

To Bless and Sanctify: Three Meditations on the Sacrament

Baking a Sacrament Prayer

Kris Wright

The wheel of the week has turned to Saturday once again. Inevitably, during the course of the day, my mind is drawn toward Julina Lambson Smith. On Sunday, January 3, 1886, she recorded in her diary: “Fast day. No breakfast to get. Prepared bread for sacrament. Cooked a good dinner. Did not go to meeting. Can hardly get up and down I am so lame. Jos. brought Kahaana home with him to dinner. I got supper with the help of the girls. Feel some little better this evening.”¹ I have read this one little paragraph many times, trying to tease meaning out of this brief entry. Did Julina see her sacred baking as a female contribution to the sacrament ordinance, or was this merely another food preparation task for her?

Since reading about Julina Lambson Smith, the idea of making the sacrament bread won’t leave me alone. I am similarly intrigued by an obituary in the *Woman’s Exponent* for Frances Ann Adams, who made the sacrament bread for her ward for twenty-five years.² Could sacramental bread baking be a form of female ritual?³

For most of its history, bread has been made at home. Perhaps early Mormon women like Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy in Kirtland transformed their kitchens into sacred space. She recalls, “Blessings were poured out. Solemn assemblies were called.

Endowments were given. The elders went from house to house, blessing the Saints and administering the sacrament. Feasts were given. Three families joined together and held one at our house. We baked a lot of bread.”⁴ I wonder who brought the bread to the early meetings of the School of the Prophets. Zebedee Coltrin paints a vivid picture where bread is central to their worship: “The sacrament was also administered at times when Joseph appointed, after the ancient order that is, warm bread to break easy was provided and broken into pieces as large as my fist and each person had a glass of wine and sat and ate the bread and drank the wine; and Joseph said that was the way that Jesus and his disciples partook of bread and wine.”⁵

I contemplate the possibility of entering the realm of an ordinance that is traditionally performed by men by baking the bread. Such a horizontal expansion along the “x-axis” of where the sacred and profane intersect allows women to experience and recover religious rituals from the “bonds of verticality.” Scholar Lesley Northup asserts that such “creative ritualizing has allowed women in a variety of cultures to more fully articulate and re-envision their religious experience. In many instances, it has also provided a mechanism for social critique and renovation.”⁶ The idea of women seeking to claim religious ritual space has been problematic in many faiths. Northup describes a cartoon which pictures an ancient sacrificial rite. A young woman lies waiting on a stone altar, a large knife raised over her by a priest in elaborate ritual clothing. A spectator who is watching the scene, comments to another, “Serves her right. She was always whining about women not being allowed to participate in the services.”⁷

Notwithstanding, I make arrangements to bake the sacrament bread for a month, hoping in my own way to claim horizontal space. Baking bread has always been a curious alchemy of art and science. Early in my homemaking career, I took on the task of making my own bread. With my copy of *Laurel's Kitchen*⁸ propped up on the counter, I would fret about the right water temperature, proofing the yeast, and finding the perfect place for the dough to rise. I gained confidence and soon perfected a couple of recipes and baked bread a couple of times a week. Then I graduated to owning a Bosch mixer, to keep up with the demands of a growing family.

It is early on Saturday morning when I begin the process of making the bread. After working with whole grains for many years, I can't bring myself to use white flour but think there could be a possible rebellion if I present a dense, 100 percent whole wheat loaf to my ward. I settle on spelt, which will still yield a loaf light in color and texture. I grind the spelt berries—embracing the teachings of a whole history of Homemaking classes. Yet this is no superficial exercise in Molly Mormonism—I find great pleasure and meaning in my task. I measure out water, yeast, olive oil, honey, and salt and begin to mix the ingredients. I watch the transformation of these simple yet symbolic elements.

This time I am not using my bread mixer. I want this to be the work of my own hands—and I realize at this moment that, by separating myself from the task through technology, in some ways, I haven't really made bread in several years. Bread is a living process, and kneading the dough brings its own rewards. The repetition and rhythm free the mind for contemplation. My hands are sticky, but I feel the familiar sensation of the dough beginning to spring to life beneath my fingers—the leaven in the lump. It is here that the transcendent nature of this holy food begins—the symbol of the body of Christ.

