Plenary Address A3: An Ancient (and Contemporary) Way to Rethink an Order of Worship

(Contemporary Worship in Historical Context, Part 3; Monday 1 July 2019, 10:00 a.m.)

Lester Ruth

(slide 1, title slide) First, before I begin, I want to thank you again for the privilege of speaking to you. I appreciate your attendance and attentiveness. I am grateful for the organizers of this event. And I am especially thankful for the translators. I thank everyone very much. Hopefully something that I have said here will have been useful to you.

 Before I get into new material, allow me to summarize what I have said the past two days. (slide 2) On the first day, I gave a history of the last fifty years and spoke about the conflict that had arisen in many places and among many churches about new ways of worship. (slide 3) I emphasized how the fighting was not just about two sides but actually involved at least three ways of worship: the “traditional worship” of mid-twentieth century Protestants, “contemporary praise and worship,” and the vision for “ancient worship” from the earliest centuries of church history, a vision advocated by the Liturgical Movement. (slide 4) I ended the day with the hope that the latter two could not be at odds with each other but actually form a friendly alliance in order to recover ancient worship in its earliest stages.

 Yesterday, I spent a good bit of time highlighting the important passage from Justin Martyr in the second century, our earliest fairly complete description of Christian worship. Because the passage is so important, let us review it again:

(slide 5) On the day called Sunday, there is an assembling of those who live in cities or the countryside, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. Then, when the reader has stopped, the presider in a sermon admonishes and invites us to the imitation of these good things. (slide 6) Then we all stand up together and offer prayers to God. And, as we said before, when we have stopped praying, bread and wine and water are brought, and the presider sends up prayers and thanksgivings in similar fashion, to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent, saying “Amen.” And there is a distribution and a partaking by each person of the food over which thanks have been given. And the food is sent to those who are not present by means of the deacons.

You will remember that I pointed out the four-fold order of worship as found in Justin (gathering, the Word of God, the Lord’s Supper, sending). Those items have been seen widely and are thus Justin Martyr has served as the historical basis for new denominational resources that have advocated a four-fold order of worship. But you will remember, too, that I pointed out three things that are in Justin Martyr but are often overlooked. (slide 7) The first is the open-ended sense of time when he talked about the readings from the Bible going on as long as time permits. (slide 8) The second is extemporaneity, that is, being able to be spontaneous in what was said and preached. Remember how Justin Martyr said that the presider prayed according to the best of his ability, not according to some written text. (slide 9) The third is how Justin Martyr described the order of worship in terms of a flow of actions: assembling, read, admonish, invite, (slide 10) stand up, offer, send up, give assent, partake, send. I suggested Justin thought of the order of worship as a stream of activity flowing from one action to the next, rather than the order of worship as merely a listing of liturgical objects, done one after another. I ended yesterday’s presentation by noting the similarity of these three items (open-ended time, extemporaneity, and a flow of activity) to praise and worship services (at least as they originally developed). (slide 11) I also ended by wondering if we could do an ancient, four-fold Word and Table from the second century with the same groove and the same feel as found in contemporary praise and worship services. Can our worship today be simultaneously ancient and contemporary?

 (slide 12) You will remember how I portrayed worship history as being a gradual loss of these three key elements. Worship went from having open-ended time to bounded time. It went from incorporating extemporaneous speech to written out texts. And the order went from being a flow of actions to a sequence of liturgical objects.

 The result of this historical trajectory by the beginning of the twentieth century, which was the heyday of the sending of missionaries from Europe and North America, was a stable order of worship that looked much like these Methodist examples. (slide 13) Here is the one from 1905. Notice how nice, neat, and stable everything is. It is a listing of objects to be done one after another. (slide 14) And here is the one from 1932. It shares the same sensibilities but is even more expanded by set items from each week. Other than the selection of hymns and, possibly, the selection of which written texts will be used, everything is in place and everything has a place. (slide 15) And here is the one from 1964 before the impact of the Liturgical Movement led Methodists to reshape their order of worship. This 1964 order of worship continues the trend seen in the previous two examples. There is a definite rhythm or groove and a definite feel to this way of “traditional worship.” There is little room for open-ended time, for extemporaneity, or for seeing the order of worship as a set of actions that flow from one to the next.

