it beautifully to his congregation: "So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its members, it's the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply Amen, and by so replying you express your assent."

The gathering of believers is the place where by the power of the Spirit and through the celebration of the Eucharist we are made into the body of Christ-for our own salvation and for the salvation of the world. And so on any Sunday morning I happily leave my newspaper at home and head for a church whose primary purpose is neither to enlighten nor empower me, but "to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Will the stress on the Eucharist produce a church withdrawn from public engagement? It could. But it need not. Indeed, as William T. Cavanaugh argues in his fascinating book *Torture and Eucharist* (1998), a proper celebration of the Eucharist is a liturgically enacted counterpolitics to the politics of this world. By drawing the church back to the cross of Christ, the Eucharist furnishes the church with resources to resist the injustice, deceitfulness and violence that mark the world for which Christ died.