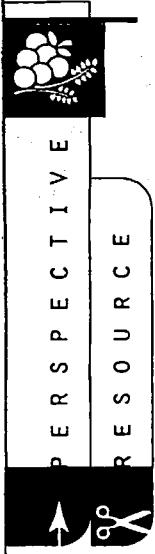


More Than Words

grace-ful gestures at the Table

L O R D ' S
S U P P E R



KAREN B. WESTERFIELD TUCKER

A visitor to our seminary chapel once asked me to show him the “sign language” I used when presiding at the Lord’s Supper. He thought that it made the service “dramatic,” but was confused that I gestured throughout the course of the eucharistic prayer, since during prayer eyes were to be closed and heads bowed.

I responded that the gestures used at the communion table were not a pantomime, and neither were they a sign language for the hearing impaired: I wasn’t necessarily expecting the congregation to be watching. Rather, the movements were intended as part of a full-bodied expression of thanksgiving to God the Father for the gift of the Son and the ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and the Lord chose both words and material signs to convey his love in the sacraments, our words of prayer and praise may be accompanied with physical expressions.

Though the celebrant (usually the pastor) prays and gestures as the representative of the congregation, the entire assembly has a role in embodying the communion prayer. There is no *prescribed* choreography, though one can find actions that are shared across different Christian communities: they constitute a repertoire to be drawn from. Each person and congregation should use gestures and postures that are meaningful in their tradition and appropriate in their culture, and that reflect God’s grace. By words *and* actions, Jesus’ long-ago work is remembered and made present for the assembly.

The Celebrant’s Gestures

Many eucharistic orders used today are composed according to a fourfold structure that reflects the events of the last supper described in New

Testament accounts of the institution of the Lord’s Supper: Jesus took the bread and wine; he gave thanks and blessed them; he broke the bread; and he gave the bread and cup to his disciples. These four actions—taking, thanking/blessing, breaking, and giving—may be translated into several simple gestures made by the celebrant during the course of the communion service. The breadth and height of the gestures should be determined by one’s own physiology, the size of the space in which the service is held, and the placement of furnishings near the communion table.

1. Taking

The celebrant receives the elements with extended arms from representatives of the congregation in full sight of the assembly. The bread, usually placed on a paten (plate), and the wine or juice (in a flagon or pitcher) are then placed on the communion table. Since communion is the Christian family meal *par excellence*, and in most families the table blessing is said after the food is prepared and the table is set, it is appropriate to prepare the elements before the eucharistic prayer begins. The bread may be uncovered, and the liquid carefully poured. The gesture of pouring may be made more visible by slowly increasing the distance between the pitcher and the chalice (cup); the sight and the sound of falling liquid is a visual and audible reminder of the blood of Christ that was poured out for many. If the congregation uses individual cups in a serving tray, the pouring of wine into a single chalice still may be used as a sign of the unity of the body of Christ.



Karen Westerfield Tucker is an assistant professor of liturgical studies at the Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

