

The Ultimate Liturgy as the Liberation of Worship Leaders

Lester Ruth

NWLC

July 2014

(Slide 1) Today I like to share one of my deepest, heart-felt convictions. It's this: "the ultimate liturgy as the liberation of worship leaders." Now, before you say, "what in the world?" let me tell how I got to this thought and that requires jumping back about 600 years in worship history. I offer the thought because I'm very fearful for worship leaders today. This is going to take a little bit of imagination and so play along with me for just a few minutes. It will be worth the patience.

(Slide 2) Here's the question I want to start with: what are the upsides to a way of worship that's done in a language the people don't understand? In fact, the people are not even there, there's only a minister and perhaps an acolyte. And the worship is done every day to try to satisfy God's sense of justice so that 2 people, Lord and Lady Hungerford (actual people who lived in Salisbury England in the 15th century), would spend less time in purgatory. The Hungerfords had left money in their wills, like many rich people at the end of the Middle Ages, so that a priest would say mass on their behalf every day.

So there are the constituent elements: dead language, dead people, bequest in will, less time in purgatory, no one present but minister and assistant. No musicians, no congregation. Something that might have looked like this. (slide 3) What's the upside to this way of worship?

That's the question I posed in a worship history class 10 years ago. It's an actual historical case. Here's the cathedral in Salisbury. (Slides 4 and 5) Here's where the chapel was. My worship history class was studying worship just before the Reformation. They had read about this way of worship. And so, to start discussion, I asked: "What's the upside to this way of worship?"

I thought I would have to wait for a while. I thought finding upsides to such a different way of worship with so many potential problems might be difficult. And so I asked "What are the upsides to this form of medieval worship?" and started to hum the song "The Sound of Silence."

But when I asked this question, a hand immediately went up. (slide 6) It was Matt, a seminary student who was also the worship leader at a nearby nondenominational church, the most vibrant in the small town. I called on Matt and here's what he said: (slide 7 with animation X1) "It's refreshing to see a way of worship that is unconcerned about the reaction of the people."

Refreshing to see a way of worship unconcerned about people having a positive reaction. That's what he said and that's the day when I began to grow concerned about y'all who are worship leaders. Instantly I got a sense of the pressures that Matt faced week in and week out. (animate) The Hungerfords might have been worried by one kind of purgatory but, as we talked through Matt's comments in class, I got a sense of how worship leaders can feel the bonds of another kind of purgatory: having to play to a group of people who ought to be a worshipping congregation but easily slip into being a critiquing, judging audience. I got the distinct sense that Matt dreamed about worship leading in a way where all he had to do was worship and not worry about the people's reaction. Someone's in need of a little liberating.

Do any of y'all ever lead worship where you have to be concerned about the people's reaction?

And it's not just reaction, but expectation, too, that can be worrisome. (slide 8) And sometimes those expectations can reach higher than the spire at Salisbury Cathedral (which is over 400 feet tall). The worship scholar, John Witvliet, tells a story about a pastor coming to him and asking for his help in finding a new worship leader for his church. (slide 9 with animation X1) "Fine," John said, "what sort of person are you looking for?"

The pastor didn't hesitate and was quite clear: (animate) "We want someone who'll make God present among us." No pressure: someone who can compel the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth to show up at a certain time and a certain place. No, actually, that's a lot of pressure. Talk about a need to find some anointed, really anointed, chord progressions. I'm really worried about y'all. Someone's in need of some liberating.

"Someone who can make God present among us." No pressure for you musicians.

But perhaps y'all are victims of your own success. In the development of the position of worship leader over the last 40 years or so, God has blessed with his presence again and again times of musical worship. But the standard worship leaders seemed to be judged by to make this happen seems to have shifted, too, adding tons of weight to your shoulders and your fingers, whether picking strings or striking keys.

Specifically, I'm talking about what it seems to me to be a growing expectation for professional coolness in your music making for it to be associated with the presence of God. I wonder if a new Pharaoh has arisen in Egypt who knew not the former times of Joseph and is now expecting you to make more bricks (and better bricks) but with less straw.