 Compare these orders to early models for praise and worship. It is easy to see open-ended time, extemporaneity, and a sense of the order of worship as a flow from one worship activity to the next. These three elements were the root of early praise and worship.

 Consider the multiple models for praise and worship that one early praise and worship teacher, (slide 16) Eddie Espinosa, highlighted in a resource for worship leaders in 1987. Espinosa’s goal was to list the ways he had seen praise and worship being done. He offered these ways as possible models for other worship leaders in their own planning and leading. Espinosa called one model the “Psalm 95 model” because it follows the exhortations to worshipers found in the first verses of Psalm 95. (slide 17) Here are verses 1 to 3 and verse 6. Be attentive to what this psalm tells worshipers to do: “O come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving. Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms. For the Lord is a great God and a great King above all gods. Come, let us worship and bow down. Let kneel before the Lord our Maker.”

 (slide 18) Notice the flow of actions this model for praise and worships promotes. First, we should come and sing for joy. Second, shout joyfully. Third, come with thanksgiving. Again, shout joyfully with psalms. Finally, worship the Lord by physical expression (bowing and kneeling). (slide 19) Espinosa uses this sequence to speak about a model for worship that should begin with rejoicing, then move to thanking God, then praising the Lord, and finally reverencing or adoring God.

 (slide 20) The second model Espinosa taught was based on Psalm 100:4 which reads “Enter God’s gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him; bless his name.” Behind this Psalm verse and behind this model for praise and worship is the idea of the tabernacle of Moses or, perhaps, the temple built by Solomon. It is an architectural model in which the flow in the order of worship is to move metaphorically from one area of the building to the next by the fluid sequence of actions. You can see that I have included on the slide a representation of the tabernacle of Moses along with the activity within a service that accompanies the path through the space. The red arrow going from right to left indicates the journey. The service should begin by giving thanks to God, which is the entrance through the gates. After giving thanks the people then praise God, extolling the Lord for his greatness and the wonders of his activity. That is the activity of the court area. And then, with an increased awareness of drawing into God’s presence, the people then worship, by which Espinosa would mean to express directly sentiments of love, appreciation, and adoration to God. That is the activity of the inner court as well as the Holy of Holies.

 The third model which Espinosa taught to worship leaders in 1987 was a relationship approach. After several interviews with him, I now understand this model, which would become widely known as the Vineyard model because of its close association with Vineyard churches, is his reframing of the first two models in the language of personal relationship. Working with his pastor, John Wimber, he shifted the language a bit so that it could be understood easily by people in southern California. (slide 21) Although he changed the labels, Espinosa did not change the basic understanding of all of the models: a service should be a flowing sequence of activities that move easily and quickly from one to the next. Here is what the relationship model looked like. The service begins by inviting or calling the people to worship. It then flows to an initial engagement with God, perhaps acknowledging God or stating a desire to interact with God. The service then immerses the people in exalting God by magnifying and glorifying him. Having saturated God with praise, the people then proceed to adoring God by shifting to expressing love and heart-felt appreciation. The service then moves to the gentle wonder of being intimate with God in love.

I am not necessarily promoting any of these particular models taught by Espinosa as much as I am trying to draw attention to their basic character. Much like Justin Martyr’s second century description of actions, these praise and worship models thinks of the order of worship as a series of continuous, flowing actions, not a listing of objects whose accomplishment can be checked off. Like Justin Martyr, the order of worship in these early praise and worship models becomes a journey, an unfolding story, of the encounter between God and God’s people, (slide 22) not a trip to the store to check items off a shopping list.

 Notice that I have been emphasizing the third of the three elements found in Justin Martyr’s description of ancient worship: (slide 23) the order of worship as a flow of actions. But after interviewing Eddie Espinosa, (slide 24) I know the other two elements are in his services also. Having a sense of the direction of activity, Espinosa would lead worship relying upon active discernment with the Holy Spirit to have a sense of when to move from one kind of activity to the next as well as gain inspiration as to how to speak and pray extemporaneously and appropriately for that service.

