

# Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God's people, going out in God's name by Ruth A. Meyers (2014) Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing

## Book Review by Nathan Blanch

### Introduction

Ruth Meyers has a Master of Arts and PhD in Liturgical Studies from the University of Notre Dame and is the Hodges-Haynes Professor of Liturgics at Church Divinity School of the Pacific, Berkeley, California. In *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission* (2014), Meyers uses her experiences in the liturgical field to explore the connection between worship and mission. This review briefly summarises her book, and evaluates its strengths and weaknesses, before concluding and providing a recommendation.

### Summary

In many churches I have attended, worship is an activity for Christians to encounter God for their personal faith, bearing little resemblance to mission. Meyers argues that this perception is wrong, suggesting that worship and mission are in fact of the same category (Meyers, 2014, p.1). In chapter 1, she begins with a core definition of missional worship: 'the understanding and practice of worship that engages worshipers in the mission of God, drawing them into God's self-offering of redemptive love through Christ and in the power of the Spirit' (p.12). She proceeds to define the key terms mission, worship, and liturgy (pp.16-29), before presenting her two models for visualising missional worship.

Meyers' first model to illustrate the connection between worship and mission is a 'Möbius strip', a mathematical object that appears to have two sides, but only has one. It can be created by twisting a strip of paper and connecting its ends. If someone were to draw a continuous line starting on one side of the paper Möbius strip, they would find that the line covers both sides and returns to the starting point. Meyers writes worship on one side of the paper and mission on the other, illustrating the connection between them: worship leads to mission, and mission leads to worship (p.35).

The second model is the more common spinning top, in which the axis represents worship, the dimensions of mission surround it, and the whole object represents mission. The energy required to start the spinning top in motion is attributed to God, representing the work of God in enabling mission (p.45). The core of the spinning top represents communal worship, shaping people and preparing them to encounter the world, whilst the edge of the spinning top represents drawing people back towards communal worship to encounter God (p.41). Meyers' two models work hand in hand to define missional worship: worship and mission are part of the same category, and simultaneously flow in and out of each other.



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leading worship

Subsequent chapters explore various components of common church worship practices. First the gathering of people, then proclaiming and responding to the word of God, intercessory prayer, enacting reconciliation, celebrating communion, and going forth in the name of Christ. Meyers explains each of these elements and their connection to mission. She demonstrates how each element points worshippers to God's mission and how they form them to participate in the mission of God. Finally, Meyers provides practical tips for those in the position of planning worship practices, notably to consider how different dimensions can enhance a worship practice. I will return to this in a later section.

To support her claims, Meyers refers to the literature of many theologians, scholars, and researchers. Among these are David Bosch, a South African theologian whose writing informed the core of Meyers' understanding of mission, and J.G. Davies, who inspired the theological perspective that worship and mission are not separate categories (pp.3-5). She also draws from the work of Lutheran worship professors that wrote on the theology of missional church, and Eastern Orthodox theologians that essentially understood worship as a foundation for mission (pp.6-7).

Finally, various scholars inform her understanding of liturgical elements, such as Clayton Schmitt who highlighted the importance of concluding a worship service by turning the assembly towards the world, and Dykstra and Bass who explained Christian practices as active participation in God's work in the world (pp.7-8). Alongside her study of academic work, her own study between 1999 and 2013 involved visiting various congregations including the Iona Community in Scotland and the Taizé Community in France, which formed her understanding of missional worship in different contexts (pp.8-10). *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission* is a book structured around academic opinions on theology and extensive research on mission and worship.

### Strengths

One strength is how well Meyers explains the components of liturgy in each chapter. The chapter on intercessory prayer was especially insightful, explaining in detail the missional significance of prayer as a form of worship. She explains that praying in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ affirms the congregation of God's universal love (p.112). Praying on behalf of others is a reminder that God is working through creation to bring healing and restoration, emphasizing a perspective of participation in God's mission of reconciliation (pp.112-13).

Considering intercessory prayer in this missional perspective is a reminder of the significance of intercession in worship, a fresh perspective in the new culture that so values concert style music in worship.

Another strength of *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission* is the chapter on preparing missional worship, where Meyers acknowledges that the components of worship are transcultural, making it applicable to readers of any denomination or tradition (p.199). She introduces seven dimensions of worship which enhance the liturgical elements: space, time, objects, actions, texts, music, and silence (pp.200-201).

One excellent example is through her discussion of space, exploring how being missional can be as simple as considering function, beauty, or tradition. She suggests specific spaces to consider, most of which are relevant to every church denomination: gathering, movement, congregation, choir, baptismal, pulpit, and altar table space (pp.208-211). Meyers teaches every reader how to think, not what to think, to be missional in their context. Her writing on altar table space demonstrates the nuanced thinking that can bear profound implications.

Meyers contrasts two churches she visited during her studies. The first church places the altar table centrally, like a typical house placement, however, their use of the table is strictly sacred, like a temple (p.210). The second church also places the table centrally, however, covers it with cloth for sacred use and removes it when serving refreshments, connecting community with communion (p.211). These churches carefully consider how they can draw attention to God in their contexts, and though the distinctions are subtle, Meyers suggests that this can have significant missional implications.

### Weaknesses

In discussing mission and worship, Meyers reveals her involvement in creating resources supporting same-sex relationships (p.52). She tells the story of engaging with restaurant staff to highlight the missional importance of loving others. Meyers regards such encounters as 'an act of worshipful mission, giving glory to God by witnessing to God's boundless love' (pp.52-3). Meyers is evidently committed to an inclusive theology, valuing relationship and connecting her beliefs to her everyday interactions. However, one weakness is Meyers' very brief mention of blessing same-sex marriages, for which I felt she could have explained or justified her viewpoint in more detail. Her perspective here, potentially divisive among readers, might have served the purpose of the book better by maintaining the focus on encouraging readers to consider the missional implications of expressing love in such circumstances.

This example was among very few that illustrated 'worshipful mission', contrasting her many practical examples of how worship could be missional. This was another weakness, that although initially against the separation of mission in the world and worship in the church (p.2), Meyers' language continues to confine worship to the church building. Although her intention was to consider 'worship' as an activity which the

assembly engage with at church every Sunday (p.25), there felt like a missed opportunity to encourage readers to think beyond the traditional boundaries. Her models of missional worship imply a unity between mission and worship but are challenged by the limitations placed on worship within church walls. It could be beneficial to explore how worship extends beyond the church building, acknowledging its significance in diverse mission contexts. Perhaps this is a research field that Meyers will explore in the future.

### Conclusion

*Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission* is a valuable resource not only for those preparing worship but those participating too. Ruth Meyers breaks down the various elements of liturgical practice in an elegant structure, explaining each one whilst offering its relevancy to mission. She offers two models for understanding missional worship which are easy to understand and presents her insights in such a way that it is applicable to anyone from any church background. Though there may be theological concerns with her approach to same-sex relationships, an issue which is currently a widespread debate for churches in modern culture, this cannot detract from her knowledge of the liturgical field. Her expertise is evident throughout *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission*, and it is worth reading for any Christian interested in understanding the missional implications of worship, and any leader of a worship team.

Meyers, R.A. (2014) *Missional Worship, Worshipful Mission: Gathering as God's people, going out in God's name*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