As I have been researching and studying the history of contemporary worship, it seems to me that one of the big evolutions between 40 years ago and today is that authenticity and honesty—the go-to values of 40 years ago—are no longer enough for a worship leader. (Slide 10) There's an expectation for a certain kind of professionalization for you to be able to make God present among us. Do you ever feel the pressure to create studio quality, CD-reproducing sound on Sunday mornings? You're supposed to have retained authenticity, and honesty, and transparency but do so in a way that's cool. Because, you know, that's when God shows up, during the show! Not!

As I've been working on the history of contemporary worship, it seems to me that this is a bit different than the roots of worship leadership. Okay, bear with me for a few minutes. I'm old enough to do that sort of reminiscing about how much better things were in the past, you know, (slide 11 with animation X3) the sort of reminiscing where people wake up 30 minutes before they went to sleep in order to walk uphill to school in both directions in 5 feet of snow in July. I've gotten old enough to do that sort of thing and I ask you to be patient with me for just a second.

I've been looking at early worship leading and early worship sets and it seems things were a little different. Take this congregation, for example. (slide 12) Launched in 1977 it was first called the

Calvary Chapel of Yorba Linda; after several migrations due to outgrowing rented facilities, it would become the Anaheim Vineyard. (slide 13) Here it's meeting in Canyon High School in Anaheim, California. I've been listening to an audio recording of a worship service from 1982. It's 50 minutes of congregational singing, 50 minutes of some of the strongest congregational singing I've heard in a long time, 50 minutes of I-can-see-why-people-said-God-showed-up congregational singing and there's no show. In fact, the simplicity of the songs and the restraint of the amplification of the worship team are striking. The musicians didn't even rehearse and didn't know what songs were coming next.

It seems to me as a research historian that things have changed and not in a direction that creates any greater sense of freedom for you as a worship leader. Each passing decade seems to up the ante on the worry about how the people are reacting to you, about them sensing whether you can make God present among them. (You know, that whole way of talking gives me the heebie-jeebies. Can you imagine the God who so forcibly addressed Job (slide 14) acquiescing, "OK, Job, you just play music the right way and I'm ready to do your bidding"?). Each passing decade seems to up the ante about whether you can lead worship in that cool, professional way of being a pop star.

If that's true, someone might be in need of a little liberating.

I don't think the solution is in returning to 1982 even though there were some desirable qualities in that worship. (slide 15) I think the solution is in liturgy: the ultimate liturgy is the liberation of worship leaders.

Now before you all start running from the room at the mention of the word "liturgy"—which in some circles is a four-letter word—let me tell you what I don't mean. I don't mean this. (slide 16) This is William Hogarth's portrayal of 18th century British worship. Everyone's asleep except for the clerk and the minister; everything's done by the book and liturgy means a text, a script for worship. I don't mean liturgy as worship by a read text.

Instead, here's what I mean by liturgy (slide 17): Jesus and the work he does for the benefit of the world and the glory of God the Father. He and the work he does is the ultimate liturgy which liberates.

(slide 18 with animation X4) The word "liturgy" is actually a pretty spectacular word. It's a fusion of two words from Greek: (animation) laos meaning people ([animation] we get the word laity from that) and (animation) ergon meaning work (animation) (we get the word ergonomics from that). (slide 21 with animation X5) Put the two together and you get liturgy as a "people work," a "public service."

There's two ways to shade the meaning. (animation X first 2) One is to make a liturgy a work for the people. (animation X last 2) In antiquity it thus meant an act of philanthropy, something someone who was rich did for the sake of all the people. (last animation on slide 19) From there the word migrated to mean any general service of a public kind and thus came to include the worship responsibilities of a priest. What he did was for the sake of all. (slide 20) A person who performed such a liturgy was a liturgist. That's how the term got applied to Jesus in Hebrews 8:2. There Jesus is a

liturgist in the true heavenly sanctuary. (slide 21) I like that verse as the idea for a t-shirt: Jesus is my favorite liturgist. Hebrews 8:2.