 Let us set aside the idea that “ancient worship” can only be done in the style of “traditional worship.” Based on what we can see in Justin Martyr, I think there is a way of doing worship that is both ancient and contemporary. This ancient, contemporary way will involve those three elements: some sense of being flexible with time, of being extemporaneous with our speech, and, especially, of seeing the order of worship as a smooth flow of key activities to engage with God. That is the important shift in our thinking: having a whole different perception of what we think we are doing by following an order of worship. The individual items listed in the order of worship are not things. They are (or should be) actions in an ongoing drama between God and God’s people.

 I was thinking about this shift the other day, the shift between seeing an order of worship as a list of objects and as a flowing sequence in a dramatic interaction between God and the people of God. At that same time I was following online the professional basketball playoffs. (slide 25) On Saturday, 25 May, the Toronto Raptors had a series clinching win against the Milwaukee Bucks. It was a dramatic game in which the Raptors had to overcome a deficit in points to win. As I was reading both the narrative description of the game as well as looking at the play-by-play listing, I realized the difference between these two is a good way to understand the difference I am trying to make between the approaches to an order of worship.

 First, (slide 26) here is the narrative description of the critical moment in the game: “Kyle Lowery stole the ball and pushed it ahead, then waited for Kawhi Leonard to arrive before feeding his All-Star teammate for a thunderous one-handed slam over Giannis Antetokounmpo. ‘The building exploded after that dunk,’ Leonard said. It sure did. Leonard had 27 points and 17 rebounds to lead the Raptors into the finals for the first time with a 100-94 victory over the Milwaukee Bucks on Saturday night. His big dunk with 6:46 to go in the fourth quarter was the final basket in a game-changing 26-3 run that began late in the third.” A good writer could go on and write up the entire game in this sort of narrative fashion, highlighting the game as a flow on actions in a forty-eight minute drama.

 And now here is the same critical moment in the game. (slide 27) This time I am only showing you the play-by-play listing. I have put an arrow by the same play mentioned in the narrative description. Notice the difference in the two approaches. Even if you cannot read the English of this play-by-play, you can see that it is simply a listing of items in the sequence by which they happened. All you get is the basic information. There is none of the drama. There is none of the intensity. There is none of the emotion. There is none of the significance of the action in the flow of the game. There is none of the story behind the play. It is simply information: 6:46 Kawhi Leonard makes two-foot dunk with an assist by Kyle Lowry. The Raptors then lead by a score of 87 to 79.

 I am suggesting the common approach (slide 28) many persons have of seeing an order of worship as merely a listing of objects is the same as the play-by-play listing for a basketball game. You get the basic information. But there is none of the drama. There is none of the intensity. There is none of the emotion. There is none of the significance of the action in the flow of the amazing interaction between God and God’s people. That amazing, dramatic interaction is what worship is. Our understanding of an order of worship ought to reflect that dramatic story understanding even if the way we have to print an order of worship looks more like a play-by-play listing.

 I pressed my students in the United States recently on an exercise I would suggest to you, too. The point of the exercise was to reshape our thinking about the dramatic quality of the four-fold Word and Table order of worship. After looking at the same Justin Martyr passage we have been looking at and after considering the models for praise and worship which speak of a service as a series of essential actions, we tried our hand at re-writing our denomination’s printed order of worship as a story. I would suggest the same exercise for you to do when you are back at your church. Take out your church’s order of worship, which is probably a list of items in a sequence, and re-write it as a story.

 Here is what I did. First I will show you the list of items as found in the first part of my denomination’s four-fold Word and Table. This is the first part of the service entitled the “Entrance.” It is the assembling of the people. (slide 29) Here is the list of items. First there is listed a gathering, which could include a welcome, announcements, conversation, rehearsal of congregational music, or instrumental music. (animation) Then there comes a greeting for which a responsive text is given. The entrance concludes with a list of three other items: (animation) the hymn of praise, (animation) the opening prayer for which a text is provided, and (animation) an act of praise. Here is the overall list of items for the order of worship for the first part of my church’s four-fold order, the entrance. While there is some hint of an essential action of praising God, that hint is easily overwhelmed by the sense of getting through the list and by the two written texts that are given for the people to read. Indeed, I have seen congregations simply plug in any hymn where the order reads “hymns of praise” whether or not the hymn chosen actually praises God. Take a moment or two to re-read through this slide to familiarize yourself with it.

