

# “Fellowship! - For the Glory of God”

Jeremiah 18:1-6 <sup>1</sup>

*<sup>1</sup> This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: <sup>2</sup> “Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” <sup>3</sup> So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to me. <sup>6</sup> He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand (Jeremiah 18:1-6).*

I mentioned last week that I believe God is doing two things on Planet Earth. The first thing God is doing is to use the experiences of our lives to so shape our character that we’ll be willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with God, a glad journey that my Mom began by God’s grace about this time yesterday morning.

The second thing God is doing builds upon the first, and that’s the project of joining our lives together in a fabric of spiritual community that only God can build. On the local level, this community is called “the church.” On the global level, this community is known as “the Kingdom of God”; and it’s important to remember that both this soul-shaping and this life-joining happen in our lives only by our consent.

Everything we do in the local church is intended to support the achievement of one or both of these two overarching principles, and many churches have found that a particular five-fold structure works very well toward this end. While the five components of this structure sometimes go by different names, most are similar to our own, which are **WORSHIP, FELLOWSHIP, DISCIPLESHIP, MINISTRY, and EVANGELISM.**

Many people—and I’m among them—find it helpful to remember these five areas using the image of a baseball diamond, where **Worship** is represented by the pitcher’s mound, **Fellowship** by first base, **Discipleship** by second base, **Ministry** by third base, and **Evangelism** by home plate.

I also find it helpful to remember these five aspects of congregational life using the words **WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO.** Would you say those with me? **WORSHIP, CONNECT, GROW, SERVE, and GO.** We’re going to look at each of these in turn over the next several weeks, with Worship being our focus this morning.

Now in baseball, if the pitcher isn’t putting balls into play, nothing else happens; and in our life in the church, if God isn’t empowering us through worship, nothing else happens—at least nothing that really matters. And as you’ve probably discovered, it’s quite possible for us to be very, very busy in our work in the church and for there still to be no “Fire.” All the other dimensions of our life together are empowered by Passionate Worship. Worship is the key. It is the Source of Fire.

Now worship is both an individual and a shared experience, both private and public. We worship God because, like Isaiah in his Temple vision (Isaiah 6), once we’ve seen God, we can’t help worshipping God. Indeed, to see God, to experience God’s Presence, demands the response of worship, because God is worthy of worship.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on January 15, 2012.

Now if God's love is the burning Center of Life and the Source of our spiritual Fire, and it is, then worship is our reaching upward in response to God's reaching downward.<sup>2</sup> In worship we return passionate love to God, who loves us passionately, and we intentionally open ourselves to God's Spirit so we can begin to see ourselves and our lives as God sees us.

While our worship is much larger than what happens in this room—indeed, our whole lives are actually our worship (Romans 12:1-2)—what happens here as we gather together is unique and special. Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase wrote that “God uses worship to transform lives, heal wounded souls, renew hope, shape decisions, provoke change, inspire compassion, and bind people to one another. . . . Through Passionate Worship, God draws people to Christ . . . deepens understanding and relationship with Christ, and over time transforms [us into] the image of Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Weekly corporate worship and daily private worship allow God to do at least five things in our lives that badly need doing. The first thing worship does for us is to “**reboot**” our spirits so that our lives get a fresh chance to work as they were designed to work. Much as computers need to be rebooted from time to time in order to clear out the clutter and errors that accumulate with use, our spiritual lives need rebooting, too. Worship does that for us.

Second, in corporate worship, we **re-member** ourselves to the Body of Christ and to each other, joining our lives once more with others who follow Jesus. Through worship, we bind ourselves to one another and to God so that we don't become “unbound” during the challenging times that come to all of us every week.<sup>4</sup>

The third thing worship does for us is to **realign** our spiritual lives so that we're better aligned with the Life of our Lord. We become distracted by the multitude of cares and worries and responsibilities that life brings to us each week and, like children's toys that create pictures with iron filings and magnets, we need the realignment of “heaven's magnetism” to get the various dimensions of our lives all going in the same direction again.