(slide 22) Both senses of liturgy as a work for the people apply to Jesus. Not only this second sense of priestly ministry for the people but the whole sense of philanthropy, too. Did he not, for our sake and the sake of all everywhere at all times, consider that equality with God was not something he wanted to grasp even though he was in the form of God, but, instead, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant even to the point of death, death on a cross? Was there ever an act of philanthropy, a work done for the people, greater than that?

(slide 23) There's another way to shade the meaning. Not only is liturgy a work for the people but it can also be a work by the people, a common work, something the whole people can participate in. Thus to speak of worship as liturgical is not to point to whether it uses a text or not—text or no text is not the ultimate issue—but whether it a joint activity by all God's people.

(slide 24) But here's where it gets wondrous and where ultimately the liberation for worship leaders is to be found. The activity in which all God's people have a chance to participate is ultimately the worship ministry of Jesus Christ that brings glory to God the Father. Worship is a gift to us in that we are allowed to be joined with Christ and drawn into his liturgy to the Father. Ultimately worship's not about us, not only in the sense that's it's not about focusing on ourselves but also in the sense that it doesn't start with us. Even if you or I had never been, there would still be the worship that pleases God the Father. It is offered to him by Jesus Christ. Ultimately there's only one reaction that's important: it's not the people's reaction to you, it is God the Father's reaction to his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Ultimately there's only one worship leader who can really make God present among us: (slide 25) it is the one we call Emmanuel. But Emmanuel, Jesus, is not withholding any of this from us. Jesus is lots of things but he is not stingy.

I'm staggered by the gracious privilege that has been shared with us as the Body of Christ. We have been drawn into the most solid bond of love from all eternity: the relationship between God the Father and Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son. Here's how Jesus said it in the Gospel of John (slide 26) (17:21, 23): As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." So that God the Father may love us even as he has loved Jesus. If that's not the coolest thing ever, I don't know what it. And that's the foundation for worship.

(slide 27) Worship leaders, my musical sisters and brothers, you are free from the burden of having to make God present among the people that you lead. That's not your job. (slide 28) It's Jesus' job. That's his liturgy. Worship leaders, don't assume a worship responsibility that's above your spiritual pay grade. (And pastors and worshipers, let's not lay that burden on our musicians.) Making God present on earth belongs only to the highest pay grades. Only Jesus Christ and the Spirit of Christ fit the bill.

It's a remarkable wonder to consider how our worship gets joined to the liturgy of Jesus. Lots of folks, ancient and modern, have liked to chew on it.

(slide 29) Here's one: Zac Hicks, the pastor of worship at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Florida: "Where we fail miserably in our feeble attempts at worship, Jesus succeeded fully. The perfect worship that the Father demands has found all its qualifications met in the Son's righteous living—both His personal piety and his fully obedient participation in corporate worship—while on earth. By the power of the Spirit, we are united with the Son, clothed in His righteous worship, such that the Father sees His worship as we worship. Jesus worships for us!"

(slide 30) Zac's in good company. Here's a similar point from Robert Taft, a specialist in the history of Eastern Orthodox worship: "According to the New Testament, it is this incarnate Lord and Savior in his self-giving, reconciling obedience to the will of the Father that for the followers of Jesus is the new liturgy. It is this, and not a new ritual system, that fulfills and replaces what went before...Our liturgy, our service, is to be drawn into him, who is our incarnate salvation, and to live out his life, the same pattern he has exemplified for us, dying to sin to rise to new life in him....actual Christian liturgies, worship services, the liturgical celebration [are] one privileged ground of this divine encounter."

(slide 31) Matt Redman has a similar insight in his book, *Facedown*: "Yes, we praise Jesus the Son with everything within us—but we also join with Jesus in worship as He glorifies His Father. As the Holy Spirit reveals the Lordship of Jesus to the depths of our heart, He also takes us into the Son's relationship with the Father. Wow!"

(slide 32) All this is a historic sensibility. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, had a similar thought when he was publishing on worship in the 18th century: "...Jesus Christ does nothing without the Church, insomuch that sometimes they are represented as only one person...the Church follows all the motions and sufferings of its Head, in such a manner as is possible to its weak members...Christ never designed to make a self-offering for the people, without the people..."

