



Sent and Gathered: A Musical Metaphor for Missional Liturgy

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While nearly all Christians seem to be interested in the renewal of worship today, perhaps the single most overlooked element of our liturgies may also be one of the most critical for churches committed to Christian mission in our communities. I am speaking of that moment when worship concludes. In comparison with the rest of the service, the sending or dismissal is brief and usually unburdened with regard to our expectations that something profound might happen there. Yet, that is precisely when the doors of the church are opened to send the gathered back into the world to do the work of Christ's mission. As a means of considering the potential of worship's concluding rite, I would like to introduce a musical image that may shed light on the latent power of this moment for Christian mission. Specifically, I will compare the movements of the liturgy to the structure of the four beats in a typical musical measure (or bar) in order to demonstrate the difference between worship that is inwardly focused and that which reaches simultaneously in toward the community of faith and outward toward the mission of God in the world.¹

¹This line of inquiry follows the trajectory of the Music and Theology Colloquium, instituted by Jeremy Begbie in Cambridge, England. It seeks to use music as a tool for doing theology.

The service of God does not end with the formal ending of a particular service of worship, which means that the liturgy must make clear that God's people are not dismissed only to gather next week but are sent to perform God's mission in the world.

All services of Christian worship, regardless of denomination or liturgical tradition, have ritualized endings. There may be a concluding statement by a presider, a formal dismissal, a benediction or closing prayer, a song; comprehensive liturgies may include all of these things. There will always be a means by which we draw a service to conclusion and release people to engage in the world. My emphasis here will apply equally to both traditional liturgies and “free” church idioms of worship. The distance between these two extremes, however, is diminishing today. We begin our discussion by taking note of how the shape of worship across traditions is now converging.

LITURGICAL CONVERGENCE

The church in North America is enjoying a period of increasing liturgical convergence. Not long ago, there was frequent and heated discussion about the so-called worship wars, where the liturgical practices of traditional churches were challenged by those employing various forms of “contemporary worship.” Now, as the smoke from the battlefield clears, we find that people are attempting to learn from one another: traditionally liturgical churches are adopting contemporary modes of liturgical expression from megachurches; megachurches and emerging church networks are embracing the use of arts in worship; all churches are exploring ways to use media, moving images, and technology in worship and ministry; and the worlds of the evangelical and “free” churches are embracing once-eschewed patterns of formal liturgy. In part, this comes as the fruit of a long-standing movement toward liturgical renewal.² This convergence also results from the desire among churches of many kinds to accept some of the gifts of post-modern culture, including renewed interest in symbol and mystery, emphasis on personal experience, capacity for instantaneous worldwide communication, eclecticism, and a search for authenticity. The result of this confluence of liturgical streams is that many churches are settling upon a shared, but broadly construed pattern of worship that will be familiar to those who worship within traditional liturgical settings.

The pattern that is widely being embraced emerges from the fact that when the people of God assemble, they do so as a local configuration of the body of Christ. This makes “gathering” a key feature of any form of worship. When assembled, what do the people of God gather around? They come together around the traditional Christian symbols and their related liturgical actions, word and sacrament (known as “ordinances” in many free church traditions). Having been gathered and fed by fellowship, Scripture, and sacramental practices (or remem-

²A brief history of the Liturgical Renewal movement in the church in the West can be found in Patrick Keifert’s *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 41–53. A culminating effect of the movement in the Roman Catholic Church was the liturgical reform that resulted from the Second Vatican Council. Its relationship to “contemporary worship” is explored helpfully in *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Christian Worship Today*, ed. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 23–27.

brances), God's people of every denomination and tradition disperse at the close of worship back into the communities where they live and work and where they witness to local neighborhoods. This increasingly accepted liturgical format is identified in four movements: gathering, word, sacraments, sending.³

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The natural flow of energy in this four-part liturgical scheme is linear, beginning with the actions of assembly. It can be compared to the first beat of a musical measure in a typical four-beat bar. Gathering is the downbeat, the first and leading pulse among four equally engaging pulsations. It sets the stage for what is to follow; typically, it announces a theme and launches a liturgical trajectory that is played out through hearing the word and, at least occasionally, celebrating the sacraments. Word and sacramental celebration (and remembrance) are the second and third beats of our musical measure. By the time the sending occurs—the final, often deflated fourth beat—the service of worship is all but over. At this ultimate point, people have offered their praise, heard the word, released their petitions, and been enriched by an encounter with God and God's people. Liturgy completed, they are dismissed.

