

Worship leading, Biblical justice and re-abolishing slavery

By Kevin Austin

Co-Director Underground Church Network Not for Sale
Staff Pastor Lakeside Community Fellowship (Free Methodist), Lake Stevens, Washington

*"Then the LORD said to Moses,
"Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'This is what the LORD says:
Let my people go, so that they may worship me.'"
Exodus 8:1*

As a worship leader I take what I'm doing very seriously. We were created to worship God, to place God in the proper place as King, Savior, and Lord of our lives. Worship is the electricity that makes everything else work. Worship unites us with God and with each other. For these reasons, worship leading is a high calling.

Worship cannot be confined to a song or a place or a form. Worship shapes us, filling all the spaces in our being. We worship as we eat, work, grieve, rejoice, gather in church buildings, converse with friends, and help the least of these. Worship is an attitude, an action, and a response. Worship is not just something we do; it's something that defines our very being.

Specifically, as a worship leader in a church, my goal each week is to craft, with the help of other leaders, the best kingdom focused, Jesus centered, worship that I can. But to create a meaningful worship service is not enough. The worship *service* is not the end goal for church gatherings.

What is the goal of our worship of God? There are four:

First, in worship we humble ourselves and put God in the proper place. We acknowledge in our songs, prayers, readings, etc., that we are not God and that God is our only source of hope, joy, and peace in this world of suffering. The first goal of our worship is to reaffirm that God is first and foremost in our lives.

Second, by focusing clearly and intentionally on God we unite with God's people everywhere who have this same desire. This is the key to Christian unity. Drawing close to God we draw close to each other. The second goal is Christian unity.

Third, worship connects us with God and thereby opens us up for all of God's help, redirection, conviction, and blessings. God is always ready to pour good things into our lives. It's through worship – the placing of God first and foremost in our lives – that we become truly receptive to God's actions. The third goal is to receive from God.

But is it all about us? Do we worship just to be united with others and receive from God? That is often where much Christian worship ends. The fourth goal of the worship of God is to combine the previous three goals into a combustion that propels us out of our comfort zones, our

places of worship, and our safe places into an exhilarating adventure where our faith moves us into a vibrant partnership with God whereby we impact the world. Worship morphs into service. The fourth goal is to let worship move us into faith-filled action.

The goal of the worship service is to apply all the above.

The worship service encourages the downtrodden, redirects the lost, convicts the sinner, brings rest to the weary, etc. This is common theological understanding in most churches. Inherent within the goals of most church worship services are these things. But what is missing in many churches and much modern worship music is the idea that worship should also propel God's people out the door with passion and purpose to change the world. Worship does not begin and end with us. It begins with God, moves to us, then launches outwards to all.

A personal story: I had been a worship leader for ten years when God radically shifted my focus. Instead of serving at a church God moved my family and me to Thailand where I served as a missionary for seven years. During that time I did little worship leading. I did worship however. Part of that worship was crying out to God to help the lost and the broken. Daily I encountered real poverty and real slavery. It was a time of deep searching.

Returning back to the states I was suddenly back in the worship-leading role. Serving at a mostly white, rural church, I have continued to this day to seek balance. How do I call people to worship and call people to engage in front line action?

The answer to these questions is to be more holistic. It's not that I sometimes engage in missions and Biblical justice and then sometimes I'm a worship leader. I don't use a prayer for the lost as a transition to the next thing on the list. I don't engage in abolitionist work and then move to lead worship. No. I worship and that worship connects me with God, unites me with others and compels me to reach out. I then reach out in an effort to help others know God and to worship God. I serve the poor and worship at the same time. I sing and play piano as an abolitionist.

This is what Isaiah is talking about in Chapter 58. For Isaiah's people fasting as a form of worship had become compartmentalized, a stand-alone feature that was just something more to do in an effort to do the right thing. Isaiah reminds them, and us, that worship is not about forms as much as about the heart. Worship encompasses all in our life. In this passage the spiritual discipline of fasting turns into the spiritual disciplines of service and Biblical justice. It's the model I'm suggesting should be the norm for us:

***Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD ?
"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice***

*and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
8 Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness ¹⁰ will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.
9 Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.*

Note also that Biblical justice turns into blessings and the answer of God in our time of need. I hear people asking often why God is not pouring out his blessings or answering prayers. Of course, there are many answers to those questions, but the passage above is a clue. Could it be that God is withholding blessing because we are refusing to allow worship to change the world through acts of service?

This is what is happening also in the book of Acts. People experience the wonder that is Jesus. They worship in the temple and they make sure that needs are met. They reach out to the least of these as well as fellowshiping and learning together.

There are many other passages from Genesis to Revelation that call God's people to worship, tell others about God, believe, *and* serve the least of these.

Specifically, for me, worship compels me to free slaves.

The quote at the top of this document is informative. Moses demanded that Pharaoh let God's people go. Why? So that they might worship. God created us to worship in freedom.

Jesus, during his declaration in Nazareth in Luke 4 said twice, not just once, that he came to set captives free:

*18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Freedom is important. Worship is important. Jesus came to set us free from sin, shame, fear, and death. It is in God's design as well that all of us experience real physical freedom from torture, poverty, and even slavery. World systems work against this. Sin works against this. When we worship God in Jesus we declare that sin and world systems can't compete with kingdom values. Poverty, racism, and slavery can't compete with God's grace.

When we sing that God is love, all the forces of hate cringe. When we pray for healing, the curse is shaken. When we declare that there is one true God, all the spirits of idolatry gear up for attack. The worship of God sustains us in the midst of discouragement that comes with abolition work, orphan care, and other acts of service.

So sing.

Pray.

Read scripture with purpose.

Recite the prayers in the Book of Common Prayer.

Dance.

Give holy hugs.

Have holy conversations.

Grieve.

Rejoice.

Celebrate the Eucharist.

Shout.

Feed the hungry.

Clothe the naked.

Set the captives free.

Worship.