As I rhythmically knead the floury mass, I feel the power of this newly born, embodied ritual. The familiar words spring to my mind: “O God, the Eternal Father, we ask thee in the name of thy Son, Jesus Christ, to bless and sanctify this bread to the souls of all those who partake of it, that they may eat in remembrance of the body of thy Son . . .”

My little daughter pulls up a chair beside me. “What are you doing?”

“Making the sacrament bread,” I reply.

“Oooh, nice,” she sighs, slipping her arm through mine.

A feeling of holiness envelops my kitchen. Food by its very nature readily lends itself to symbolic use, and a home where people share meals together easily becomes ritual space. Since the publication of Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* in 1957, academics have debated the nature of the function of ritual and how it moves the believer out of time and space into an alternative sacred reality.⁹ Yet female ritualizing often occurs in place and time; it is rooted in the here and now, in everyday materials and in ordi-

nary locations where women live and work. This ritualizing and the attendant horizontal expansion of sacred space can be described as “the activity of incubating ritual; it is the act of constructing ritual either self-consciously and deliberately or incrementally and editorially.”¹⁰

The dough has been transformed into a smooth ball, and set it in a protected place, then sheltered with a red tea towel. Covering the sacrament bread with colored cloth doesn’t resonate with my Mormon sensibilities. I search for a large white napkin. Mirroring the ritual preparation of thousands of sacrament meetings, I gently drape the bread in white. I go through the typical bread-baking process—punching down the dough and allowing for a second rise, shaping the loaf, waiting for a third rise, and then into the oven. Once it has cooled, I cover the bread again with the white cloth.

I take the bread to church the next morning, and I’m completely unprepared for my own reaction. We sing, “O God, th’ Eternal Father” and all of sudden I am too emotional to sing as I watch two priests, both of whom I have known since they were three, carefully breaking up my bread. I know that my sacrifice is a broken heart and a contrite spirit, but it feels very meaningful to lay something tangible on the altar as well. There is “a difference between doing something yourself and observing someone else doing it[. It is] a matter of great significance.”¹¹ In a small way, I am a partner in feeding my ward this sacramental meal. The deacons approach our row. Gandhi’s words spring to my mind, “There are people in the world so hungry, that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” I approach my God through bread—the morsel of bread that I eat now, the bread that I have fed His sheep today, the bread I have baked.

Notes

1. Julina Lambson Smith, quoted in Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 346.

2. “Obituaries: Frances Ann Adams,” *Woman’s Exponent* 31 (March 1903): 78.

3. Tony Begonja, *Eucharistic Bread-Baking as Ministry* (San Jose, Calif.:

Resource Publications, 1991); H. E. Jacob, *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History*, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2007).

4. Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy, 1816–1902, “Life History of Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy Written by Herself,” typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, <http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/NTracy.html> (accessed May 14, 2011).

5. Salt Lake School of the Prophets Minutes, October 3, 1883, in Merle H. Graffam, ed., *Salt Lake School of the Prophets Minutes, 1883* (Palm Desert, Calif.: ULC Press, 1981), 38.

6. Lesley Northup, *Ritualizing Women: Patterns of Spirituality* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1997), 85. Lesley Northup has written extensively on the topic of ritualizing women and the horizontality of these rituals. Her scholarship has deeply influenced my thinking on this topic. See also her “Expanding the X-Axis: Women, Religious Ritual, and Culture,” in her anthology, *Women and Religious Ritual* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), and her “Claiming Horizontal Space: Women’s Religious Rituals,” *Studia Liturgica* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 86–102.

7. Lesley A. Northup, “Emerging Patterns of Women’s Ritualizing in the West,” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 109.

8. Laurel Robertson, Carol Flinders, and Bronwen Godfrey, *The Laurel’s Kitchen Bread Book: A Guide to Whole-Grain Breadmaking* (New York: Random House, 1984).

9. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 1987). For a critique of Eliade, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and his “No Need to Travel to the Indies: Judaism and the Study of Religion” in Jacob Neusner, ed., *Take Judaism, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2d ed. (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986). For a discussion of the usefulness of Eliade in Mormon studies, see Richard L. Bushman, “Eliade’s Return,” *The Mormon Review* 1, no. 3 (2009): 1–4, <http://timesandseasons.org/mormonreview/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/MormonReviewV1N3.pdf> as well as “MR: ‘Eliade’s Return,’” <http://timesandseasons.org/index.php/2009/09/mr-eliades-return/> (accessed May 14, 2011).

