

Justly Broken: Worship and Mission

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Worship and mission. Out of the many different topics discussed this weekend at Verge LA, these two often feel most in tension with the other. Isn't mission what we do outside of the church—our outreach? Isn't worship what we do inside the church—part of our in-reach? I feel sometimes that our ritual acts of congregational worship are not easily seen as being part of the church's mission, and vice-versa.

I had an opportunity a few months ago to share dinner with my pastor, Ryan Bell, who is pursuing a DMin in missional church studies, and also two distinguished missional theologians, Al Roxburgh and Mark Lau Branson. Our conversation was exciting, thoughtful, but I think we all hit a wall when the topic of mission and worship came up. We had more silence and questions than answers.

As a worship minister at a missional church, the Hollywood Adventist Church, the relationship between mission and worship is a looming concern of mine. So I'm honored to be here at Verge LA to share some thoughts, along with the experiences of my congregation, on the relationship between mission and worship.

This is an overview of two primary acts of worship described in the Gospels and in the Hebrew Scriptures and their relationship to mission. How can scriptural theology of justice and Eucharist inform and challenge our contemporary forms of worship? There are two covenantal moments in scripture that find expression in ritual, liturgical

responses, and at both of those climaxes the ritual response is deeply concerned with the people of God being God's redemptive and just presence in the world.

The Sinai Covenant

Worship in the Old Testament (especially the Pentateuch and the Prophets) is a world-shaping act responding to God's covenant that is fulfilled through missional acts of justice. This covenantal movement of God in our lives—indeed, in all the history of salvation—invites a response. At Sinai, the Israelites responded to God's covenant in worship through rituals prescribed in the law. The vision of worship first given in Leviticus and then restated in Deuteronomy is that of a ritualized, reality-shaping worshipful response to God's covenant. This worship was a liturgical structure intended to symbolize all of creation and God's redemption of that creation through God's worshipping kingdom.

In the book of Leviticus, the vision of worship established at Sinai is that Israel would pursue purity to worship God through sacrifice at the tabernacle, culminating at a transformative ritual event—the Day of Atonement—that cements God's presence in Israel. Having encountered this holiness Israel returns to community bearing God's holy nature, thus creating a just and redemptive community. The liturgical laws and ritual proceeding from and responding to the Sinai Covenant allow Israel to worship God, become transformed in that worship, and thus live that experience of holiness for the sake of the world.

This just and redemptive community at worship is deepened further in Deuteronomy. Throughout Deuteronomy the laws for the worshipping community given

previously are revisited but with a much more socially just slant. More focus is given to the integration of deliverance and jubilee within the liturgical calendar growing from the Sabbath practice. Chapter 14:28-29¹ for example, describes a tithing system that provides food for resident aliens, orphans, and widows. This refrain of remembering “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” resounds throughout the law in Deuteronomy. The ritual acts, liturgical cycles, and lifestyle regulations—in other words, the *worship*—of these people are intended to be just.

The failure of this model is later criticized by Isaiah and the other prophets. Here the connection between social enactment of justice—what we might today call mission—and true worship is made, nowhere more explicitly than in Isaiah 1:1-20. Through the prophet God condemns the Kingdom of Judah,

“Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity. Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them.”

The worship of the Lord had been liturgically accurate; the people and the priests were offering sacrifices and incense, and they kept the divine calendar. Their worship was right worship—yet it failed. What remedy does God suggest? “...cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). *True, God-pleasing worship is worship that seeks to be God’s present and redeeming justice in the world.*

So if we’re going to take this worship from the Sinai covenant seriously, and if we are to honestly respond to God’s prophetic critiques of how this liturgical system

¹ **Deuteronomy 14:28-29.** “Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.”

eventually failed, then our worship consequently needs to transform creation in light of God's saving justice. *The yardstick for effective worship is not in our liturgy but in our mission*; it is not in our musical styles, our spoken creeds, or our artistic expressions—and I say this as an artist and musician in worship leadership. The worshipping people of God will necessarily “seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow”—or else we have not worshipped. At Sinai, the formative act of worship produces a mission of justice. We worship for the sake of the world.