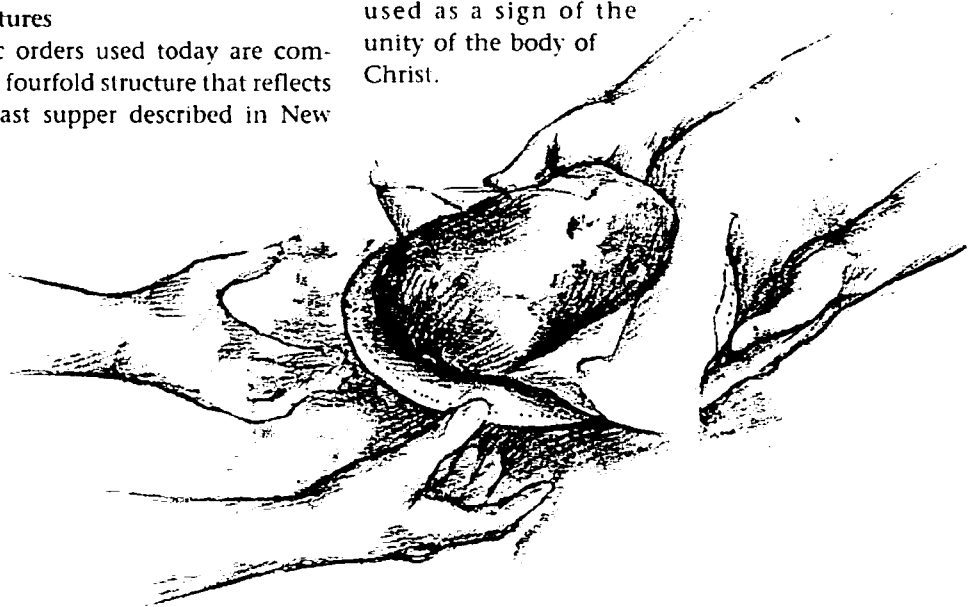


Illustration by Scott Holbeck

2. Thanking/Blessing

In some parts of the church it has been customary for the celebrant to kneel in penitence and humility when offering all or part of the eucharistic prayer, though this posture has occasionally generated concern because it suggested adoration of the sacrament. The growing preference is for the celebrant to adopt the gesture for prayer known from at least the third century—the *orans* (praying) position—of standing with palms upward, and arms slightly upraised and away from the body. This position may be used throughout the course of the prayer, or it may be interspersed with segments where the hands are loosely grasped in front of the body. Above all, the gesture should communicate prayerfulness and hospitality.

When the words of institution are spoken in the prayer, the celebrant may lower the hands and lift the bread during the appropriate words, followed then by the raising of the cup; or, instead of lifting the elements, the presider may gesture toward them.

If the prayer includes an invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiclesis*) over the gifts, the celebrant may extend the hands, palms down, over the bread and cup. For an *epiclesis* over the people, the *orans* position may be raised and broadened to suggest the embracing of the congregation: or one or both hands may be extended in front of the body at the eye level of the celebrant, with palms toward the congregation.



FROM A FORTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD MAN WHO NOW WORKS FOR MISSIONARY-OUTREACH TO JEWISH PEOPLE



I was brought up in the Jewish faith. I remember the Passover celebration as a holiday when all the families got together. It was a big occasion. For children, one of the most fun Passover activities was the hiding of the *afikomen*. During the ceremony, a bag with three matzohs would be on the table. A grown-up would take out the middle matzoh, break it in half, and return half to the bag. But the other half would be wrapped in a napkin and hidden somewhere for a child to find later. This was the *afikomen*. The child who found it would be rewarded with money. Then the grown-up would crumble the *afikomen* and distribute it to the family while saying the Hebrew prayer for the blessing on the bread.

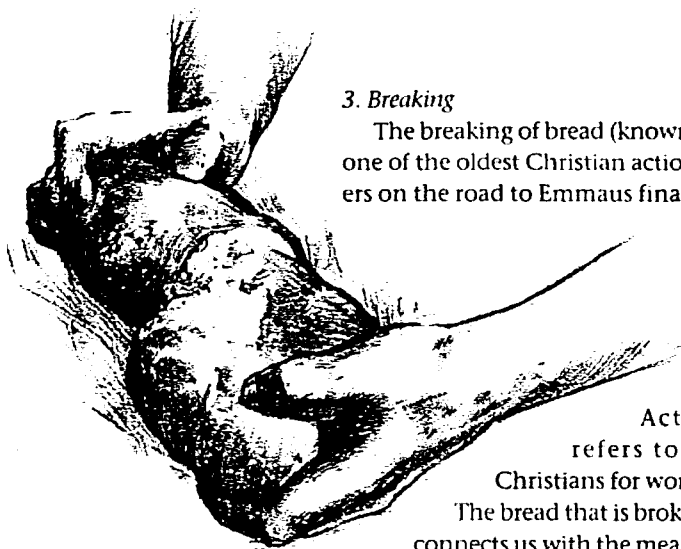
As I grew up, I knew something was missing from my life, and in college I spent a lot of time trying to find out what it was. But eventually I gave up and began to pursue money. I was very successful at it, but I sure wasn't happy. When I was forty, a friend phoned me the week before Palm Sunday. He said, "Dennis, we're having a Jewish man come to our church

to do a demonstration about the Passover. Our pastor told us to invite our Jewish friends, so would you like to go?"

Our family went to that service. When the Jewish missionary made his presentation, my Jewish jaw dropped into my Jewish lap.

After the service, I ran after the missionary and said, "We have to talk." For six weeks, he came to study the Bible with me, and I went to his congregation of Messianic Jews to worship. With my head, I made the realization that Christ was the Messiah. One Sunday, I found myself crying and crying. The connection between my head and my heart had been made. I had found the answer to the thing I was looking for, and that Passover celebration had been the milepost that pointed me there.

