

## **LITURGY LEADERS**

### **Why and how pastors are the primary worship leaders of the church**

**Thesis: Pastors ought to be the primary worship leaders of the church, but pastors may invite and include lay people in some types of liturgical leadership.**

Prior to the 1960s, only pastors led worship in the vast majority of Christian churches. Are there biblical reasons for this overwhelming historical consensus?

#### **1. Jesus Christ is the primary worship leader of the church.**

Jesus is not merely the God whom we worship but also our perfect human high priest who offers perfect human worship to the Father. Jesus not only leads the church in every act of worship, but his leadership as our human representative and mediator before God is the necessary condition for the possibility of our worship. We only have access to the Father through the ministry of the incarnate Son, and thus our worship is only acceptable insofar as it is united with and perfected by his worship on our behalf.

#### **2. Pastors are men through whom Jesus leads and serves his church**

In continuity with the OT pattern of liturgical leadership, Jesus Christ gifts, calls, and authorizes a group of men through official recognition of the presbytery and the broader church to be his personal representatives in leading the church through a ministry of word and sacrament.

##### **(1) Continuity with OT priesthood**

In the OT, only special divinely authorized leaders exercise leadership roles in corporate worship (see the notes on OT priesthood), and the NT description of the ministry of pastors in the Christian church has strong continuities with the ministry of OT priests.

The continuity in patterns of leadership between OT and NT is not surprising in light of the many layers of OT/NT continuity expressed in the church's identity and mission. As the people of the Messiah, the Christian church is the family of Abraham and the new, eschatological people of God in which the history of Israel continues and finds fulfillment in the gathering of the Gentiles. Even more specifically, the church is also the new covenant temple, and every act of Christian worship is given a sacrificial interpretation. Since local Christian assemblies are new covenant temples, it stands to reason that the distinctions of office and liturgical leadership found in the OT temple would have strong parallels to the leadership of Christian congregations. Likewise, every single action of Christian worship receives a sacrificial interpretation in the NT. If the actions of Christian liturgy are transformations and reapplications of OT sacrifices, then it stands to reason that OT guidelines for those who preside over sacrificial worship would still provide wise guidance for understanding the duties of their NT counterparts.

##### **(2) Continuity with Jesus' ministry, which fulfills the OT priesthood**

There is a strong connection between the priestly ministry of Jesus and the ministry of NT pastors. Since Jesus fulfills all of the functions of the OT priesthood, and since NT pastors

exercise the pastoral ministry of Jesus himself, there is, therefore, a Christ-centered basis for OT/NT continuity.<sup>1</sup>

The New Testament assigns many of the same titles and liturgical functions of Jesus himself to the leaders that he calls to lead the church:

- **Titles:** *Apostles/ambassadors*, i.e., preachers are those through whom Christ himself speaks and who are sent (Rom 10:14–15; cf. 2 Cor 5:20); *Pastors/shepherds* (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2); *Servants/ministers* of God (2 Cor 6:4), of Christ (1 Cor 4:1; 2 Cor 11:23; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 4:6), of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6), of the Spirit (2 Cor 3:8), of righteousness (2 Cor 3:9), of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18), of the gospel (Col 1:23), of the church (Col 1:24); Sowers/farmers (1 Cor 3:6–9; 2 Tim 2:6); *Athlete* (2 Tim 2:6); *Stewards of the mysteries of God* (1 Cor 4:1); *Builders of God's house* (1 Tim 3:15).
- **Functions:** *Baptism* (Acts 8:36–38); *Reading Scripture in corporate worship* (1 Tim 4:13); *Preaching/teaching* (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:1–5; Tit 1:9; 1 Thess 5:12; Timothy is to entrust other faithful men with apostolic teaching so that they can in turn teach others (2 Tim 2:2); *Lord's Supper* (“Do this for my memorial”); *Prayer; Suffering* (2 Tim 4:5); *Ruling/oversight* (Heb. 13:17; 1 Pet 5:2). There are no NT examples of lay people leading any of these liturgical functions in the Christian church.

These parallels imply that pastors are an embodied means by which the ascended and bodily absent Christ continues to exercise his liturgical leadership of his people.

### 3. Lay leaders may participate in leading the congregation's responses to God

Some actions in the liturgy are “downward” acts of God's service to his people in the sense that the main relational movement is from God to us, i.e., God serving us in ways such that the church as a whole is a relative passive recipient. (“Relatively passive” because all faithful reception of God's gifts is an active reception requiring attentiveness and faith on our part.)