 Now here is my re-working of this list into the opening act of a dramatic story of encounter between God and the people of God: (slide 30) Gathered by the Spirit of God as the Body of Christ, God re-energizes the church assembly as a graced fellowship enjoying the presence of the risen Christ. Staggered by how quickly grace is offered and the wonder of Christ’s ongoing presence, God’s people respond time and again in praise and adoration of God, opening their hearts in all honesty so that this day’s encounter with God may bear all possible fruit.

 Notice this paragraph is a dramatic presentation of the list of items in the order of worship as well as the two given written texts. Rather than being simply a list of items to progress through, my dramatic presentation seeks to describe in story form the essential actions that are the center of this first part of the order of worship. It is a story, not a list. It is a story of dramatic engagement with God, not simply a string of independent items to be done. It is a story of essential interaction where one action flows into the next. This paragraph is like the story-like description of Kawhi Leonard’s basketball dunk (Kyle Lowry stole the ball and fed his All-Star teammate, Kawhi Keonard, for a thunderous one-handed slam in a game-changing 26-3 run). This paragraph is not like the simple play-by-play listing (Kawhi Leonard makes a two-foot dunk). Too often we approach our orders of worship like a play-by-play listing, not as the drama of a wonderful engagement with God. To approach a service like this drama is the ancient and contemporary way of worship. It is the way of Justin Martyr and Eddie Espinosa.

 After the Entrance, my denomination’s service continues with an order of worship that lists the worship objects that should be in the order. Here is that list. (slide 31) It is the next part of the service dealing with the Scripture readings up to the sermon. One text is given for unison reading, the prayer for illumination. The rest of this part of the service consists of a listing of Bible readings and musical pieces up to the sermon.

 Here is my dramatic re-writing of this part of the order of worship: (slide 32) Continuing in a posture of openness and recognizing their dependence upon God, the people ask for divine help to grow in joyful wisdom. God pulls back the curtain on the grand scheme of saving activity, showing how Christ has become the key to this history and how there is an immediate, ongoing, and current relevance to the story of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ.

 Notice how writing out the order of worship as story of related, unfolding, and flowing actions helps us see what is behind the list. It helps us see what the simple list is trying to get at: the people of God, with open ears and hearts, hearing a living Word from God from across the whole Bible with Jesus Christ as the center of that story. Writing out the order of worship as a story of related, unfolding, and flowing actions helps us see that in worship we are doing more than just saying or singing certain things at the right point in the list. It helps us see what is really at stake: the encounter of God’s people with the living God.

 Writing out the order of worship as a dramatic story also helps us know what the essential actions are. (slide 31) The prayer for illumination, for example, is not simply a text to be read at this point in the list. It is the chance for us to stop, open ourselves up to God, and seek God’s help to listen for God’s voice today. The Psalm is not simply a chance to have a responsive reading so the congregation has something to say in the midst of multiple Bible readings. It is the chance for the congregation to offer praise to God in a way appropriate to the story of God’s dealings prior to Jesus Christ. The Gospel reading is not simply an item to be checked off a list because every service ought to have a reading from one of the four Gospels. A reading from the Gospel is the way of seeing that the whole trajectory of God’s story of creation and redemption reaches its pinnacle in the coming of Jesus Christ. I could go through each item listed in this order of worship and interpret it the same way as to how it contributes the narrative implicit in the order of worship.

Writing out the order of worship as a dramatic story can help us re-imagine how the essential actions might be done. Let us look again at my narrative description of this part of the service: (slide 34) Look at the first activity here: Continuing in a posture of openness and recognizing their dependence upon God, the people ask for divine help to grow in joyful wisdom. That is what the prayer for illumination given in the denomination resource does. If we think of the order of worship as a listing of things to get through, it might lead us to think that the only way to get this activity done is by reciting together this prayer or another prayer like it. But if we think of the part of the order not as a necessary object but a necessary kind of action, it would be possible to achieve that necessary action by a song, by a dance, by an extemporaneous prayer, by a Scripture reading, or perhaps in some other fashion. Similarly, hearing the breadth of God’s story of redemption, which is the goal of having multiple Scripture readings, might be achieved by selections of songs that help tell the story, by filling the content of prayers with content from the Bible, by dramas, by children’s sermons, or by retelling part of the story in the sermon, among other choices. There are more ways to hear Scripture telling this broad story than simply reading prescribed texts.