And it goes even farther back. Here's how the important 5th century pastor and theologian, Augustine, put it when writing on Psalm 85. Hang tough. This quote is a bit like good beef jerky in Texas; it takes a little bit of chewing to get the full flavor. (slide 33) "When the Body of the Son prays, it does not separate its Head from itself; and it is the one Savior of his Body, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who prays for us, and prays in us, and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest; he prays in us as our Head; he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us therefore recognize our words in him and his words in us." Augustine bases this idea of the unity of Jesus Christ and the church on Paul's notion of the church as the Body of Christ. The two aren't separated when the calendar turns over to Sunday morning. Christ prays for us as our heavenly high priest; we pray to Christ as divine; and, here's the biggest wonder, Christ, our head, prays in us to the One he calls Father. That's what Sunday morning is about.

Like I said Augustine's quote can take a bit of chewing. Here's a simpler way of putting it from Don Saliers, one of my former worship professors: (slide 34) Christian worship on Sunday morning is the ongoing song and dance of Jesus Christ. Take a look around this coming Sunday morning. When you see the church worshipping, it should strike you as the ongoing song and dance of Jesus.

And who does Jesus sing and dance for? For God the Father. (slide 35) That means there's a necessary Trinitarian dimension in Christian worship if it's actually Christian, of Christ. To be Trinitarian in worship doesn't mean to say "Trinity" a lot; it means to have that sense of worshiping with and through and in Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father.

Ancient Christians had a great image for describing this relationship of Jesus Christ and God the Father and the Holy Spirit. They said the relationship between the Three was like a big dance. (slide 36) The technical word was perichoresis. Like a lot of useful words, it's a combination of two other words: peri meaning around and choresis meaning dance. We know these words: think periscope as something that allows you to look around and choresis as related to choreography. (slide 37 with immediate animation) With respect to the Trinity, think of the three Persons as involved in a circle dance, moving so gracefully, so quickly, and so eternally that they seem as one although they are also three distinct partners.

And we get invited in to this dance. It's not like one of those movie scenes about a prom where some guy goes in, taps another guy on the shoulder, and takes over dancing with the partner while the original guy heads to the sidelines. (slide 38) No, it's more like what used to happen to me as a kid with my dad. When it came time to dance, he would have me climb up on his feet and hold his hands. And he would start to dance around the room. My job wasn't to initiate the dance. My job was to stay attached to him, feet firmly on his, hands firmly in his and be attentive to his movements so I could join in with him. And we would dance around the room. (slide 39 with animation X1) When we were dancing, was it his movement or mine? Was it his energy or mine? Was it his liturgy or mine? (animation) Yes.

And so by the Holy Spirit we have been joined to Jesus Christ, we have climbed on to his nail-scarred feet and held on to his nail-pierced hands and, joined to him, we have been invited into the eternal circle dance of Father, Son, and Spirit. (slide 40 with animation X1) While we're dancing with him, is it Jesus' movement or ours on Sunday morning? Is it his energy or ours on Sunday morning? Is it his liturgy or ours on Sunday morning? Is it his worship of God the Father or ours on Sunday morning? (animation) Yes. Our job is not to initiate but to stay close to him, attentive to his movement, and eager to follow his every sway. And that's the perspective that leads to liberation.

Good, true, God-pleasing worship doesn't depend upon you first of all. It depends upon Jesus Christ. (slide 41) Here's a good rule of thumb for what you're planning for next Sunday: Does your worship participate in Jesus' song and dance, in Jesus' worship of God the Father? Can you imagine the prayers, the actions, the songs on the lips of Jesus Christ? Can you imagine what you're going to say and sing on the lips of Christ in his relationship with God the Father? Getting to be part of his good reaction from God the Father trumps any reaction you might get from the people. Worshiping in a way that is dancing along with Jesus' ultimate liturgy is the liberation of worship leaders.

