



The Shape of the Liturgy is the Shape of the Mission

The Second Century Liturgy of Justin Martyr

by Joe Morris Doss



The Mission of the Church

The mission of the church must be that which God is up to. It must be that cosmic, that important, that good. In light of the radical nature of this mission we might do well to understand what it is not. The mission is not the church. The mission of the church is not Christianity. It is not evangelism. The mission is not religion. The mission is not belief. It is not faith. The mission of the Christian church cannot be secondary to anything, no matter how meet and right, no matter how crucial it may be as a means to the church's mission.

We must distinguish the mission of the church from what it is not, for confusion can be highly dangerous. Evangelistic fervor can pervert the gospel; marketing a version of faith can "sell out" the gospel; the gospel can easily be reduced to religion. Our mission must be no less than the causes of God. What are they?

I will offer two statements of faith. Consider which is the most important statement for you personally?

- We are called to embrace this life, as it is, as a gift, and to make gratitude for this gift the basic attitude of our life (especially through belonging to a people of

thanksgiving), becoming at home in the world and achieving the fullness of our humanity as lovers – finally, lovers of all that is, of the entire created order.

- We are to make this a better world. This world is not the final reality or our true destiny. We are to resist evil, identify where there is wrong and name it, support the weak, the oppressed, and the deprived; we must strive for that justice, compassion, and righteousness which reflects the inner life of God and which finally will be established when the prayer is realized that God's will be done on earth as in heaven.

It is perhaps normal to have a preference, based on personal experience or proclivities. Christian mission, however, demands that we take both as equally valuable and hold the tension together in balance. These two statements of faith seem to the world to be mutually opposed, or at least incompatible. Yet Christians have to believe in and work for both at the same time, refusing to cheat one way or the other. The mission of the church is CREATION and KINGDOM. (The problems with using the term "kingdom" are well known. Nevertheless, it is important that we not lose the scandal or, if you will, the "theological irony" contained in the term, and continue to wrestle with the reality to which it points.¹)

Notice how this is not a simplistic "this worldly" v. "other worldly" dichotomy, and any attempt to position those we

categorize as liberals and conservatives in one or the other understanding of the faith is disorienting; both fit in both and neither fits in either. They are a classic dialectic: the creation, since it presents the problem of evil, compels us as lovers of creation to eucharistic worship and a life characterized by thanksgiving; the kingdom, since it leads us into a life of holiness in prayer, drives one to establish justice in this world.

Therefore, we work for the kingdom by immersing ourselves in service to creation; we serve creation by keeping our eyes on the kingdom of God and living now as a citizen of that reign. The mission is one. Little corrupts mission more than sliding into the false dichotomies of this-worldly v. other-worldly and spirituality v. activism.

The Shape of the Liturgy in Justin Martyr

The second century Roman liturgy described by Justin Martyr² is the earliest text to demonstrate the shape of the liturgy, and therein, the mission of the Christian Church and how it is different from the mission of paganism. The church was surrounded by the Hellenistic paganism of Rome, and this was the primary background against which Justin demonstrated how Christians and Jews worship differently than other religions, and how Christian worship was something entirely new and unanticipated in religious and cultic cultures. He has several techniques to make his missional point. For one, he compares pagan sacrificial liturgy with a different kind of sacrifice found in Christian liturgy. He also compares the simple outline of what Christians did at that time with what pagans did. Finally, he shocks his pagan society with the way he uses their terminology — *sacrifice, offering, processions, meal, worship, supplications, ritual, festive* — metaphorically, turning it on its head and revealing Christian mission for what it is. For Christians, Justin employs certain words that are, if you will, “wrong.” For pagans, Justin employs these words that are familiar, and work well for their liturgies but that make no sense as he uses them to describe the liturgy that is Christian. In each case they have a shock effect, one that cannot be ignored and has a de-familiarizing effect; they demand redefinition. Justin does this to create an entirely new level of understanding and possibility, and one that should be

recognized as comparatively devastating for pagans.

Justin’s understanding of worship depends on the contrast between the pagan view of the cosmos and the gods’ purposes for humanity, and the Judeo-Christian view fulfilled, for him, in the Christ. The pagan universe was not a moral one, with any end or purpose toward which the gods were leading humanity and creation. The gods were concerned with their own society in the heavens and used human beings for their purposes and capricious whims in satisfaction of their heavenly relations. Their society was based on a pyramidal ranking in which each had his or her place and given role, often violently achieved, and the relationships were competitive and dangerous. One way to compete was to sponsor human beings in their place in society, giving the creature the wherewithal to function successfully within the lower realms of earth in imitation of the sponsoring god’s power and status. Thus, from a human perspective, to be blessed was to be sponsored by a god high enough in heaven to be placed in a similarly high position in the pyramidal society of earth. The cosmos was a heavenly pyramidal society in the heavens that ruled and was imitated by the pyramidal society in the world. Worship was offered in this context, from the rulers down to the slaves, seeking the blessings of the gods in terms of power, wealth, privilege and status.