 I hope I have made my point about seeing the four-fold Word and Table order of worship as more than a list of objects. I hope I have made a case for the usefulness and the ancient pedigree of seeing it as a dramatic narrative of engagement between God and God’s people. Here is how I wrote out the third and fourth folds of the Word and Table order as a narrative. The third fold deals with responding after the sermon, especially in the Lord’s Supper. The fourth fold deals with the sending of the people. Here is the third fold: (slide 35) Having heard and been amazed by this grand scheme, the people recommit themselves to it and search out its application by bombarding God with requests based on it. While God’s answer will come in many ways and in many times, Christ immediately invites those involved in this story to feast on him during the current journey. (slide 36) Moved by the gracious invitation and aware of their own lacking (and need), the people humble themselves before God who responds with gracious forgiveness. Exhilarated by their restored status and aware of Christ’s presence in their midst, the people unite themselves in Christ by extending his peace among themselves. (slide 37) Still overwhelmed by the grace of God, the people offer themselves in multiple ways, not the least of which is an extended time of thanking and honoring God for the grand scheme of saving activity. Knowing the direction of this story, the people request a fresh outpouring of God’s Spirit, which God answers by allowing the Body of Christ to feast on the body of Christ. (slide 38) Overwhelmed, the assembly painstakingly gathers its breath and sensibilities in order to offer a final word of thanks and of obedient submission to God’s work.

 That is what takes place in terms of activity in my denomination’s order of worship. But it would not be immediately obvious because the way the items are presented on the printed page makes it look more like a list of objects to be checked off rather than a story in which to engage.

 There is one last fold or movement in the Word and Table order. It is the Sending. My denomination’s printed worship book merely lists two items (a hymn and a dismissal with blessing), giving a well-known text for the last item. Here is how I wrote this out as a narrative: (slide 39) The people prepare to depart by lifting up one last gasp of praise and of commitment to God. God speaks the final word, sending the church back into the world and blessing it as the Body of Christ disperses. The people depart in hope.

 Let me offer one small side comment at this point. If you are unfamiliar with this four-fold Word and Table order of worship, especially if you are in a church doing praise and worship, I would encourage you to take a look at it more closely. It offers a way for your church’s worship to become better rooted and better balanced for a long period of time. The range of Scriptures it offers and the range of prayers also provide a balanced diet to nourish and form your people. And it can be done in a way that looks and feels just like praise and worship. I will describe that in just a few minutes.

 I believe my approach of emphasizing the order of worship as a related flow of activities is in harmony with some recent books about how to do worship planning. (slide 40) Consider Constance Cherry’s well-known book, *The Worship Architect*. Cherry uses a basic analogy of how designing a service should be like designing a building. Each of the four folds of Word and Table becomes a room in the building, each having its own particular function, that is, its own appropriate activities as the church engages with God in worship. There are foundational aspects and support aspects for each room, too.

 I might expand her basic image in one way: seeing the building that the worship leader is planning as a particular kind of house. I have been watching TV shows in the United States which describe a particular kind of home that is very popular right now in my country. It is called an open design home or an open floor plan home. (slide 41) Rather than have distinct rooms, clearly marked off by walls on four sides, many of the common areas of the homes have more open designs. As you can see in these pictures, there are distinct areas within a larger open space. Each of these areas focuses upon a certain kind of activity (gathering, sitting and talking, sitting and watching television, preparing food, eating) but the open design also draws attention to how the whole thing holds together. I like this expansion of Cherry’s metaphor in order to make sure that there is an overall coherence and unity for the entire service. Does everything fit together well and make sense within its own slice of the narrative?

