

Eating out in the Open: The Centrifugal, Missional Significance of the Eucharist

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Abstract

Throughout Scripture, and in the history of the Church, the Eucharist has been strongly associated with the Kingdom of God and the *Missio Dei*. This seems to be in stark contrast to how the Eucharist is often, in modern, Western Christianity, associated with rigid institutionalism, ecclesial division, and theological questions—such as those around the nature of Christ’s presence. While these are important questions and issues for the Church, this paper argues that they fail to capture the inherent meaning of the Eucharist, which acts as the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom. Indeed, this paper explores how the Eucharist is not merely centripetal but also a centrifugal force that holds the key to the Church’s missional renewal. By exploring how the Eucharist reveals the Church’s identity as a missional community, how it initiates and challenges the Church’s mission of hospitality, and how it catalyses a sacramental approach to creation care and stewardship, this paper seeks to offer an integrative, sacramental approach to the Church’s mission that reclaims the Eucharist’s central place in ecclesiology and missiology

In *Announcing the Kingdom of God*, Mortimer Arias writes that the Eucharist is the “central celebration” of the kingdom “and the ever-re-enacted proclamation of the coming reign of God...as already and not yet” (Arias 1984, p.31). This may seem unusual to modern, Western ears, given how the Eucharist is often connected with rigid institutionalism and ecclesial division rather than mission (Schmemmann 1973). As Alexander Schmemmann explains, modern, Christianity—both Catholicism and Orthodoxy—is “used to thinking of sacrament as opposed to the Word” (Schmemmann 1973, 21) and is accustomed to “formal” questions around the sacraments (e.g. their number, validity, institution, etc.).

However, these questions—while important—capture neither the inherent meaning and nature of the Supper nor the Sacraments. Rather, the Eucharist—when properly understood and oriented—acts as the sign and sacrament of the Kingdom. Rather than being merely centripetal (i.e. which brings things to the centre)—the Eucharist is also *centrifugal* (i.e. moving outwards *from* the centre). Indeed, as Schmemmann (102) writes, the essence of the sacramental is *transformation*.

This article will argue that the Eucharist holds the key to the Church's missional renewal since it, along with the Church, is the sacrament of the Kingdom. First, I will provide a brief theology of the Eucharist's missional meaning—in conversation with the missional church movement. Then, I will show how the Eucharist's centrifugal, missional nature renews the Church by revealing what the Church *is*, by initiating the Church's missional hospitality, and by catalysing a sacramental approach to creation care. This paper, while not exhaustive of missional theology and the Eucharist,¹ seeks to present an integrative sacramental missiology that understands Word and Sacrament as working together (cf. Schmemmann 1973). In reorienting the Eucharist for mission, we recognize it as the sacrament of the Kingdom and the missional church—which “defines itself, and organizes its life around, its real purpose of being an agent of God's mission to the world” (Hirsch 2006, 82).

Eucharistic theology and the hope of missional renewal in the Church

First, let us briefly outline a Eucharistic theology in conversation with the missional church movement. As previously mentioned, modern, Western Christianity tends to divide Word and Sacrament and abstract the Eucharist. This is indicative of larger problems within the Western Church that missional church writers identify. As Charles Ringma writes, “Church is usually a ‘sacred’ ceremony which clergy hope will have some relevance for living a life of faith in the real world” (Ringma 2003, p.52). This dualism is also revealed in modern Evangelical missiology, which tends to separate evangelism from justice, worship from practice, and creation from new creation (cf. Leithart 2017). Yet, as Alexander Schmemmann asserts, mission *cannot* be separated from the Church's life since “the Church is mission and...to be mission is its very essence, its very life” (Schmemmann 1973, 107). Thus, a renewed eucharistic theology can hold these important polarities together and help the Church renew its missional posture to the world—in participation with the missional God.