Now the Passover feast has such significance for me. The broken matzoh, the cup of redemption—they point to Christ, the fulfillment of the Old Testament Passover. The three matzohs symbolize to me the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Wrapping the broken matzoh in a napkin reminds me of Christ being wrapped in the burial cloths. And when we find him, we are rewarded beyond our dreams. My life has totally changed.



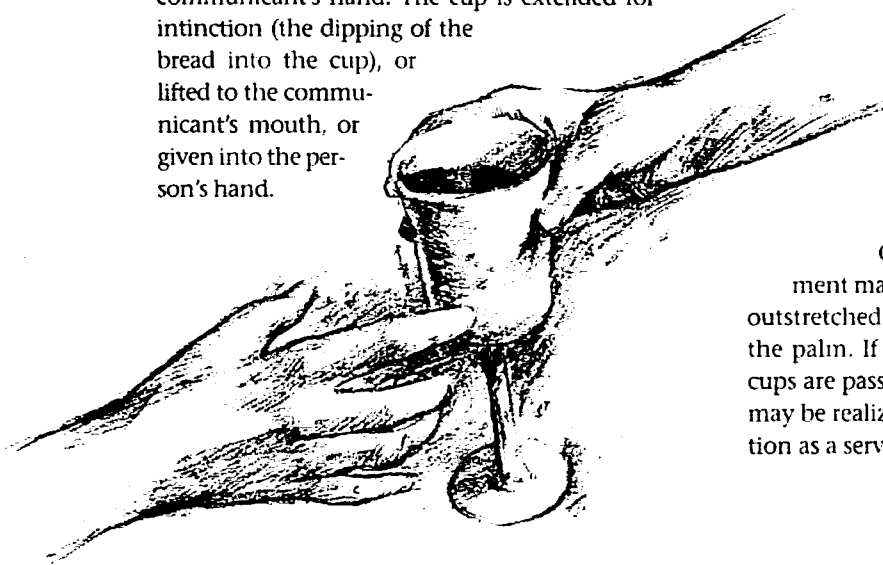
3. *Breaking*

The breaking of bread (known as the "fraction") is one of the oldest Christian actions. When the travelers on the road to Emmaus finally recognized Jesus, it was in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:30-31); the phrase "to break bread" in the Acts of the Apostles refers to the gathering of Christians for worship and fellowship.

The bread that is broken in today's services connects us with the meals and celebrations of past Christians, and it looks forward to that heavenly meal when we shall share in the feast with all God's saints. The loaf or flat bread is lifted from the paten and divided in silence or to the accompaniment of words recalling Christ's institution. The chalice is held securely and lifted high in silence or with accompanying words. The celebrant then does the final preparations before the distribution.

4. *Giving*

Just as God's grace is given in the sacrament, the server *gives* the elements; the recipients do not take them for themselves. A piece of bread is placed into the communicant's hand. The cup is extended for intinction (the dipping of the bread into the cup), or lifted to the communicant's mouth, or given into the person's hand.



The Congregation's Gestures

The congregation too should use movement to reflect their thankfulness to God. The following are among the more common gestures for members of the congregation.

1. *Offering*

In the early church, the people would bring from home the wine and bread that would grace the Lord's table. That which was not used for communion was typically distributed to the poor and the clergy. It is therefore fitting that members of the congregation—perhaps those who have purchased the wine or juice and who have baked the bread—present the paten and the pitcher to the celebrant. As these representatives of the congregation do so, the rest of the assembly may join in the action of offering the gifts for holy use by standing (if they are not doing so already). This posture in biblical times and in the ancient church signified respect or honor for one greater than oneself.

2. *Prayer*

The people may assume a variety of postures and gestures, depending upon personal preference, congregational practice, and the season of the church year. Postures include sitting, kneeling (especially during Lent), and standing.

The head may be bowed in prayer or raised in thanksgiving and praise. Hands may be folded with fingers interlocked, palms may be placed together, or the hands and arms may be uplifted in the *orans* position.

3. *Receiving*

Openness to God's grace in the sacrament may be represented by the hands open and outstretched to receive the bread that is placed onto the palm. If trays containing bread and individual cups are passed in the pews, the gesture of receiving may be realized by having the adjacent person function as a server for both elements. ■