10. Ron Grimes, *Reading, Writing and Ritualizing: Ritual in Fictive, Liturgical and Public Places* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1993), 5.

11. Ann Braude, ed., “Blu Greenberg,” in *Transforming the Faiths of Our Fathers: Women Who Changed American Religion* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 243.

This Is My Body: A Mormon Sacrament

Matthew Bowman

In thinking about the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, I want to first discuss language: religious language, which is to say, words that are not simply language. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus Himself is in some sense language: the Word of God, which "became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory" (John 1:14, NRSV). What these verses tell us is that language is not simply a tool of description, but rather the way in which God invokes His presence in the world. In Genesis, of course, God creates simply by speaking; for John, God initiates the work of salvation that is the life and death of Jesus Christ by cloaking that same Word in flesh. If we read the words of scripture to discover the world as God imagines it should be—a world of order, truth, and redemption—we see in the Word of Christ His action to make that world true.

All of this is why we should study the scriptures—and really study them, in the way I hope to do while I'm standing before you today. What I'm going to ask you to do here is to read closely and carefully, to seek the deep patterns of metaphor and meaning that illuminate the ways the bread and water, the body and blood, illustrate divine reality as the authors of scripture understood it. What we should presume when we study scripture in search of that great organizing Word is the absolute presence of significance: There are no irrelevancies. Every choice of word, syntax, emphasis, or allusion carries with it meaning, and adds pieces to the totality of the world that God is dreaming. And so, if we spend our fifteen minutes of study on a single verse, it may be so much the better for us.

So. Let's turn to the institution narrative of the Lord's Supper, here, in Mark 14:22–26 (NRSV):

While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it.

He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.

"Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

What we are given here is not an explanation for what the Lord's Supper is or why it was important; what we are given here is a story: a narrative with character, plot, and action. And this is important, because the Lord's Supper is not something we believe; it is something we do. It is a ritual that we enact, a story that we imitate; these are words which we take upon ourselves. We do not merely hear and understand them cognitively but make them part of our own robust, multi-dimensional beings, part of our time, our bodies, and our actions. And in so doing, we seek to make their power our own.

What is that power? I propose it's twofold. First, the Lord's Supper teaches us to see the world sacramentally. Strictly speaking, of course, despite our colloquialisms, the Lord's Supper is not *the* sacrament but *a* sacrament—that is, a rite in which God has promised to deliver His grace in some formalized and particular way. Baptism and the temple ordinances might also be considered sacraments. And all of them are marvelous for a particular and pointed reason: They show us the ways in which the mundane things of the world—bread, or water—might suddenly tilt in particular times and places and refract the lovely and blinding light of God's love in ways unexpected and dazzling.

But the Lord's Supper also presents to us a particular way of thinking about what God's grace might do for us, and that is its power to evoke in us holy and typological memory, to bring us into a particular flow of history in such a way that revises our understandings of who we are and to whom we belong.

Every Sunday, we imitate the lives of a band of first-century Jews; we remember with our hearts, and our minds, and our bodies; and we become conscious of history as God sees it, dated by its own pulses and rhythms. We learn to date our lives by His reckoning rather than our own, and we learn to see ourselves as the spiri-

tual brothers and sisters of the group that sat in that rough and simple upper room that night, members of the same great body of believers, sitting together to receive the bread and water, which are the body and blood of our Savior.

What do these things mean about the ways in which the Lord's Supper might change us? To answer that question, I, again, want to look closely at the texts, at the very beginning of Mark's account: "While they were eating . . ." At its most basic level, the Lord's Supper is just that: a supper; a meal, shared among friends. Why is this important? The Apostle Paul answers, chastising the Corinthians for the ways in which they served it:

When you come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord's supper.

For in eating every one takes before another his own supper: and one is hungry, while another is drunken.

What? have you not houses to eat and to drink in? or do you despise the church of God, and shame them that have not? what shall I say to you? shall I praise you in this? I will not praise you. (1 Cor. 11:20–22 NRSV)

The New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan has a great deal to say about the importance of meals in the ancient Mediterranean world. For most, they served as a key place to enforce social distinctions: to exclude those deemed unworthy on grounds of poverty, or gender, or status as a slave or servant or laborer. For Paul, and for other Christians, meals were the place to subvert these distinctions and instead to celebrate the radical inclusivity that Christ taught and that Paul repeated: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NRSV). At the Lord's table, all that was required was a broken heart and contrite spirit.

