

**Rethinking our Sending Rites**  
by Jonathan Hehn

THEO 60404  
Eucharist: Theology and Celebration  
Rev. Michael S. Driscoll, instructor

University of Notre Dame, 2009

It has been said the the “Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church”<sup>1</sup> We the Church are influenced by our actions, and we in turn influence our actions. To put this into liturgical terms, the way we worship influences our belief, but what we believe also influences how we worship. Since early times Christians have gathered around two fundamental actions: the proclamation of God's Word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper<sup>2</sup>. These actions have been fundamental in shaping the way that Christians believe. This “*theologia prima*,” as David Fagerberg and others have called it, has given rise over the centuries to what we might call *theologia secunda*, theology that is not experiential but cerebral and explanatory. The practice of secondary theology, apparent since the early middle ages but especially since the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, has been the primary guiding force behind the reshaping of Christian worship. The fundamental actions of proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Lord's Supper have remained intact throughout nearly all the Christian traditions, and so the shaping of Christian worship according to *theologia secunda* has occurred most notably in those parts of the liturgy which Michael Driscoll terms “soft”. The “soft” parts of liturgy have grown up gradually around the fundamental actions and are a means by which the Church comments upon those two primary facets of eucharistic worship. They are the gathering rites, the transition rites between the liturgy of the Word and liturgy of the Lord's Supper, and the closing or sending rites. This paper seeks to examine and critique the sending rites of the eucharistic celebration. It will trace the early history of these rites, their use in the church of the Calvin's Geneva, and their current usage by congregations of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It will then examine ways in which the sending rites might be altered to better reflect a missional theology.

Eucharistic worship prior to the fourth century was in all places relatively free from liturgical accretions. The Church of the first few centuries had not yet come to a liturgical consensus about the two basic actions of the eucharist liturgy. *Theologia prima* was still very much valued over *theologia secunda*, and therefore little attention needed be paid to the “soft” parts of the liturgy, including the

1 See work of Henri de Lubac as well as the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* by Pope John Paul II.

2 The term “Lord's Supper” is used here in order to distinguish as one part of the entire Eucharistic celebration.

sending rites. However, even by the time of the writing of the *Didache*, some basic patterns of sending had emerged. Chapter 10 of the *Didache* includes a post-communion prayer with a strong eschatological focus. It calls for the second coming of Christ and the passing away of this world.

And after ye are filled, give thanks thus: 'We give thee thanks, Holy Father, for thy holy name. . . Remember, Lord, thy Church, to deliver her from all evil and to make her perfect in thy love, and to gather from the four winds her that is sanctified into thy kingdom which thou didst prepare for her; for thine is the power and the glory for ever. Let grace come, and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If any is holy, let him come: If any is not holy, let him repent. Maranatha. Amen.'<sup>3</sup>

The First Apology of Justin Martyr, written some fifty years later in or near Rome, does not mention such a post-communion prayer but does include the following description of how leftover eucharistic gifts and other offerings brought by the people were distributed after the meal.

. . . and there is distribution and partaking by of all the Eucharistic elements; and to them that are not present they are sent by the hand of the deacons. And they that are prosperous and wish to do so give what they will, each after his choice. What is collected is deposited with the president, who gives aid to the orphans and widows and such as are in want by reason of sickness or other cause; and to those also that are in prison, and to strangers from abroad, in fact to all that are in need he is a protector."