Worship in Hellenistic Paganism was largely sacrificial. Their liturgies involved:

- Animals to be slain as the people’s offering
- Instruments of sacred song and music to praise the deity and give a festive air to the cult
- Sacred knives or bloody stones
- Acts of holy violence
- Processions with hymns through the streets taking the victims to the temple (sometimes they were great parades of pomp and ceremony with decorations of garlands), followed by more loud processions within the temple to “cover” the act of killing
- The point is to give God something to eat

According to Justin the shape of the Christian liturgy in its most simple or reduced form is:

- A communal gathering
- which enacts or remembers baptism,
- reads and considers Jewish and apostolic scripture,
- shares bread and wine, and
- shares a meal

From Justin’s *I APOLOGY*, 13³:

Therefore, what person of understanding will not publicly confess that we are *not atheists*, since we worship the maker of all this universe, of whom we say, as we have been taught, that *God has no need of blood-outpourings and drink-offerings and incense-burnings*, and whom *we praise as much as we can, by the word of prayer and thanksgiving over all that we take to eat*. We have received the tradition that the only honor that is worthy of God is not to consume by fire *those things which God has brought into being for human sustenance*, but to set them out for *ourselves and those in need, and thereby to conduct processions and hymn’s verbally, being thankful to God for the creation and for all the means to health, for the various qualities of the different kinds of things and for the changing of the seasons. And we ‘conduct’ our supplications for existing again in immortality through the faith that is in God. The one who taught these things to us, who also was born for this end, is Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate...*

Justin implies that Christians, as opposed to pagans, will not waste the creatures of God because that would demonstrate a lack of gratitude for creation. Instead, giving to the poor what has been devoted to God manifests respect and love for everyone — no matter what their station in society — and the specific Christian mission to serve them. Christians take creation, give thanks for it, and share it in an act, bringing together praise and mission. This generosity as an act of thanksgiving for creation contradicts the religious pretensions of paganism and invites reverent delight in the things of the world that are blessed for human use. At the same time, the offering to the poor

expresses the hope for immortality for which Christians pray. Without this missiological symbolical action, Christian worship would be no more meaningful than when creation is wasted in meaningless sacrifice.

Notice how Justin uses the idea of pagan offering and contrasts it. The formal act of an offering places Christian liturgy in the category pagans would consider religious worship. The people take something up for sacrifice to the gods in “the processions and hymns” which are the most dramatic and festive part of the rituals for the crowds. Christians, Justin says, offer food in a ritual of sacrifice but it is in the form of “verbal prayers of thanksgiving.” That which is offered is not wasted but given to the hungry. All the People of God are spiritually hungry and those who are without sufficient food are physically hungry. Using food for human need, giving food to the spiritually and physically hungry, is the Christian cultic act. It is also a sign of the Christian mission.

Justin uses the pagan word for conducting solemn religious processions in the offering for sacrifice, *pompas pempein*, for the offering up of the prayers of thanksgiving. This is religious liturgical action, but it is liturgy that transcends religion. Instead of offering it to the gods of heaven, it is offered to God for the purposes of God on earth. The offering is something real within the created order; that is, for concrete human service to those who need God’s creation to be fully human. “Our ‘pomp,’” says Justin “is the care of the poor. Our processions are supplications for life to come with God.” The shape of the Christian liturgy implemented the Christian mission, which is God’s mission of creation and kingdom.

It is as though Justin is saying, “Sacrificing to God is empty – God is not hungry; to waste the creatures of God is to be ungrateful for creation. Christian worship is real – we don’t kill in sacrifice; we eat in thanksgiving and that is our ritual of sacrifice. We sacrifice in the new Christian sense of offering food to the hungry and serving those in need. This use of love in giving to the hungry what is devoted to God is true religion and the only sacrifice acceptable to God who created what is offered. Ours is a sacrifice suitable to the purposes of the created order.

Christian worship makes thanksgiving our religious posture toward God, and thus compels us to share with those who are without.”

Or, it is as if we were to say to our society so taken with commerce, organized for nothing so much as selling and buying: “We have nothing to sell and nothing to buy, for there is nothing worth selling or buying, but these prayers we pray, these meals we eat, this food we give away, they are our commerce. All other commerce is utterly wrong, selfish, empty of eternal merit, and working against the purposes of the God who created the objects of commerce.”

From [I APOLOGY](#), 67:

Those who have the means help all those who are in want, and we always meet together. And over all that we take to eat [or, both literally and metaphorically, “over all that we offer ourselves,”] we bless the Maker of all things through God’s Son Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. And on the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or the countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invites us into the pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer [literally, “conduct prayer as a procession”]. And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat [or, both literally and metaphorically, “bread is offered] together with wine and water.” The presider likewise offers up [literally, “conducts up”] prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people shout assent saying the amen. There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacon to those who are not present. Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one’s own choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are aliens working here...

In this excerpt, the concept of *offering* stands out from the many ways in which mission and liturgy connect. In what sense do we use the words *sacrifice* and *offering*? If worship expresses a self-giving ministry, celebrating the all sufficient self-gift of Christ, the language speaks good news. This is impossible unless we are sharing that sacrifice, that offering, with those who join us in our hunger for God and who are hungry for God’s creation.

These Eucharistic sharings are not merely charity, not merely a provision of food and money for the needy. Through his images of a second century Christian liturgy, Justin critiqued social structures as well. His critique provides a deeper understanding of both the amoral nature of paganism, and the meaning of Christian mission today: it is a new social order of justice that welcomes the kingdom.

Notes

¹ For a more complete explanation of several of the ideas contained in this article I refer you to *The Songs of the Mothers*, which I authored. It is a book that uses a comparison of the Songs of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Hannah, the mother of Samuel, as to examine the particular agenda for this present generation if we are to do our part in reform of the church. For the purposes of this article I draw your attention in particular to the section on justice.

² The idea using Justin Martyr’s outline of the liturgy and unique way of speaking about it came to me from an article with a slightly different focus by Gordon Lathrop, “Justin, Eucharist and Sacrifice”, published in *Worship*, Volume 64, Number 1, January 1990. I have used his translations and I recommend his more detailed article with gratitude for the many ideas that show up herein.

³ All italics and emphasis mine, here and in the other quotes.

Joe Morris Doss is a retired bishop of New Jersey. He is also an attorney with a background in civil rights, and is the founding president of *Death Penalty Focus*. He is the author of *Let the Bastards Go: From Cuba to Freedom and Songs of the Mothers: Messages of Promise for the Future Church*.