The Gospel Covenant

In the Gospels, we are given another covenant connect with another ritual response. While in the Hebrew scriptures God dwelled among God's people in literal tents, God comes to dwell in a tent of human flesh as the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Towards the climax of Christ's ministry we find another covenantal ritual established by God as a remembering response to God's salvation. The central act of ritual response in the Gospels is God's new covenant expressed in communion, an act that forms us in Christ's own broken and poured-out nature for the sake of the world. This is the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. In the Gospels, both Christ's body and blood have a deeply missional purpose: in John, Christ says that the bread of his body is given “for the life of the world” (John 6:51); in Mark, Christ's blood is “poured out for many” (Mark 14:22-25).

This has become one of the primary worship acts of the church for two thousand years. For some traditions, it is even the weekly centre of worship and liturgy; for others it may only happen once a quarter. In my own congregation we've committed to placing this text, among others, at the centre of our own missional development with a renewed

approach to communion. We've been talking about—and attempting to live—as a Eucharistic community. Much of what I'm sharing here comes from these conversations, a missional listening process of transformation we've been engaged in for the past several years. Our missional Eucharistic identity is also indebted to our senior pastor's theological work.²

When the Church gathers in worship at the Lord's Table, we participate in the body and the blood of Christ.³ This is a formational event. I believe that the worshipping community is meant to be a Eucharistic community, and that there are definite implications of being formed by Christ's body and blood. For the church to worship God, that is, to respond to God's covenantal saving movement towards us with actions giving God praise and glory, we too must be broken for the sake of the world and poured out for many. We remember this in our thankful, communal worship.

At the Lord's Table, the remembering act of worship produces mission. God sent his Son, Jesus Christ—*for the sake of the world*. In remembering the body and blood of Christ in our worship we too are broken and poured out—*for the sake of the world*. We not only remember the body and blood in a recollecting sense, but also in the sense remembering, as opposed to dismembering; we become Christ's body anew. Our worshipping communities *are* the body and blood of Christ, broken and poured out in worship and mission—*for the sake of the world*.

² See "Give It Away Now," a sermon preached by Ryan J. Bell, 12 September 2009 at the Hollywood Adventist Church.

³ **1 Corinthians 10:16-17**. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."

So What?

All this having been said, is such a cycle of missional worship actually happening in our congregations? How are missional forms of worship any different from how we currently worship? There are immense implications for our liturgy when we worship for the sake of the world. A simple shift might be that we choose songs differently. A deeper shift might see a completely redesigned liturgy. We may even reexamine the scope of leadership roles within our communities; does this make our worship leaders into some of our primary missionaries? What conversations are happening between our worship leaders and our mission leaders? Are our liturgies and worship flows just, broken, and poured out? How do we connect adoring praise of “Holy, holy, holy!” with the justly broken covenantal responses I’ve discussed above? My own congregation is still figuring this out, doing our best to listen through the Holy Spirit to discern where God is moving in the world, the *missio dei*, to go there, and to worship there, be it standing before city hall and neighborhood councils, wading through the LA river bed, working with a graffiti artist, or gathered in our ramshackle fellowship hall by candlelight around the Lord’s Table, hearing God’s Spirit in our midst.

Closing Thoughts

As our churches meet for worship, our worship rituals bring us to the liminal place that forms and sends us into a worshipful, missional, justly broken life. Living that justly broken life necessarily brings us into a need for the liturgical ritual again. What we experience in the streets drives us into the sanctuary, and what happens in the sanctuary drives us into the streets. There's a cycle here: our worship forms us and breaks us for mission, a mission that incarnates God's salvation of justice and redemption in our communities—like Israel's worship in response to the covenant at Sinai, propelling us once more to thankful, glorifying, Eucharistic worship. This is justly broken worship that will once again form us and break us back into the world, poured out for mission, as the Body and Blood of Christ. This worship is our mission; this mission is our worship.