

BREAKING BREAD

“ They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ”



HOLYHABITS

MISSIONAL DISCIPLESHIP RESOURCES FOR CHURCHES

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To order more copies of the Holy Habits resources, or to find out how to download pages for printing or projection on screen, please visit brfonline.org.uk/holy-habits.



Remember the context

This Holy Habit is set in the context of ten Holy Habits, and the ongoing life of your church and community.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, **to the breaking of bread** and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:42-47

A prayer for the faithful practice of Holy Habits

This prayer starts with a passage from Romans 5:4-5.

Endurance produces character, and character produces hope,
and hope does not disappoint us...

Gracious and ever-loving God, we offer our lives to you.
Help us always to be open to your Spirit in our thoughts
and feelings and actions.

Support us as we seek to learn more about those habits of the Christian life
which, as we practise them, will form in us the character of Jesus
by establishing us in the way of faith, hope and love.

Amen

INTRODUCTION

The breaking of bread is a distinctive term of Luke, the author of Acts. He uses it most powerfully when Cleopas and his companion describe how Jesus had been made known to them ‘in the breaking of the bread’ (Luke 24:35).

It is not clear from Acts 2:42 how Luke is using the term when describing the life of the first Christian communities. Commentators are cagey about its use. Is it describing the act which opened a common Jewish meal? Is it a specific liturgical and sacramental act? C.K. Barrett argues that “‘breaking of bread” was not a Jewish term for a meal and in this sense must have been a Christian development’ (*Acts 1–14*, T&T Clark, 2004, p. 165), i.e. an embryonic service of Holy Communion. James Dunn is more circumspect, suggesting, ‘We may assume that on some occasions at least the meal included a shared commemoration of the last supper but Luke has not gone out of his way to make this plain’ (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth, 1996, p. 35). Hans Conzelmann points out that Luke makes no attempt to distinguish between an ordinary meal and the ‘Eucharist’ and suggests that ‘the unity of the two is part of the ideal picture of the earliest church’ (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Fortress, 1987, p. 23).

This exploration of **Breaking Bread** works with a broad understanding of the term: one that includes and honours the practice of Holy Communion, but reflects upon **Breaking Bread** in other ways and contexts too – ways that also make Jesus known.

When exploring the specific sacramental act in which bread is broken and wine shared, the term ‘Holy Communion’ is used most often. Other terms such as the Lord’s Supper and the Eucharist are also used when appropriate to represent different perspectives and traditions.



Resources particularly suitable for children and families



Resources particularly suitable for young people

CH4 Church Hymnary 4 (also known as Hymns of Glory Songs of Praise)

RS Rejoice and Sing

SoF Songs of Fellowship 6

StF Singing the Faith

Reflections

In first developing this resource, the team from the Birmingham Methodist Circuit centred their thinking on the reminder that the early Christians found God in every aspect of life and that they gathered together to share their lives as a community. They made mistakes, they didn't always share and yet they found something so special that they tried to follow Christ's example. So they, like him, took bread, the ordinary and everyday; they gave thanks to God, they broke it, they shared it and they consumed it.

Through **Breaking Bread**, you too are invited to gather and take the everyday; thanking God for it, breaking it, sharing it and eating it. And as you do this, in many varied ways, including sharing Holy Communion with Christ, our prayer is that you will be transformed by God's love and be people energised by the Spirit to play your part in transfiguring your churches, your communities and the world beyond so that God's kingdom may grow on earth as in heaven.

Above all, our prayer is that this habit helps you to deepen your trust, knowing yourself loved by God and challenging you to offer God your love, individually, as a church and as a community, through your living alongside others as a thankful, broken, blessed and sharing people.

Please refer to the notes in the Holy Habits Introductory Guide about considering the needs of those with diabetes, food allergies or intolerances, eating disorders or other restrictions around food and drink.

Introduction to the theme

Place a table at the front or centre of your worshipping space. Dress the table nicely with a cloth and a centrepiece (perhaps a cross, a flower or a bowl of water and some pebbles). Place a large plate upon the table with a range of pieces of bread upon it. Remember to include at least one piece of gluten-free bread, taking care to place this in a way that prevents it touching the other bread.

If time permits, you could meet before the service to bake some of the bread that you place on the table. If you have or can borrow bread makers, then have one or two of these baking bread as you meet so that the fragrance adds to the occasion.