First, the Eucharist serves as a model for how God's people may bear witness to the identity and character of God—in continuation with the “mission of Old Testament Israel,” which—as Christopher Wright (Wright 2017, 70) suggests—was “not to go to other nations but to *be* the nation God called them to be...to be a visible model [cf. Gen. 12:1-3].” The Biblical story is rife with images of food and drink as distinct signs of God's redemptive communion with humanity (e.g. Gen. 18:1-15; Ex. 20:24; Is. 25). For example, Israel's leaders went up to Sinai to see God and eat in his presence (Ex.24:10-11). Likewise, the Church, as God's new humanity in Christ, also sees and eats with God in the Eucharist (cf. Leithart 2017), which is our bread for the journey (Ex. 16; cf. John 6) and a foretaste to that great wedding feast

¹ Due to this paper's scope, various theological/historical/denominational understandings of the Eucharist (e.g. transubstantiation vs consubstantiation) cannot be discussed. The Eucharist will be addressed from an ecumenical perspective.

(cf. Matt. 22:1-14; Rev. 19:6-9). In other words, the Eucharist marks the Church's distinct mission—which is to participate in and extend God's redemptive purposes (cf. Hirsch 2006).

However, to reduce or abstract the Eucharist to a set of beliefs would be an oversimplification since it does not address the issues of rigid institutionalization and a clergy-laity/sacred-secular dichotomy associated with the Eucharist. Instead, we should understand the Eucharist as participating in an “underlying systems story” that “determines how an organization [i.e. the Church] feels, thinks, and thus acts” (Hirsch 2006, 54). What is needed to disrupt and reorient our “systems story” (i.e. lethargic missiology, rigid institutionalization, and a secular-sacred dichotomy) is a revitalized vision for the Church's rituals and routines, symbols, theology & myths, etc. One of these revitalized rituals/symbols may be the redemption and revitalization of the Eucharist. Thus, rather than being truncated or institutionalized symbol of the church, or abstract theological concerns, the Eucharist can serve as a holistic and centrifugal missional symbol that both *de-institutionalizes* the Church, and empowers and sends the whole people of God on mission.

How does the Eucharist de-institutionalize the Church and empower the whole people of God? Because Christ in the Eucharist constitutes the Church as His body, and because this Body is marked by mutuality, solidarity, and multiplicity (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-7), the Eucharist challenges the Church's institutionalization by encouraging us to re-consider the Church's structure at a *local* level in a Trinitarian fashion. As Miroslav Volf writes, “The symmetrical reciprocity of the relations of the trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which *all* members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord...Like the divine persons, they all stand in a relation of mutual giving and receiving” (Volf 1998, 219).

This creates an exciting paradigm for how the Church may be rethought of as the “responsibility of all”—thereby empowering the *whole* people of God (Ringma 2003, 123-124). Thus, the Eucharist—once a sign of the Church's institutionalization—may hold the seeds for the Church's radical de-institutionalization and missional renewal.² It holds the keys for “building the new *underneath* the old” (Ringma 2003, 140).

Indeed, rather than being *merely* centripetal, the Eucharist is *also* centrifugal. As Christians live into their identity as the Body of Christ and realize the missional implications of the Eucharist (i.e. Christ's self-offering for the life of the world), the worship and life of the Church can be gradually changed in small, yet significant, ways that allow them to also maintain a relationship with traditional Church structures.

² De-institutionalization is not the destruction of institutions, but the reform and renewal of the Church as the *Body*, instituted by God, which embodies the gospel and empowers its members; see Sayers 2016, 122-139.