The liturgical convergence that is characterized by this four-beat construction brings a welcome end to years of warring over liturgical idioms and music. Churches of many denominations and traditions find it useful to craft their liturgies with these four movements clearly marked.⁴ Whether traditionally ordered or free, richly figured or spare, the pattern provides for worship that has a reasoned sense of plot and flow. The gathering, whether it contains a single entrance hymn or a twenty-minute set of songs, draws the people together in the place and moment of corporate worship. Assembled, they hear the word of God read and proclaimed, increasingly through the use of arts. The sermon and/or artistic proclamation of the word bring the assembly to a liturgical culmination. When the sacraments or ordinances are celebrated, a second climax is attained.⁵ The sending constitutes the liturgical denouement.

³See Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mixture of Old and New* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

⁴See, for example, the communion liturgies published in the *United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1992); *The Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's African American hymnal, *This Far by Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

⁵Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 50.

SENDING OR DISMISSAL?

While this four-part action is a useful blueprint for worship, care must be given to the final segment. Wrongly construed, it can give the sense that worship is a containable set of activities bounded by a musical prelude and postlude, and complete within itself. This is the message conveyed when worship's final action is understood not as sending, but as dismissal.⁶ To be dismissed is to be set free from participation in an activity. Dismissal at the close of worship has the power of adjournment, where the activities of worship are suspended until the worshipers reconvene at a later time. The implication is that nothing relating to worship will occur until the resumption of liturgical activities the following Sunday morning. This type of liturgical release heightens the notion that worship is something removed from the rest of life, reserved for those inside the faith community and separated from the mission of God outside the church walls. Thomas Schattauer identifies this conventional view as an "inside and out" approach to worship and mission. It occurs where

liturgy is understood as the quintessential activity for those inside the church community. Mission is what takes place on the outside when the gospel is proclaimed to those who have not heard or received it or...when the neighbor is served in acts of love and justice.⁷

When the final liturgical movement is understood as dismissal, its action is often nearly imperceptible, forgotten, or a mere afterthought. Illustrations abound: a hasty benediction is uttered, without care given as to poetic language or gesture; a rote blessing is recited without consideration for that which came before or that which is to follow; a closing song is sung while the worship leaders beat a hurried exit. The following practice, though witnessed in Southern California, has

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become regrettably routine: a megachurch service of worship concluded with the pastor, wearing nonliturgical mufti, standing before his people. He raised his hand in an awkward farewell gesture and said clumsily, "Ah, okay, see you all next week." The practical implications of this action are clear: we have now concluded that for which you have gathered; with no further agenda, we conclude with a casual *auf Wiedersehen*. The theological message, in such cases, is equally clear, though problematic. The action implies that worship is a distinct set of activities that begin with people drawing together and end with people dispersing. There is no indication in

⁶The English word "mass" comes from the Latin phrase that concluded the Roman Catholic rite: *Ite, missa est* ("Go, it is the dismissal").

⁷Thomas H. Schattauer, "Liturgical Assembly as Locus of Mission," in *Inside Out: Worship in an Age of Mission*, ed. Thomas Schattauer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 2.

the dismissal that God's presence goes with people beyond the church door. There is no apparent expectation that God's people will be the church beyond the congregational campus or that the mission work they might engage in is connected to the Sunday service of worship. Yet, faithful believers know that it is an act of worship to live continually in God's presence while engaging in secular pursuits as well as in Christian service. In pondering the question of whether a believer's worship in church is distinct from his or her engagement in the world, Miroslav Volf says:

The answer to this question depends on where God is to be found. It is a consistent teaching of the Bible that God's presence is not limited to a particular locale. God is present in the whole created reality. No segment of it is secular in the sense that the transcendent God is absent from it. All dimensions of life in the world have what one might call a sacramental dimension: they can be places of meeting God in gratitude and adoration.⁸

If there is a dimension of worship that occurs in the world, then a liturgical dismissal sends entirely the wrong signal. It suggests that God's presence and purpose only occur to believers when they gather.

A richer view of worship emerges when the final movement in the liturgy is understood as *sending*, whereby the people of God are sent forth into the world to engage in the ongoing work that has begun in the assembly. The implication is that worship consists of two kinds of activities, those within the church walls and those without. Worship, as Volf asserts, is both "adoration and action."⁹ He observes:

The sacrifice of praise and the sacrifice of good works are two fundamental aspects of the Christian way of being-in-the-world. They are at the same time the two constitutive elements of Christian worship: authentic Christian worship takes place in a rhythm of adoration and action.¹⁰

This rhythm suggests that the two movements are organically related. Adoration and action are not to be separated into inward and outward functions, but maintained as a single operation enacted in two spheres: within the assembly of believers and throughout their dispersal in the world. The organic nature of this connection has been captured by Schattaer, who contends that the conventional "inside and out" approach to worship and mission must, in this age of mission, be supplanted by an "inside out" approach:

This approach locates the liturgical assembly itself within the arena of the *missio Dei*. The focus is on God's mission toward the world, to which the church witnesses and into which it is drawn, rather than on specific activities of the church undertaken in response to the divine saving initiative. The *missio Dei* is God's own movement outward in relation to the world.¹¹

⁸Miroslav Volf, "Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections of a Christian Way of Being-in-the-World," in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 208.