Other actions in the liturgy are “upward” acts of the church's service to God in the sense that the main relational movement is from us to God, i.e., we actively respond to God's service in fulfilling our part of the covenantal exchange/communion that is worship.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are also important discontinuities with OT priesthood. The historic Reformed stress on the minister's representative role in liturgical leadership does not turn him into a mediator in a way that conflicts with the mediatorial priesthood of Christ. Unlike OT priests, pastors do not have any greater access to God or to the revelation of God's special presence in ritual and symbol than any other member of the church. However, pastors are a means through which God works (note the parallel descriptions of their positions and functions with that of Jesus). They are personal instruments through which God works to save his people (1 Tim 4:16). Furthermore, the fact that the whole church is a general priesthood does not negate the goodness and necessity of a distinct office of worship leaders since Israel was a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:6) who nevertheless were served by an ordained group of special pastors/priests in her own worship.

<sup>2</sup> This distinction between “downward” and “upward” relational movements in the covenantal communion of the liturgy is not a distinction between divine actions and human actions. In a properly Trinitarian framework for liturgy, every liturgical action is both divine and human. God the Father acts through the Son and by the Spirit in serving us through human leaders he ordains, and our response to God's service is only possible because the Holy Spirit in us unites us with our human worship leader Jesus. However, there are different types of divine actions in worship that have different purposes, and thus there can be different roles for people to embody those divine actions in the liturgy. In some liturgical actions, the church is relatively passive in receiving God's service to us (e.g., preaching, receiving communion, receiving God's blessing/benediction, etc.). But in some actions clearly the main

<b>God's service to us led by presbyters (usually ministers/pastors)</b>	<b>Responses to God's service led by presbyters and (potentially) lay people</b>
Calling/summoning to worship	Praise/thanks
Calling/summoning to confession of sin	Confession of sin
Declaring forgiveness of sins	Praise/thanks
Reading <sup>3</sup> & preaching of Scripture	(1) Offering (2) Confessing the faith (creed) (3) Praying for the church & world
Presiding at the Lord's Supper	Praise/thanks; serving one another the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper
Blessing	(Living all of life as worship)

- **Pastors lead God's "downward" service to the church in corporate worship:**

Pastors have been authorized to speak and act in public assemblies as the Lord's public ambassador and representative in exercising the Lord's service to the gathered church. This authorization comes by ordination. A pastor's ordination means that he is explicitly, formally, and publicly/officially called, equipped, and set apart by Christ and the church to represent Christ and the church authoritatively in leading the church in the functions of corporate worship. By virtue of his ordination, a pastor embodies the authority of Christ and the church and the connection to the broader universal church (both the denomination and the broader church) in a way that no lay person does.

- **Pastors, elders, and lay people may share lead the church's "upward" responses to God:**

Pastors should have a clear role in presiding over the church's responses to God because Jesus leads us not only as God who acts to serve us—the "downward" vertical movement—but also as our human high priest who acts to lead us in our response to God—the "upward" vertical movement. Pastors embody this spiritual reality by exercising a visible, presiding role in these "upward" responses (e.g., initiating, explaining, and/or leading us in our praise/thanks, confession of sin, confessing the faith, etc.).

However, because these actions are our collective response to God, it is also fitting for lay people to share leadership in these actions. The congregation may respond to God by every member acting in unison and/or by one or more representatives who act on behalf of (not instead of) the

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relational movement is from God to us in ways that are unlike other actions in which the main movement is from us to God (e.g., offering thanks for God's forgiveness or confessing our faith/trust in God in response to his word to us, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> "Reading Scripture" here refers to the main Scripture readings offered for the purposes of instruction of the assembly that are directly connected to the sermon as part of the ministry of the word. In that kind of ministry of the word (reading + preaching), biblical examples and commands seem to suggest that the body of laity as a whole is not the agent of this ministry of the word but rather a recipient of these actions from ordained leaders through whom Jesus exercises his teaching ministry in serving his people.

congregation by giving explicit expression of the response of the whole congregation. Since the “upward” actions in the liturgy are congregational actions, there is no reason why any lay members of the congregation (either men or women) with sufficient gifts and training for leading public worship may not act in this representative capacity.

#### **4. The ministry of worship leaders supports the ministry of the whole church**

##### **(1) Active participation in corporate worship**

The whole church is a kingdom of priests, and therefore active participation in worship is both the duty and blessed privilege of the whole people of God. Thus, all who lead worship should do so to serve the active worship and service of the whole people of God. Worship leaders do not worship as serve as proxies or substitutes for the church to offer worship instead of the church. Rather, worship leaders lead in order to instruct, guide, and facilitate the active worship of all of God’s people.

##### **(2) Active mission in life between Sundays**

The service that the people of God receive from the Lord in corporate worship (some of which comes through the leadership of pastors) equips the people of God in turn to go forth into the world as a priestly people to be a kingdom of priests in mission among the rest of humanity. Jesus gives a special ministry of word and sacrament to pastors as an important means through which he communicates and gives himself to the church to guide and strengthen us in all of our various callings to serve him and the mission of his kingdom in the world.