The first example from the *Didache* is clearly concerned with the immanent return of Christ. The kind of eschatological emphasis present in the *Didache* prayer can be considered representative of all Christian thought around this time, and speaks to a rich understanding of the Church as the *Ecclesia Militans*. The Church is to be in the world but not of the world, actively awaiting the coming of God's kingdom. These are the primary reasons that we proclaim the Word and celebrate the Eucharist, that God might continue to nurture the worldly Church so that it can work toward the coming of God's kingdom. We do not wait passively, but rather actively as participants in the saving work of Christ. So waiting for the coming of God's kingdom is profoundly linked to activity, to worldly work. The description of the offering from Justin Martyr helps to bring the eschatological theme of the *Didache* prayer into practical focus. The urban churches of the Patristic era engaged in active waiting through

---

<sup>3</sup> (Bettenson/Maunders 70). Bettenson, Henry, and Maunders Chris, ed. Documents of the Christian Church. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

works of social justice. Orphans, widows, the sick, the imprisoned, travelers and strangers, all were cared for by Christ through the work of his Body as a way of proclaiming the immanent coming of the Kingdom. They did so as a response to the acts of proclaiming the Word and eating the Lord's Supper, understanding themselves to be participants in the saving work of Christ and not merely recipients of it. Today we would say the church prior to the middle ages had a profoundly “missional” ecclesiology.

Unfortunately, as centuries passed, the *Church Militans* became increasingly inwardly focused. While the fundamental actions of the liturgy remained the same, and while the Church continued to collect offerings for its missions, liturgical evidence betrays what was a gradual but radical change in the Church's self-perception. Beginning with the Peace of Constantine (A.D. 312), Christianity slowly became the normal European and Near-Eastern religion. As John Baldovin terms it, the Roman empire was being “baptized” between the fourth and seventh centuries. Christianity became more and more widespread and so the perceived necessity for evangelical mission and works of social justice waned. The care of the baptized faithful, somewhat understandably<sup>4</sup>, became a dominate concern. In addition, the Church had long since lost its sense of the immediacy of Christ's return. Christian thought still centered around actively waiting, but rather than emphasizing external mission the Church now emphasized internal salvation. In the realm of liturgy we see this new theology appear via the gradual expansion of gathering rites. The purpose of these rites, rather obviously, is not send the people out but to gather them in. Rather than simply preparing in a functional way for the proclamation of the Word, the gathering rites brought focus to an inwardly focused ecclesiology. An opening procession centered around the entrance of the ministers; in Rome the *Kyrie* was eventually appropriated from its original use as part of a priestly litany to an opening act of penitence for the gathered people; the opening collect asked not for God's blessing on the world but for God's blessing on God's faithful people. Similarly, many other prayers and ritual actions appeared that focused on the salvation of the already

---

4 I mean to say that once Europe had been thoroughly “baptized”, there were comparatively few non-Christians left to convert but many new converts who needed nurture. The difficulty of travel made evangelizing other parts of the world difficult. Indeed we do not see widespread attempts at worldwide mission until the fifteenth century. Thus it is understandable that such a shift from a missional to an internally salvific ecclesiology occurred.

believers. By contrast, the sending rites, which point toward a missional ecclesiology, remained comparatively simple. The post-communion prayer, present in at least in some places since the time of the *Didache*, continued to ask for the sanctification of the Church, but by the seventh century had lost both an eschatological and missional sense<sup>5</sup>. By the time of the Verona Sacramentary, an episcopal blessing had appeared that was said *super populum*, again reinforcing not a missional but an internal ecclesiology. In most churches the deacon gave a perfunctory dismissal after the blessing and the service was ended.

The late middle ages saw the continual expansion of Christianity in the West and the explosive growth of an institutional church centered in Rome. Through the influence of the Carolingian emperors Roman Christianity and its liturgical forms became standard throughout most of Europe and North Africa. Medieval rites further grew in complexity, continuing the trend begun in the fourth century after the Peace of Constantine. The sending rites experienced several additions during this period which were codified in the missal of Pius V. The number of post-communion prayers was increased; several of these prayers could be recited sequentially by the presider. Additionally, what is known as the “Last Gospel” appeared after the formula of dismissal originally given by the deacon. This was a reading of the prologue to John's Gospel followed by a short summary prayer. As with many liturgical accretions, this one from the late medieval era further obfuscated the original form and meaning of the sending rite as a sending of the people into the world for mission.