⁹*Ibid.*, 203ff.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 207.

¹¹Schattaer, "Liturgical Assembly," 3.

This missiological approach to worship is currently ascendant in liturgical theological thinking. In a book called *Missional Church*, an ecumenical team of North American Protestant theologians writes:

Our postmodern society has come to regard worship as the private, internal, and often arcane activity of religionists who retreat from the world to practice their mystical rites. By definition, however, the *ekklesia* is a public assembly, and its worship is its first form of mission....The reality of God that is proclaimed in worship is to be announced to and for the entire world.¹²

Similarly, Carolyn Headley and Mark Earey urge a break from the conventional approach to worship in mission that

assumes that worship only operates when “they” come to “us.” But worship also has a role in forming Christians for mission “out there.” By energizing and envisioning worshippers, by proclaiming the gospel, by shaping an alternative worldview and by modeling aspects of the kingdom, regular worship plays a significant part in the mission of a local church even before a visitor enters the building.¹³

Adoration and action, worship as the first form of mission, worship inside out: what these images hold in common is an understanding that there is no such thing as an adjournment of worship. That which concludes the Sunday service is not a dismissal, but a dispersal, a sending. To be sent from corporate worship is to be released for and reengaged in the mission of the church in the world. Eddie Gibbs has put it succinctly: “Mission *means* sending.”¹⁴

SENDING, MISSION, AND MUSIC

To say that sending is mission is to suggest that the customary downbeat stress within the four-part pattern of worship is at odds with the church’s purpose. Conventionally, we think of the gathering as the first element in our worship, our first step toward adoration. Adoration continues through hearing the word read and proclaimed and culminates in the mysteries of the sacraments. With the sending, the adoration concludes in its most explicit sense and gives way to action. In the conventional sense, the sending represents finality (“Go, it is the dismissal”) and worship has come to its completion. But, if adoration and action are understood as equal liturgical engagements, the sending is not a mere ending but a compelling. It both concludes corporate adoration and inaugurates action. Sending engages the church for mission. While it is the downbeat of gathering that sets the tone and the course for the church’s adoration, it is the fourth pulse, the sending,

¹²Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 242.

¹³Carolyn Headley and Mark Earey, *Mission and Liturgical Worship* (Cambridge, England: Grove Books, 2002) 10.

¹⁴Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000) 51. Italics added.

that propels the church toward its missionary work. The mission is the *leitourgia*, the “work of the people” in their communities.¹⁵

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If sending engages worshipers in mission, then, to complete the imagery of the four-beat musical bar, the stress of the downbeat no longer dominates. While the downbeat of worship inaugurates adoration, the fourth beat initiates action.

The success of this musical image draws upon the compelling quality of the final beat in a musical bar. There is, in fact, more generated at the ending of a measure than there is completed. Within a given four-beat bar, there flows a limited amount of musical material—precisely of the duration of four beats. The shape of the measure, with its strong leading impulse on the first beat and a secondary stress occurring on the third beat, imbues a musical performance with shape and coherence. But, the fourth beat in a bar, though the last and least stressed, is also critical. While it serves to conclude, the last beat is also weighted with anticipation. It is the pier from which is launched the next musical moment and all that succeeds it. This applies even when the final beat of a measure occurs at the end of a musical piece. Even there, the final beat leans toward something: not music, in this case, but silence. Every musical performance ends in a hush, an aural vacuum. The final cutoff from the conductor is not followed by immediate applause from the audience, nor even the intake of breath by the singers or players. (Indeed, even the listeners may be left momentarily breathless.) There is an unwritten *tacet* in the music, the one that follows everything, the silence that signifies the end of the piece, the pause that echoes the emotive power of the final musical moment. The more powerful the musical experience, typically, the longer the post-musical pause. The final beat of the last measure in the music leans directly toward this pregnant hush.

In relation to the measures of music that follow within a musical piece, each final beat of a measure can be construed as an upbeat. The upbeat is the unwritten beat *before* the music, the moment of preparation. The conductor raises the baton; the singer draws breath; the violinist extends the bow over the strings, making it ready to be drawn into play at the downbeat. The final beat in a measure has the same power: it leans toward the next bar and raises its musical possibilities; it strains forward with an expectation of musical completion.