(slide 42) Sidebar time. Sometimes when I raise this question (Can you imagine the worship on the lips of Jesus addressed to God the Father?) some folks wonder if I'm trying to apply the question in a rigid way to say that it is not appropriate *at all* to say things *to* Jesus in worship. No, that's appropriate, too. It's quite okay and scriptural and historical to worship Jesus Christ and, for good measure, the Holy Spirit. What I'm concerned about is a worship so tightly centered on Jesus that God the Father is unnecessary, marginalized. Take a look in the New Testament. Those folks worship Jesus Christ but most of the worship is directed to God the Father. And sometimes people ask me about prayers like confession of sin. Should we say these if we can't imagine them on the lips of Jesus, since he never sinned? Here I think it's okay to think about what having Jesus in us, having the mind of Christ, produces in us. And for me to have the mind of Christ about myself means I'm quite aware of my sinfulness. We're still dancing with Jesus if being joined to him is producing honesty about who we truly are before God. Okay, sidebar over.

Dancing and singing with Jesus. I like that. (slide 43 with animation X4) What it has meant for me is that I've put away the term "Christ-centered worship." Of course, I'm not arguing for Christ-decentered worship as if I want Christ to be moved to the margins of worship. After all, we only get to be part of the divine dance because we're joined to Jesus. But I've grown cautious about the phrase because it seems to me that I've heard the phrase used in a way to say that everything about worship needs to be about Christ and that he indeed is the chief object of our worship. There's only one problem with that: (animation X4) it moves God the Father and the Holy Spirit to the margins and neither the Father nor the Spirit seem all that marginal in the New Testament.

(slide 44 with animation X1) I like the phrase Christ-mediated worship better. I think it gets at his role in worship better. He mediates our worship to God the Father. A mediator is a bridge and Christ as mediator is (animation) not a bridge that turns back on itself so that he looks like the letter P. His role in our worship is not merely to have us worship him more but to worship the One that he glorifies, to love the One that he loves, the One that he calls Father. That's what we're invited into, what we're being drawn into.

(slide 45) What does all this mean as we consider Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs this week?

For one thing, it means that we shouldn't get too fixated on the precise definitions for these words, particularly if it means trying to find some sort of quota for each in worship. I've seen several different explanations for what these words mean and I've never been satisfied or convinced completely. (slide 46) Whatever we sing, can you imagine it on the lips of Jesus? If not, perhaps it doesn't matter what we call it. If not, is it fitting for Christian worship? Can Jesus sing and speak through the words of Scripture? Yes. Through historic pieces with a long pedigree and staying power? Yes. Through spontaneously birthed pieces? Yes. Jesus happens to be pretty versatile. Climb on the feet of Jesus, hold on to his hands, and use all three—Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs—as you dance with the Trinity.

(slide 47) For another thing, when considering Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, it means we ought to pay attention to the other Trinity found in the passages that speaks of this three-fold division of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. In both passages that uses this trinity of musical forms—the one in Ephesians 5 and the one in Colossians 3—there's a clear Trinitarian dimension of referring to all three Persons of the Godhead. (slide 48) Notice the dance dynamics: we're to be filled **with** the Holy Spirit, giving thanks **to** God the Father **in** Jesus Christ. Notice how the weight of all truth hangs on the littlest words: with, to, in. Notice the choreography of eternity—how to do a saintly cha-cha-cha—in these tiny words: with, to, in. The entire universe hangs on these smallest of words.

(slide 49 with animation X1) And, finally, notice the other verbs in the passages, especially Colossians. Paul's trying to speak about the internal dynamics of church life: put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience; bear with one another; forgive freely, be all wrapped up in love; let peace rule in your hearts; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; be thankful and sing in your hearts to God. (animation) Doesn't that sound like a character sketch of Jesus and a summary of his dance moves?

That sounds like a pretty good messianic song-and-dance number to be part of. And the best part? It's not merely a show for a human audience.

(slide 50) Worship is not first of all our gift to God; it's God's gift to us. Consider what we get to be part of. We're invited into the honoring and loving and glorifying that exists—and has existed from all eternity—between the three Persons of the Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I love the way one of the concluding prayers in the Episcopal liturgy puts it. It's a concluding prayer that's summarizing the wonder of what's just taken place in Sunday worship. The prayer begins: (slide 51 with animation X2) "Eternal God, Heavenly Father, you have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ...." Worship as God graciously accepting us as living members of Jesus. (animation X2) If there's anything better, or more liberating, in heaven or earth, I don't want it is. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (slide 51)