The Calvinist Reformers sought to return the liturgy to a form according to the ancient church. For Calvin in particular, this involved a radical “trimming” of the liturgy, much more than was undertaken by the Council of Trent or Lutheran reformers. Calvin also favored scriptural texts over non-scriptural ones whenever possible. These guiding principles resulted in a simple rite of sending including a post-communion thanksgiving, the canticle of Simeon, and a blessing:

---

<sup>5</sup> This is based upon a survey of the post-communion prayers of the **1962** *Missale Romanum*, available at <http://www.angelqueen.org/missal/>.

### **Thanksgiving after the Supper:**

Heavenly Father, we offer thee eternal praise and thanks that thou hast granted so great a benefit. . . Now grant us this other benefit: that thou wilt never allow us to forget these things; but having them imprinted on our hearts, may we grow and increase daily in the faith which is at work in every good deed. Thus may we order and pursue all our life to the exaltation of thy glory and the edification of our neighbor; through the same Jesus Christ, thy Son, who in the unity of the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth with thee, O God, forever. Amen.

¶ After thanks has been given, the Canticle of Simeon is sung: *Maintenant Seigneur Dieu.*

[Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for Revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.]<sup>6</sup>

¶ Then the Minister dismisses the Congregation by pronouncing the Benediction used on Sunday.

[The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be merciful unto you. The Lord lift up His countenance upon you and keep you in virtuous prosperity. Amen.]<sup>7</sup>

-- from Thompson, Bard. *Liturgies of the Western Church*. New York: World Publishing Company , 1962. pp. 203-208

Calvin's liturgy helped to recapture a sense of eschatological readiness and a missional ecclesiology. Use of the Canticle of Simeon, which speaks of Christ as “a light for Revelation to the Gentiles<sup>8</sup>,” put into the mouth of the people a text essentially dealing with salvation history as fulfilled in the incarnation of Christ. By extension, this canticle calls to mind all of salvation history, including the *eschaton*. The Thanksgiving after the Supper clearly supports a missional ecclesiology. After having been nurtured by Word and Sacrament, the Church is to go out with a renewed faith, one that is “at work in every good deed.” The sanctification and edification of the *Ecclesia Militans* in the eucharist liturgy leads it to the “exaltation of [God's] glory and the edification of [the Church's] neighbor.” We are called out to share in Christ's saving work through the nurture provided us in Word and Meal. Despite these theological recoveries, however, the final part of Calvin's sending rite is a blessing over the people. Much like the addition of the Last Gospel in the medieval mass, the use of the Aaronic blessing obfuscates the missional focus of the sending rites, shifting attentions back to the salvation of the already believers after what should be their charge and dismissal.

The current *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) retains nearly

---

6 Luke 2:29-32. New International Version

7 (Bard 203). Thompson, Bard. *Liturgies of the Western Church*. New York: World Publishing 1962.

8 I realize of course that Calvin's parishioners were singing this text in a French paraphrase. These themes of the text are the same in both languages.

exactly the order of Calvin's *Forme of Prayers* sending rite. The post-communion prayers in the *Book of Common Worship* are not specified as part of the "Sending" rite, although this distinction is arbitrary; prior to modern idea of a four-fold ordo, historic liturgies (including Calvin's) simply considered the sending rites to be an accretion on the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There are four such prayer, each of which retains both a prayer of thanks and call to mission, echoing Calvin's "Thanksgiving after the Supper". This is followed by a hymn, spiritual, psalm, or the Canticle of Simeon, again retaining Calvin's use of a song, especially the first Lukan canticle, before the dismissal. Hereafter, though, the *Book of Common Worship* inserts a Charge to the people. This text has its parallel in the formula of dismissal in the current Roman Rite. There are three primary and several supplemental texts offered in the *Book of Common Worship*. All address missional activity, but Charge #1 is especially clear:

Go out into the world in peace;  
have courage  
hold on to what is good;  
return no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the fainthearted;  
support the weak, and help the suffering;  
honor all people;  
love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

However, despite the inclusion of a charge the *Book of Common Worship* continues to insert a blessing as the final liturgical action. The final action of any service is in some ways key to one's theological understanding of the entire celebration. As the ultimate action, it comments upon and solidifies all that has been done before it. Therefore, retaining a blessing of the gathered believers as the final action reinforces the already predominate attitude that eucharistic liturgy is primarily for the sanctification of the people, which it is not. Eucharistic liturgy is primary for the glory of God and the nurture of a people who are charged to go into the world, awaiting the coming of God's kingdom through the active participation in the saving work of Christ.