One example can be seen in the Roman Catholic Church (“RCC”). The liturgical reforms of Vatican II have allowed for more participatory and charismatic renewal movements in the Roman Catholic Church that exist alongside traditional structures (Alva 2016). This charismatic renewal has allowed Roman Catholics to rediscover the participatory, efficacious nature of the Eucharist, and has also led to a renewal of the Spirit’s charisms among the laity (e.g. the gift of tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.) (Alva 2016). These are not “reactive” groups who have “no vision for the new and no courage to begin to walk the difficult,” but groups of Spirit-empowered and missional oriented people who stand out as being *counter-cultural* in order to “proclaim the mighty acts of the One who has called them” (Guder 1998, 119). The Eucharist allows community to be a *gift* that is “impregnated with hope and celebration” (Ringma 2003, 161), rather than dreary labour. As Schmemmann writes regarding the missional, holistic, and Kingdom-oriented nature of the Eucharist: “For eucharist...is the very form and content of the new life that God granted us when in Christ He reconciled us with Himself... It is indeed the *preface* of the world to come, the door into the Kingdom” (Schmemann 1973, 39).

This shows that the Eucharist does not *merely* anticipate the Kingdom, it also *effects* the Kingdom—by the Spirit. As Geoffrey Wainwright asserts, “The eucharistic celebration does not leave the world unchanged. The future has occupied the present...the kingdom of God has come closer with each eucharistic celebration” (Wainwright 1981, 150). Thus, the Eucharist gives the Church new eyes to see the world “as a meaningful field of our Christian action” since we “see the true reality of the world and discover what we must do” in light of our renewed Kingdom vision (Schmemmann 1973, 113).

The Church’s Missional Communion in the Eucharist

Having briefly expressed the theological vision of the Eucharist’s centrifugal, missional nature, let us now turn our attention to how it reveals the nature of the Church. Both Scripture and the Christian tradition testify that the cause and *telos* of the Christian life is communion with Christ by the Spirit (cf. Jn 15; Col 1:1-4; Rom. 6:5-11) since “[t]o be included in salvation is to be in Christ” (Tillard 2001, 6). However, salvation is not solitary since “reconciliation with God is inseparable from entrance into the unity of sisters and brothers in the body of Christ” (Tillard 2001, 6).

Therefore, the communion that Christians have with others in Christ is “not the object of an ethical demand superimposed on the essence of the Christian way of life...*it is part of its very definition*” (Tillard 2001, 24) [emphasis added]. The Church’s nature is to be *in* Christ, *with* others, and cannot be reduced to the sum of “‘justified’ individuals” (Tillard 2001, 135). Thus, Tillard argues, “[T]he church is explained by the Eucharist” since “[t]he moment of the greatest intimacy with the Lord...*is also that of the greatest solidarity with others* [emphasis added]” (Tillard 2001, 28).

This does not mean that there are no distinctions between persons in the body, since the Eucharist “merge[s] us in unity with God and among ourselves, although we each have a distinct

personality...making [us] one body with him and among [our]selves” (de Lubac 1988, 91). Therefore, diversity is *intrinsic* to the Church’s communion—setting the stage for the empowerment of God’s whole people for mission. In the Eucharist, the Church receives what she is—as a gracious gift from Christ; but the Church cannot exist simply for itself—it must move *outward* in love to the world.

The Church’s communion cannot be reduced to a safe “community” apart from the world. Rather, the Church’s eucharistic communion is more analogous to the notion of *communitas*—where togetherness, adventure, and movement are intertwined (Hirsch 2006). In other words, the Church’s *communitas*, embodied in the Eucharist, allows God’s people to be united as a covenant people in an “explicit commitment...to each other and to the world they have been sent to serve” (Frost 2006, 154), while being “carried forward by a vision of the future that constitutes our mission” (Hirsch 2006, 234). Mission and worship are *intrinsically* connected in the Eucharist since the celebration of the Eucharist, while revealing and constituting the Church as Christ’s universal body,³ also serves to proclaim Him—it is “the most powerful evangelistic event in our congregation” (Arias 1984, 81). As Schmemmann asserts: “The Church is not a society for escape—corporately or individually—from this world to taste of the mystical bliss of eternity. Communion is not a ‘mystical experience:’ we drink of the chalice of Christ, and He gave Himself for the life of the world” (Schmemmann 1973, 44).