And indeed, once we begin to read carefully and see sacramentally, once we are alert for the sudden appearance of God's grace, we begin to see the Lord's Supper everywhere in scripture: food and drink as Christ, and the eating of them as the creation of a community of worshipers. Christ first proclaims Himself as a worker of miracles at the wedding feast of Cana, where He reveals that in plain water there may be rich wine. He repeatedly defies the social boundaries of his time by eating with prostitutes and lepers and the unclean. And the only miracle Christ performs

that is repeated in all four gospels is His feeding of the five thousand.

When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."

One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him,

"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"

Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all.

Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.

When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."

So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. (John 5:5-13 NRSV)

This miracle is, perhaps, the greatest type-scene of the Lord's Supper in scripture, and reading it will help us understand better what goes on in the sacrament, particularly when we note the attention Christ gives to the bread. He blesses it and passes it across to all those who have come to hear Him, and it is only a matter of verses later that Christ tells us that He is the bread of life. Bread is Christ's gift, and it comes inextricably entwined with Christ's word, which of course is God's word. As Christ gives the bread, so does God give us Christ.

Further, the wonderful thing about this story—and the institution narrative in Mark—and, more, in the way that we Mormons administer the rite is that it is Christ's disciples who pass and gather the bread. We bear Christ's grace to each other; we serve it as we pass it down the rows; as the memory of that upper room makes us the spiritual children of the first apostles, so in serving the bread of life to each other do we make each other our brothers and sisters.

Paul, again, has something to say about this:

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ?

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16–17 NRSV)

There is, of course, only one Bread of Life; and for Paul, the rite of the Lord's Supper is similar to the rite of baptism, of which he says in Romans 6:3: "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" Notice that we are not here baptized *in* the name of Christ, but *into* Christ; we are clothed in His identity, brought into His body. These sacraments are not merely a symbol but a means by which God extends the reach of the Holy Spirit to make us all the spiritual children of His Son. And as we serve it to each other, we become instruments of that grace.

Now, there is another way in which the feeding of the five thousand echoes the ritual of the Lord's Supper. Let's compare the language here. In John 6:11 (NRSV), as Christ prepares to feed the five thousand, we read: "Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted."

Now remember Mark 14:22: "And as they were eating, he took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.'"

The patterns here run toward similarity: Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives.

The same pattern repeats in all the other gospels:

Matthew 26:26: Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."

Luke 22:19: And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

[And, even, in a profoundly interesting move, in 3 Nephi 18:3:] And when the disciples had come with bread and wine, he took of the bread and brake and blessed it; and he gave unto the disciples and commanded that they should eat.

The liturgical theologian Gregory Dix identified this fourfold pattern—taking, blessing, breaking, giving—as what he called the “shape of the liturgy.”¹ For us to rightly celebrate the Lord’s Supper, we must present the bread and water to the congregation, we must pray over them, we must break the bread, and we must offer them to our fellow worshipers.

But it seems to me that we can see also the very thing that we celebrate in the shape: the Atonement itself appears here, as Christ takes upon Himself the flesh of human life, blesses those around Him in miracle and teaching, is broken on the cross, and gives us all life eternal. The Lord’s Supper then reminds us that the Atonement extended from the birth to the death of Christ and reminds us to remember the incarnation as much as the cross.

Interestingly, the Joseph Smith translation of these verses in Mark drives this theme home; Christ there emphasizes not only His death, but His life, adding to the admonition to “remember him” the poignantly particular “this hour that I was with you.” Each moment of the shape of the liturgy, then, calls us to remember a facet of Christ’s life and death: the body broken, but also born, the body slain, but also resurrected. And Mormon scripture in particular emphasizes the life as much as the death of Christ: His presence with his disciples, His communion with them, and by extension our communion with each other.

Thus, the Lord’s Supper is not only a type of what has happened but also what is happening and, ultimately, what will happen. It gives us the entire scope of salvation history, from our fall to our redemption, wrapped up in the barest of actions, because all of those things are bound together in Christ’s exodus through mortality.