How then could one reshape the rites of sending in the *Book of Common Worship*<sup>9</sup> to better

---

9 Really these arguments apply equally well to the sending rites in current Roman Catholic and many Protestant liturgies.

reflect an eschatological and missional ecclesiology? How do we make it clear to those present that we must actively await Christ's return through work in the world? Firstly, reversing the order of Charge and Blessing would allow the Charge to comment more strongly on the nature of the actions that precede it. If the fundamental actions of proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Lord's Supper are meant to send us into service, then the final, summary action of the liturgy should focus on sending, not blessing. Simply reversing the order of these last two elements, then, would allow the liturgy to retain the blessing, which has been in place since about the fourth century<sup>10</sup>, while diminishing its importance as a theological commentary on the eucharist. Secondly, the blessing could be altogether abrogated or integrated into the post-communion prayer. This would obviously reject a very much ingrained part of the historic eucharistic liturgy, but would bring Presbyterian post-communion prayers closer in line with the more inwardly focused post-communion prayers of the traditional Roman Rite. Lastly, while the people traditionally respond to the blessing with "Thanks be to God. [Alleluia! Alleluia!]," or in the current *Book of Common Worship* with "Alleluia! Amen," an alternative and sung response could help retain the theme of mission. The congregation could sing the Cantic of Simeon after the blessing rather than after the post-communion prayer, or could adopt a non-scriptural text such as this one:

Behold, I make all things new,  
beginning with you  
and starting from today.  
Behold, behold I make all things new,  
my promise is true,  
for I am Christ the way.

Or simply this:

Through our lives and by our prayer  
your Kingdom come.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever future changes are made to the eucharist liturgies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) and other denominations, these need help recover a sense of missional ecclesiology. As "soft" parts of the liturgy, these rites are malleable in the best sense. They have grown up through the centuries around

---

10 (Deiss 215). Deiss, Lucien. *Springtime of the Liturgy*. Trans. O'Connell, Matthew J. St. Paul: North Central Publishing Company, 1979.

11 Texts taken from Bell, John L. *Come All You People: Shorter songs for worship*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1994.

the fundamental actions of proclaiming the Word and celebrating the Supper as a type of commentary upon those two primary facets of eucharistic worship. Through the history of Christianity they have changed in scope and focus to reflect the prevailing theology about these actions, and they must now be reshaped again as the Church seeks to recover its mission for a post-Christendom world.

### Bibliography

- Baldovin, John, F. "The Empire Baptized." in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Bell, John L. *Come All You People: Shorter songs for worship*. Chicago: GIA Publications, 1994.
- Bettenson, Henry, and Maunder Chris, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- The Book of Common Worship*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.
- Bower, Peter C., ed. *The companion to the Book of Common Worship*. Louisville: Geneva Press, 2003.
- Bradshaw, Paul F. *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Cabié, Robert. *The Church at Prayer, Volume II: The Eucharist*. Trans. O'Connell, Matthew J. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1986.
- Deiss, Lucien. *Springtime of the Liturgy*. Trans. O'Connell, Matthew J. St. Paul: North Central Publishing Company, 1979.
- Fagerberg, David W. *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004.
- Keifert, Patrick R. *Welcoming the Stranger: A public theology of worship and evangelism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Missale Romanum*. Pustet: 1963.
- Palazzo, Eric. *A History of Liturgical Books*. Trans. Beaumont, Madeleine. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Thompson, Bard. *Liturgies of the Western Church*. New York: World Publishing 1962.