Invite a group of people to come and sit around the table – making this group as diverse as possible. Sit among them and facilitate a conversation about bread. This is a conversation you want the congregation to listen in to and get involved with. Start by asking people what their favourite type of bread is. Invite those at the table to sample some of the bread on the table. Ask them to say which is their favourite and why. Then ask people to think and share times and places when they **Break Bread**. Encourage a range of answers: e.g. when I am eating my lunch at work, when we share Holy Communion, when I volunteer at the day-care centre. Point out the range of contexts in which we break bread and how the Christian practice of **Breaking Bread** began in homes: at the last supper and in the church Luke describes in Acts 2. Sometimes this may have been as part of a meal, sometimes as part of an early form of Holy Communion service. Sometimes both. On all occasions, the breaking of bread would remind people of Jesus and help them to recognise his presence with them.

Invite people to take the bread from the table (either now or at the end of the service) and to do one of two things with it later in the day:

- Break it and share it with a prayer of grace before a meal at home.
- Take it as a gift to someone in need of help or encouragement.

Encourage people to notice how they sensed the presence of Jesus when they shared bread in either of these two ways.

GROUP MATERIAL AND ACTIVITIES

Some of these small group materials are traditional Bible studies, some are more diverse session plans and others are short activities, reflections and discussions. Please choose materials appropriate to whatever group you are working with.

Breaking bread

Readings from Matthew, Mark, Luke and others

‘The breaking of the bread’: the Greek original of the New Testament only has the exact equivalent of this phrase in two places. Look up Luke 24:35 and Acts 2:42. Familiarise yourselves with the passage in which each verse occurs, and then discuss or ponder the question of whether or not the phrase suggests something special is being referred to, and whether it refers to the same thing in both passages. Hold your answers to come back to.

Now look at a selection of the following verses, again observing the story in which they occur. If you are in a group, each person could find one and share it with the others; you need not look them all up, depending on time available. Note or discuss what your passages have in common, and where they differ. Do this before reading the notes below.

- Matthew 14:19; 15:36; 26:26
- Mark 6:41; 8:6, 19; 14:22
- Luke 9:16; 22:19; 24:30

In these passages, it is always Jesus who gives thanks or blesses the bread, then breaks and shares it. It seems an action characteristic of him. Does that shed light on the phrase in one of those opening verses, Luke 24:35? Remember Jesus is recognised by this action, as if it is something special to him, not just the blessing any Jew would offer before a meal. The same actions occur in all these passages; however, in the ‘feeding of the multitude’ stories it appears that everyone is included – food is showered on people in abundance – whereas in the last supper narratives Jesus shares just with his intimate group of disciples. The feeding stories implicitly

(explicitly in John 6) associate what happened with God's gift of manna in the desert at the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt; whereas the last supper narratives suggest that these actions are to do with Jesus' body soon to be broken on the cross. What difference do you think that makes? Is **Breaking Bread** a sign of the kingdom, or is it a memorial of Christ's death?

All of these Gospels associate the last supper with Passover. In John's Gospel, the association with Passover is made in a different way: Jesus dies when the Passover lambs are being sacrificed in the temple in preparation for the Passover meal (John 18:28; 19:14), and a scriptural text about the Passover lamb is applied to Jesus' dead body – 'none of his bones shall be broken' (John 19:36; cf. Exodus. 12:46; Numbers. 9:11). Paul wrote 'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed' (1 Corinthians 5:7, NIV). So the breaking of the bread points to the story about Israel being freed from slavery in Egypt as a model for understanding how Christ dies to free humankind from the tyranny of sin and death – the blood on the doorposts averts the angel of death, and the meat/bread strengthens for the journey. Jewish teachers around the time of Jesus associated with Passover God's gift of manna on the journey through the desert, and John's Gospel brings all these themes together in chapter 6, his feeding story. So the answer to the question about whether the breaking of the bread is a sign of the kingdom or a memorial of Christ's death may be not 'either-or' but 'both-and'.

Now turn to another selection of verses and study them in the same way.

- Acts 2:46; 20:7, 11; 27:35
- 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:24

In all these passages, **Breaking Bread** has apparently become characteristic of the Christian community, as before it was characteristic of Jesus; but is it always special or often just sharing meals? Three things to consider:

- **Prayer** is nearly always associated with **Breaking Bread**.
- Often the action imitates those characteristic actions of Jesus.
- In Paul's letter, **Breaking Bread** is associated with the last supper, whereas that is never entirely clear in Acts. However, in Acts 2:42 (the other of our opening verses), the phrase 'the breaking of the bread' sounds like a kind of 'technical term' – rather like someone now speaking of 'the Communion' or 'the Eucharist'.

In the light of these scriptures and your thoughts or discussions, explore these questions:

- 1 Should blessing, breaking and sharing bread be ‘special’ or ordinary? Should this be a ‘holy habit’ whenever we meet together?
- 2 Should **Breaking Bread** be exclusively reserved for the Christian community, or did Jesus give the bread to the disciples to distribute to everybody?
- 3 What might all this mean for:
 - o our relationship with food in general?
 - o our understanding of the sacrament?