It is this “leaning forward” quality of the fourth beat of a musical bar that makes it an intriguing metaphor for liturgical sending. Like the sending, the final beat of the musical bar brings to an end one period. At the same time, it is intrinsi-

¹⁵Liturgy is often defined as “the work of the people.” Originally the civic work of the populace in Greek use, it now typically refers to shared participation in worship by all in the assembly.

cally connected to that which precedes it, and it leads forcefully into all that follows. It creates a moment filled with anticipation, with leaning toward that which will be fulfilled. The sending is an upbeat, not divorced from that which precedes or follows, but organically part of the whole of adoration and action; the sending is a culminating moment of adoration and the inauguration of the worship action that proceeds from it.

For this reason, it may be useful for worship planners and leaders to think of the sequence of liturgical actions in this way: Sending is not a hasty afterthought. It is the primary element of preparation for a demanding aspect of worship (action) that lasts typically from one Sunday morning to the next. During the week the faithful are engaged in outward worship, the “work of God’s people,” which we might call *the living liturgy of discipleship*. The week of work in Christian mission is followed by the gathering of God’s people who, now spent, draw earnestly together for fellowship and the refreshment of the “bread of life” and the nourishment of the sacraments. In short, worship consists of God’s people being *sent and gathered*, that is, sent out for action in the world and gathered again for the hour of adoration.

SENDING GOD’S PEOPLE FORTH IN MISSION

In practice, what would it mean to see our sendings as the beginning of worship in the world? It does not mean that the sending should compete in duration with the other liturgical movements. (Here, the musical metaphor breaks down, as all metaphors must when stretched beyond their useful limits. The beats in a musical bar have different kinds of stress, but each are necessarily of equal relative duration.) Like the denouement in any drama, the sending will always want to be brief and summary. But to see the sending as a powerful liturgical moment means to prepare it intentionally and conduct it with vitality. It is not an afterthought, nor a casual “see ya later,” but a force-filled word of compulsion. It contains a sense of the impending action that is ahead, and it is grounded in the sense that God is present in the world of action even as in the place of adoration. We are sent forth, not on our own, to make the best of the coming days, but with God. We are blessed, benedicted, infused with the conviction that God is with us in the journey from inward to outward; that God’s Spirit is leading us from adoration into action; that Christ’s love in its inward reaching has redeemed the body and in its outward reaching will continue his mission of healing, peace, justice, and salvation in the world. A strong sending will bless God’s people on their way but will also propel them insistently into the world of living discipleship.

A common liturgical misinterpretation of the sending occurs when the celebrant offers a concluding prayer instead of a benediction. While there is nothing wrong with a final prayer, in the case where it replaces the benediction or blessing, it deflates the compelling moment of sending and makes of it an ending and dismissal. The language of prayer is directed toward God, not God’s people. Though it

may ask for God's presence during the coming week, or for God's guidance in the mission of the church, it does not *send* God's people into mission. A prayer in place of a benediction represents an "inside *and* out" model of worship. The "*inside out*" model requires a firm word to the people. The benediction is not a concluding prayer. It is a declarative statement of blessing spoken directly to those who are to go forth in action. The Aaronic blessing, as an example, is unequivocal in its pronouncement of God's ongoing presence and blessing. "The Lord bless you and keep you," it declares in the present tense. It has explicit performative force, in that it performs a powerful action in its very enunciation.¹⁶ Blessed by God's action in fulfilling this pronouncement, the people remove to worship in the world.

We have been considering the ways that worship is simultaneously directed inward as the body of Christ gathers to adore God and outward as people are sent into mission in the world. The use of the musical measure as an analog for the four movements of the liturgy has provided a means by which to demonstrate the potential for mission that resides in liturgical endings. When we understand the opportunity that rests within this often perfunctory rite, it raises the possibility that an entire service of worship be infused with missional intent. In a post-Christian age, when every church in North America resides within the mission fields, there is a need for Sunday worship to prepare God's people for Christ's work in their workplaces and neighborhoods. Renewing worship for mission requires that we attend to all aspects of our worship life together, planning them with discipleship in mind, and executing them with intention and excellence. When our gatherings are filled with inspiration and spiritual nourishment, our sendings may burst like levees and flood our neighborhoods with God's love. ⊕

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¹⁶The word performative is used here in the illocutionary sense of J. L. Austin, as developed in *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). For an explanation of the explicit performative power of pastoral pronouncements, see Clayton J. Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 45–53.