Thus, our communal life in Christ should not lead to rigid institutionalization or a lethargic missiology. Rather, the Eucharist both initiates the Church’s mission of witness, hospitality, and justice, and *challenges* the Church to grow in deeper love and unity—as a participation in how the Triune God is manifesting the Kingdom in the Eucharist. For, “[e]very time the church celebrates the Lord’s Supper, the future kingdom is manifested in the present, and through the Spirit the kingdom’s power and life comes to us” (Leithart 1993, 121). In other words, the Eucharist inspires and transforms the Church to be an *organic* missional body that embodies Jesus’ life—and brings a foretaste of the Kingdom (cf. Hirsch 2006).

Bread for the Journey and Room at the Table

Deeply tied to our communal life in Christ, the Eucharist also initiates the Church’s mission of hospitality and justice in the world—in participation with the missional God. Beginning with the New Testament, Christians understood the Eucharist as a “boundary event” where the new creation and the kingdom intersect[ed] with everyday life in transformative ways” (Koenig 2000, 244). One of these transformative manifestations related to the everyday experience of poverty in the first century—marked by 80% of the Roman Empire’s population living at or below subsistence level (Das 2017: 33). Thus, from the beginning

³ On the importance of a “catholic orientation, see Frost 2006, 154.

of the Church's life, the Eucharist was never "intended as a meal of satiety" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:20-34), but made a clear connection between service to the poor—who are Christ among us (cf. Matt. 25:31-46)—and the Church's communion.

Thus, the Eucharist presents the seeds for the Church's desire for and participation in God's hospitality and justice. First, since the Eucharist is about our life in Christ, it also reveals that social justice "has a larger object than service to the poor...[it] is communion" (Tillard 2001, 93). Eucharistic hospitality must mean more than open tables—it includes "open homes, open churches, and open communities" (Arias 1984, 81). Thus, for churches to have poor and marginalized in their congregations—yet allow them to be socially marginalized and excluded in their worship—is a *counter-testimony* to the reality of our communion with Christ and each other.

Second, the Eucharistic connection between communion and hospitality should be expressed in both evangelism *and* generosity. As John Chrysostom writes, "Remember this also in regard to Christ, he is going about, a wanderer, a stranger, needing a roof to shelter him...Therefore, do not ignore your sisters and brothers in distress while you adorn Christ's house, for they are more a temple than the other" (Tillard 2001, 71). The Eucharist, arranges our table life to focus on Christ at the altar *and* Christ among the poor (cf. Matt. 25:31-46; Frost 2006).

Indeed, the Eucharist is "intended to sensitize us to the needs of others, to justice" since "communities which do not experience some neediness and personal poverty as they gather for eucharist risk becoming complacent and inward-looking" (Gittens 1993, 51). The Eucharist teaches us that the Church's mission must include the invitation to communion in Christ (i.e. evangelism and discipleship), and finding ways to satisfy human hunger. Thus, as Ross Hastings suggests, the Eucharist's must include the invitation to communion in Christ (i.e. evangelism and discipleship), while also "feeding the poor and advocating for just legislation on behalf of the hungry"—in light of the Eucharist and in anticipation for the great banquet (Hastings 2012, 87-88). The Eucharist shows us that evangelism and hospitality are not to be divided but done together with the *whole* people of God. Indeed, the Eucharist provides the missionary catalyst for empowering "[e]ach believer's share in the Lord's work" of announcing the gospel in worship, Word, and deed (Koenig 2000, 126).