John Wesley wrote a sermon on ‘The Duty of Constant Communion’. You could finish by reading the following extracts:

The first reason why it is the duty of every Christian [to receive the Lord’s Supper as often as he can] is because it is a plain command of Christ. That this is his command appears from the words of the text – ‘Do this in remembrance of me’... They are... his dying words to all his followers.

A second reason why every Christian should do this as often as he can is because the benefits of doing it are so great to all that do it in obedience to him – namely, the forgiveness of our past sins and the present strengthening and refreshing of our souls...

The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty and leads us on to perfection...

In order to understand the nature of the Lord’s Supper, it would be useful carefully to read over those passages in the Gospel, and in the first epistle to the Corinthians, which speak of the institution of it. Hence we learn that the design of this sacrament is the continual remembrance of the death of Christ, by eating bread and drinking wine, which are the outward signs of the inward grace – the body and blood of Christ.

For further discussion

If you want to explore this further, you can follow discussions of ‘The Duty of Constant Communion’, in volume 2, issue 1 of Wesley House’s *Holiness* journal (www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness).

ARTS AND MEDIA

There are many films and books containing scenes about **Breaking Bread** which could be used as an illustration in worship. However, it is suggested that the following films and books are watched or read in their entirety and followed by a discussion to go deeper into the topic of **Breaking Bread**.

Films

Cast Away (12, 2000, 2h23m)

In *Cast Away*, the struggle to survive and the scarcity of food mean that, on the castaway's return to civilisation, the emotional significance of various things including food is very noticeable. At one stage, Tom Hanks appears to try to share food with an inanimate object. This film is useful for discussion of symbolism and of attaching of value to an item.

- This film illustrates the overlapping of **Eating Together** and **Breaking Bread**. Is there something sacramental about the castaway's desire to share food with an inanimate object?
- How does this challenge our understanding of **Breaking Bread** and its relationship to **Eating Together**?

Of Gods and Men (15, 2010, 2h2m)

A monastic community stay in Algeria, even though they know it may cost them their lives. Their life is prayer. (French with English subtitles.)

- What part does **Breaking Bread** play in sustaining the monks in faithful discipleship?
- How does the monks' extreme situation speak to your context?



The Miracle Maker (U, 2000, 1h30m)

An animated film of the life and teaching of Jesus, which features several episodes of **Breaking Bread**, including the feeding of the 5,000 and the last supper. This is an excellent resource for introducing the last supper to children and younger people in particular. For others, you may wish to discuss:

- What significance is there in Jesus **Breaking Bread** with his disciples in a domestic setting?

Places in the Heart (PG, 1984, 1h51m)

A US Depression-era Texan widow tries to save a family farm with the help of a blind white man and a poor black man. An extraordinary community is formed.

- In the final scene, bread is broken and shared as part of a Holy Communion service. How does the broken bread feed them?
- What can we learn from this film about Communion and community?

Books: fiction

Are there people in your church or local community who would like to discuss some of these books at a book club? Guidance on how to form these is widely available online, and you could also ask denominational training officers for help.

Hillytown Biscuit Church and the Custard Cream Communion Club

Ruth Whiter (Christian Education Publications, 2010)

As new children join the church, they explore how to live together.

- Read the final chapter: do the preceding chapters make the service of Holy Communion more or less significant?
- How does the book help you to understand the importance of **Breaking Bread** together in all-age groups?

Making Heart-Bread

Matthew Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Dennis Linn (Paulist Press, 2006)

This book presents a spiritual practice of making heart-bread to add richness and meaning to daily life.

- Could you use this practice alongside the petition in the Lord's Prayer for daily bread?

The Power and the Glory

Graham Greene (Vintage Classics, 1940)

The moving story of a priest who, though deeply anxious that he has been a failure, continues to administer the Mass at a time and in a place where the practice has been banned.

- How might the divine simplicity of **Breaking Bread** be subversive in a kingdom way?

The Velveteen Rabbit

Margery Williams, illustrated by William Nicholson (George H. Doran Company, 1922)

The story of a stuffed rabbit who is on a mission to become real, or known, through the love of his owner.

- How do we discover the reality of Christ's presence in the act of **Breaking Bread**?

HOLY HABITS is an initiative to nurture Christian discipleship. It explores Luke’s model of church found in Acts 2:42–47, identifies ten habits and encourages the development of a way of life formed by them. These resources, which include an introductory guide, have been developed to help churches explore the habits in a range of contexts and live them out in whole-life, missional discipleship.

Biblical Teaching
 Fellowship
 Breaking Bread
 Prayer
 Sharing Resources

Serving
 Eating Together
 Gladness and Generosity
 Worship
 Making More Disciples



Edited by Andrew Roberts, Neil Johnson and Tom Milton



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