Now, the theme that I hope is emerging here is that, the deeper we push at the ideas presented to us in the Lord’s Supper, the greater its scope extends; the more nuanced our examination of the words, the more we understand our own actions. We see in them not only the works and the history of Christ but also, increasingly, our own. In what we do there, at the Lord’s Table, we are told what we do now and what we should do in the rest of our lives—and, most importantly, we see those two things merge. We are the ones who break the bread, the body of Christ—those

young men up on the stand thus represent all of us, sinners in need of grace every one. But we are also the ones who give—who pass to each other as Christ did the bread of life—who create the corporate body of Christ by partaking of its grace, and helping others eat of it as well.

Notes

1. Gregory Dix, *Shape of the Liturgy* (New York: Continuum, 2005).

Holy, Holy, Holy

Kristine Haglund

We speak so often of “taking” the sacrament and too rarely of receiving it. Our discussions revolve around what we should do, what we should wear, what we should sing, when we should arrive at church, how we should quiet our children so that we can be certain to constrain the Lord’s Spirit to be with us. It’s a little silly, really, to imagine that we’re in charge, that a member of the Godhead might be put off by the shade of our shirts or the happy prattle of our children. I’ve always loved what Annie Dillard had to say about such delusions:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.¹

Yesterday was a day I needed to be lashed to the pew. I was visiting my brother’s ward for the naming and blessing of a sweet

new nephew. My brother's ward is a funny pie-sliced wedge of city and suburbs, a sometimes awkward mix of suburban apartment-dwelling graduate students and inner city residents, mostly poor, mostly immigrants, many from Liberia. Most of the members are new(ish) converts, and many of the men are therefore adult Aaronic Priesthood holders. And yesterday, several of them helped with the administration of the sacrament for the first time. Or, better, yesterday they ministered to us—to me—in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

The first prayer was in beautifully African-accented English. I lost track of how many times it started; I only know it was enough for me to hear and feel every word. "O God, dee Eternal Fader"—the repeated invocation more earnest each time. And when all the words (or nearly all, at least—in the end, we all shared a single soul, because the plural "s" just would not come out) were perfectly pronounced, there were no twelve-year-old deacons lining up in white shirts; in fact there was no lining up at all, just a bewildered clustering around the sacrament table, a lot of whispered instructions, and a few young men leading their elders by the hand to show them which way to go, or, in one case, to steady an older brother who walked with some trouble.

There wasn't a lot of quiet prayer or pondering among the members of the congregation, either. We were all nervous to see what would happen; maybe a few people were scandalized by the hint of chaos. I was mostly scrounging around for tissues for my leaky eyes. After a few minutes, there was a motley parade back up to the table—servants of God in parkas, kente cloth, a bright orange sweater, and a necktie or two. Another blessing, another confused outpouring of grace, and it was finished. The cloth folded, our brothers returned to sit among us in the pews, as though they had not just been transfigured, as though they had not been—a moment ago—holy vessels of God's surpassing love.

I used to think that people were all mostly alike, that if we learned the same things, and especially if we belonged to the same church, we'd eventually understand each other well enough to get along, to feel something at least vaguely warm and fuzzy for one another, and that we'd become unified by being more like each other (by which I meant, of course, that everyone would come around to my way of thinking). I thought we could make

ourselves into brothers and sisters by force of will (mostly mine). To my shame, I believed that I mostly knew how things should be done. I knew what a well-planned, elegantly executed sacrament service was and assumed that it was the goal of all congregations. I thought that loving my fellow Saints, especially newborn ones, mostly meant helping them know how to do things the “right” way. Once we had mastered the basics of reverence, I thought, we might touch the hem of God’s garment, might get a staid taste of mercy.

It is not like that at all. Not at all. I have nothing to teach, no help to offer. I am small and broken, and it turns out that I know nothing of love. Yet holiness rains down in wild, pelting torrents, without warning or reason, though we don’t expect or deserve it. Because we don’t deserve it. The mercy seat is right there, in front of us, the table groaning under the weight of Christ’s broken body, His love poured out like water, laughing at those tiny cups as it floods the room to cleanse and heal and refresh, to hold us all in the womb of grace, until we are reborn as true brothers and sisters.

Note

1. Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 52.