

## Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

November 10, 2020

I came across this excerpt in *Christianity Today* a month or two ago. It's from J. R. Briggs's book, *The Sacred Overlap: Learning to Live Faithfully in the Space Between*.<sup>1</sup> I thought it was pretty good:

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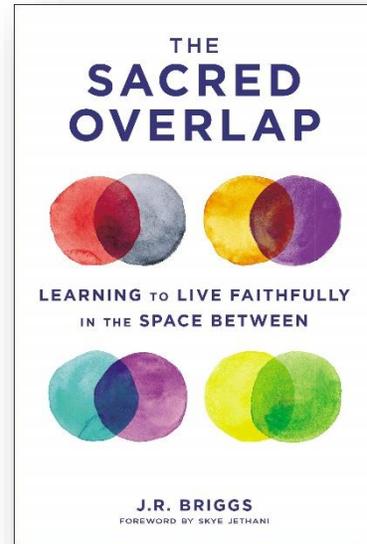
**M**y sons' elementary school is just a block from our house; it appears to inhale students every morning, hold its breath for several hours, and then cough them back out in the afternoon. On spring mornings, when the windows in my office on the third floor of our house are open, I can hear the bustling as kids chat and squeal with their friends. When I look out the window, I can see the minivans lined up in the carpool lane, waiting to be waved forward by students on safety patrol.

When the weather is nice, I often take a walk around the block at midday, to clear my mind or pray. When I pass the school, all is quiet outside the building; there's not a sound or person in sight. And then, at 3:40 every afternoon, kids begin trickling out a few at a time. This builds to a crescendo, as the building spews out one large, chaotic rush of students with noise, laughter, excitement, and relief. Some kids rush to hug their parents or jump in their parents' cars, while others sprint to throw the football on the playground. Similar scenes of inhaling and exhaling probably play out at most schools around the world.

I often think of church as a pulsating heart, which expands and constricts to push blood through the veins and arteries of the body. Or, better yet, a living, breathing entity that inhales her people, holds her breath, and then exhales them out, scattering them as missionaries disguised in various vocations, roles, and responsibilities throughout the world. Of the 40 miracles found in the book of Acts, all but one of them occurred *outside* the walls of a religious building.

This idea of a breathing church is quite theological, actually. The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*. (To say it properly you have to say the end of the word—the *ch*—as if you are clearing your throat.) *Ruach* means “spirit, breath, or wind.” In Greek, the word is *pneuma* (said with a silent *p*), which means “spirit, mind, or breath.” It's where we get our word *pneumonia*, the condition where you have trouble breathing.

To be a faithful church, we take our cues from this holy wind-breath. We read in the Gospels that the first apostles were told by Jesus himself they could not begin his ministry until—and only until—they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). Don't do anything until the Spirit comes. Stay put. Maybe we should take note, too. In the Book of Acts we see that the Spirit is the chief player in the mission of Jesus' church, the director of this entire venture which points the world toward Jesus.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/october/jr-briggs-sacred-overlap-spiritual-pneumonia.html>

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1 | Page

As members of Jesus' church, we are both blessed *and also* sent. We are called to gather in Jesus' name *and also* scatter in it. If all we do is gather, singing our songs and saying our prayers and listening politely to sermons without any intent to live all of it outside the church, it would be like taking a deep breath and never exhaling. It's exhausting, unhealthy, and eventually we'd turn blue and die. If all we do is scatter, busying ourselves with service projects, community events, and other meaningful endeavors, it would be like we're exhaling and exhaling until there is nothing left in the tank. Eventually, we'd turn blue and die.

Gathering for worship is vital because it's where we center around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and respond to his great love for us. But 90 minutes spent in worship every Sunday only equates on average to a mere 1.3 percent of our waking hours in a given week. If we believe this space will be sufficient to mold us into fully formed, fully matured Christlikeness, who are we kidding? We need to gather together in worship, but we also need to learn to engage with God and others in various forms of worship, formation, and mission during the other 98.7 percent of our time.

This approach of only inhaling (or only exhaling) is never the vision or intention of the church. If we have either one without the other, we cannot faithfully express God's purposes in and for the world. It's spiritual pneumonia. But when churches find the sweet spot in the midst of this healthy tension, they develop strategies for both gathering *and also* scattering in order to bless the world.

Doing both means we value the activities of the church without neglecting those outside the church. Inhaling and exhaling with regularity and intention, we allow the Spirit to work in our communities of faith in naturally supernatural ways. Being present and committed to the local church is an important priority, but sometimes this also means you have to just skip the Wednesday service to hang out with your neighbors.

This is what pastors and authors Hugh Halter and Matt Smay describe in their book *AND: The Gathered and Scattered Church* as the power of the *and*. The right things are centralized and also decentralized. Both people and resources find a blessed blending of maintenance *and also* mission, survival *and also* sending, tradition *and also* innovation. Fans are turned into followers, disciples are made into apprentices, and consumers become missionaries. It reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 13, where the owner of a house brings out of his storeroom new treasures *as well as old* (v. 52). The kingdom is not always *either/or*; it's often *both/and*.



Jesus' intent is to create little pockets of heaven where people can be in God's presence, but he does it out here in the world, in the middle of sin and death. I'm certainly not saying this is easy. Admittedly, many Christians find church to be the most difficult aspect of being a Christian. As a pastor, I have found this tension to be tough work, like walking a tightrope; sometimes it feels like I'm about to throw up.

The church stands as an alternative and prophetic space, a colony of heaven in a country of death. We don't have to be seminary trained or overly religious to participate in this. As Eugene Peterson wrote, church is "a congregation of embarrassingly ordinary people in and through whom God chooses to be present to the world." We long for things to be made right and to be put back together in the *shalom* of God, yet we live in the midst of a world at war with itself.

When we started our church over a decade ago, I asked our core team why we existed, why we would go to the trouble of setting up chairs and singing songs and listening to sermons. I wasn't against these activities; I believed they were important. But if we didn't clarify *why* we were doing these things, we could also fall into the trap that perpetuates the unhealthy mentality that we're just in this for ourselves. Without focused and intentional conversation and communal discernment, we could run the risk of becoming a church that inhaled and held its breath for dear life.

During the weeks those conversations took place, trying to clarify exactly why we would gather each week as a community of Jesus followers, we eventually landed on the phrase *formation for mission*. We realized that we gathered to be formed in order to be sent. We realized that, in our own way, we were articulating the blessed-and-sent posture. The purpose of our singing and prayers and Communion and storytelling and sermons was to form us in order to allow the Spirit to exhale us into our various contexts, not as just somebodies but as God's deeply loved children sent to represent Christ well in the world by living the *with God* life.

Inhaling *and also* exhaling, blessed *and also* sent, studying God's Word *and also* following God's Spirit. It's messy and costly and time intensive. But it's worth it.