 I think my approach fits well with another (slide 42) recent book about designing worship services, Marcia McFee’s *Think Like a Filmmaker*. McFee encourages worship leaders who are planning services to think about what it would be like to be someone who makes a movie. She sees a good filmmaker as someone who can tell a good story that has coherence and interest from the beginning to the end. She notes how filmmakers layer multiple dimensions at the same time (visuals, words, music, the body) to make the story engaging and participatory. Thus McFee is helpful for a worship planner to think beyond just the words being said or spoken, but to think also about what is being seen and experienced through the body and through music. She is also a good reminder that our services do not have to have simply one action going on at a time. An essential worship activity might be simultaneously done in multiple ways as when, for example, a piece of projected visual art reinforces the words of a song just as its particularly moving melody is doing the same thing.

 I will end with one final point: (slide 43) I believe my approach of emphasizing the order of worship as a related flow of activities can allow us to do this ancient order of worship in a way that looks and feels like a praise and worship service. Remember what I said in one of my earlier presentations: it was a shame that recent attempts to recover the ancient order of worship from Justin Martyr presumed a style of doing worship that was much more like “traditional worship.” But what if that was not the case?

 I have already tried to make the case that Justin Martyr knew three elements of worship which are commonplace in praise and worship: an open-endedness to time, extemporaneity, and the order as a flow of activities. For most of today’s presentation I have been emphasizing the latter. But let us bring in the first two again. If we do so, I believe it is possible to do an ancient order of worship in a way that looks and feels like a praise and worship service. It is possible to worship in a way that is both ancient and contemporary.

 My recent class was able to make this possibility a reality. I taught them about the four-fold Word and Table order of worship but did so by asking them to think it through as a narrative of engaging activity between God and the church. We then named the normal stylistic dimensions of praise and worship, especially how the songs tend to flow from one to the next. (slide 44) I then gave them a three-column template to design the services. In the first column, they were to think through the narrative flow of actions between God and humanity, especially in terms of what would be said or what prompt might be given to speak extemporaneously at some point. In the second column, the students had to think through the aspects of actually playing the music, paying special attention to the flow of the songs. In the third column, they had to describe what would be happening in terms of projection and the visuals.

 It worked. We worshiped in a way that Justin Martyr from the second century would have recognized and in a way that people who regularly exalt God in praise and worship would have felt at home.

 (slide 45) There were several things we all learned were crucial. (animation) The first is that a good, continuing flow (including between songs) is crucial for maintaining the energy of the service and keeping the worshipers engaged.

(animation) The second is that we need to pay attention to what action the words of a particular act of worship do. This applies even to songs. Do the words praise God? Do they adore God? Do the words remember God’s activity before Christ? Do the words call us to worship? Do the words confess sin? Do the words offer pardon? Those are just some possibilities. Being attentive to what the words do enables a planner and leader to know where to place certain things in the overall design of the service.

 (animation) The third is that McFee’s thoughts on layering words, music, visuals, and the posture of the body is a good idea for making a service feel more like an immersive story of engagement with God and God’s word.

 (animation) The fourth is that spoken transitions are crucial. The things we say between acts of worship are crucial. Rather than simply announce what comes next on a list, the right transition can open our eyes to the wonder of being in the midst of a story of God’s interaction with the church. There is a world of difference between merely saying “Let us now sing hymn number 450) and saying “Awe-struck by God’s greatness, let us respond with one voice in song about how great is our God.”

 (animation) Perhaps the most critical thing we learned is the necessity to have a different perception. Having to think about the order of worship as a story meant we had to keep asking a foundational question: what is the story being told in a worship service? And that answer keeps coming back to it being a story about a God who through Jesus Christ has taken, continues to take, and will take dramatic action in order to be among his people. What story is being told in a worship service? It is the story about God’s overwhelming and gracious desire to be interacting with us, something that takes place within the telling of that story in worship. This meant a fundamental shift in the perspective about what a worship service truly is. Rather than seeing it at the surface level of a bunch of people singing a bunch of songs, reading the Bible some, and then listening to a long talk known as a sermon—as a bunch of people checking things off a list—we learned the critical thing is to perceive worship rightly. And that shifted our expectations to ancient, true ones: in our worship we encounter God through Jesus Christ.

 If you carry nothing away from my presentations other than that point, you have gotten the main point.

 As I end, let me say what I said at the beginning: I thank you and I thank our God. (slide 46) Thank you very much.