Seeing Creation as Sacramental in the Eucharist

Finally, the Eucharist is also deeply connected to the Church's mission to care for creation since it is the symbol of reconciliation for all things—over against the modern, Western dualistic spirituality that divides the sacred from the secular (cf. Hirsch 2006). This dichotomized, truncated soteriology *fails* to see how, in Christ, all things are held together and all things, whether on earth or in heaven, are being reconciled by

Him (Col. 1:15-20; cf. Rev. 21-22). Unfortunately, it is no secret that many evangelical Christians have this truncated view of creation (Wright 2012; Frost 2006). How can we catch a vision of this redemption of our eager, groaning creation? We can attain a foretaste in the Eucharist, which is *created*. As Irenaeus acknowledges, since the Word became flesh, “because we are His members, we are nourished by means of creation...The cup, which is part of creation, He declares to be His blood...and the bread, which is part of creation, He affirms to be His Body, by which our own body is fortified” (Irenaeus 1990, 90-91).

In the transformation of these created elements, the Eucharist “discloses to us the purpose and ultimate destiny of the entire creation—that the creation was made to reveal God, to be a means of knowing and communing with Him” (Leithart 1993, 124). The Eucharist teaches us that “it is precisely *this* world—this material, physical world of eating and drinking—that is the “matter” of the Kingdom of God” (Leithart 1993, 124). In the Eucharist, we offer “the world and ourselves to God” (Schmemmann 1973, 35) because we trust that the same Spirit who was present over the waters of creation (Gen. 1:2), and who inaugurates the Kingdom, will also manifest the world to come (Schmemmann 1973). The Kingdom is ultimately *this world* transfigured by the Spirit (Leithart 1993). Thus, the Eucharist reveals the sacramental nature of creation and the world and eschews dualistic sacred-secular dichotomies in favour of seeing Jesus’ Lordship as extending over everything.

It would be a failure of our prophetic imagination to affirm this eucharistic vision and not to see the invitation to *participate* in God’s redemptive mission for creation *here-and-now*. The materiality of the Eucharist, which transforms the created elements of bread and wine, should inspire us to commit to the practical work of partnering with the missional God, for the life of the *whole* world—in anticipation of “its final redemption in Christ” (Frost 2006, 247). The Eucharist is a reminder of the missional God who does not despise His created world, but who sent His Son—the Word who became flesh (John 1:14)—to redeem us. In other words, the Eucharist can provide the church with a powerful paradigm for creation care.

Rather than being a distraction, creation care is *essential* to “the full spectrum of Christian mission” (Wright 2012, 90; cf. Hirsch 2006) since that creation care “is part of God’s divine plan for God’s people” (Frost 2006, 250). This posture is not a “capitulation” to “social justice” movements, but a true expression of the Church’s mission that finds an embodied analogy in the Eucharist. As Orthodox Archdeacon John Chryssavgis writes, “[T]he church cannot ignore the material world; it cannot properly exercise its mission unless it cares for every human person and every living creature [since it is in the Eucharist] that one can garner a glimpse of the reality of matter and of what really matters in the world” (Chryssavgis 2019, 19).

Conclusion

The Eucharist—once a sign of the Church’s rigid, traditional institutionalism—should be rightly seen and oriented as the sacrament of the Kingdom that transforms the Church into the Kingdom’s sacrament. The Eucharist both centripetally brings the Church together in Christ as *communitas* and *sends it forth*—in participation with the missional God—for missional hospitality and creation care. Practical implications of this are that the Church must be a welcoming, missional community, recognizing that “we are not the owners of the table” (Arias 1984, 80). We can also welcome by opening our homes, churches, and communities to others—thereby moving toward the periphery—and feed the poor and marginalized, spiritually and materially (Arias 1984). Finally, a sacramental approach to creation means that churches can engage in creation care by stewarding our resources well, reducing our waste, engaging in small acts like neighbourhood clean-ups, and prophetically calling leaders to take creation care seriously. In this, the Eucharist equips and roots the *whole* people of God in the Biblical narrative and catholic tradition, while fully empowering the Church to engage its surrounding culture—in obedience and hope for “what God has already done and what God has promised to do” (Guder 1998, 230).

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