Fourth, like the clay on Jeremiah's famous potter's wheel, God **reshapes** our souls through worship in ways that seem best to Him (Jeremiah 18:1-10). Bishop Schnase noted that “God uses worship to crack open closed hearts, reconcile broken relationships, renew hope, restrain harmful arrogance, heal wounded souls, shape personal decisions, interrupt destructive habits, stimulate spiritual growth, and transform lives.”<sup>5</sup>

And fifth, through all of these together, God uses worship to **reconstruct** the pathway that allows God's power to flow into our lives and through our lives into the world.<sup>6</sup> Worship helps us move beyond haphazard and harried lives toward lives that are focused, connected, and grounded in what really matters.<sup>7</sup> Beyond our conscious awareness, something happens to us in worship that is real and life-changing.<sup>8</sup>

Now I can't speak for you, but I know that my life needs frequent rebooting, re-membering, realignment, reshaping, and reconstructing, and those are some of the things that, together with passionate, grateful love, bring me regularly to public and private worship. I don't do all this just because it's my job. I do it because I love it . . . and because I need it.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> *Living*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Living*, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Living*, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Living*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> *Living*, p. 54.

While there's really no end to the images that might be used to guide our worship, a very simple guide is the six-step progression that God gave us in the design of the Temple in Jerusalem. If you have a picture of the Temple in the back of your Bible, you might turn to it and follow along as we take this short journey together.

Beginning outside the Temple, there were six stages of approach to God. The first stage was to enter the outer gates of the Temple, an initial separation from the world and its distractions, while the second stage was to pass through the three courts: the Court of the Gentiles; the Court of the Women; and the Court of Israel.

The one hundredth psalm tells us how to do this. We enter the gates "*with thanksgiving*," and we enter the courts "*with praise*" (v. 4). It's good for us to begin our worship by giving thanks to God for our many blessings, "*new every morning*" (Lamentations 3:23), and to praise God for who God is, for God is worthy of our praise.

The third stage of worship brings us to the Basins of Cleansing, where the sacrifices were prepared. After thanksgiving and praise, our sense of God's presence brings us to an awareness of our sin and to an attitude of **repentance**, so that we can receive the cleansing of God's forgiveness.

Past the basins, we come to the Altar of Sacrifice. Because God can't fill us with His Spirit if we're already full of ourselves, here at the altar we **surrender** to God anything and everything that we've brought with us, so that we come near to God with empty hands and open hearts.

The fifth stage of worship brings us to the Holy Place, where the Bread of the Presence was kept, symbolizing God's Nourishment of His people. Here the golden lampstands symbolized God's Light in our darkness, and here the altar of incense symbolized the prayers of God's people. In the Holy Place, we **worship** God with prayer and praise and singing.

Finally, because of the Blood of Jesus, you and I are able to enter the Most Holy Place, the very Presence of God. The Most Holy Place is a place of awe and quietness. Here we **listen** and **wait** to hear God speak to us. So, again, the six steps of worship in the Temple were *thanksgiving, praise, repentance, surrender, worship, and attentive waiting*.

There's one more word I want to add to our lexicon of worship this morning, and then we'll be done. This final word is "yearning," and it has to do with the "passionate" aspect of worship. The psalmist wrote, "*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God*" (Psalm 42:1). "*My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God*" (Psalm 84:2).

Have you ever been really, really thirsty? While I doubt that any of us have really experienced life-threatening thirst, we've all had times when we were very thirsty. As is frequently the case with summer mission trips, it was really hot while a group from our church in Bristol was working in eastern Kentucky last summer.

On Thursday afternoon of that week, our work site had very little shade, and our group consumed all the drinks we had with us long before the work was done. As the afternoon progressed, we were all yearning for water. That's similar to the kind of yearning the psalmist was writing about, except that he was writing about a yearning to be in worship. Have you ever felt that way about coming to church? People who love God passionately enter worship with eagerness, anticipation, expectation, and *yearning*. They're drawn by their love for God and by their desire to open themselves entirely to God.

While I've called worship "the Source of Fire," Jeff Merry has noted that the place to look for Fire in worship may not be where we might expect it to be. "Think about it," Jeff said. "What is a non-churched [person] doing coming into a church, and what is he really looking for? . . . Is he looking for a concert, for a performance? Is he looking for great music from a band [or a choir] on the platform? No, not really. If that's what he's looking for, he can [just download something].

"Is he looking for a philosophical argument from a learned [person] who will speak to him from [some] sacred book? Not really. He could read the book himself and make his own decisions. So what is he coming for, if it's not for the music and it's not for the lecture? I believe," Jeff wrote, "that he's coming because the Spirit of God is drawing him. And he's coming to see whether the people there have gotten . . . that emptiness, that unsatisfied spot in his life . . . *satisfied*. I believe he's probably tried everything else to satisfy it. [He has a] hole in his heart, and he's tried to fill it up with power and materialism and relationships . . . and none of that has worked. . . . They haven't filled the [void].

"So what's going to fill the [void]? Well, maybe it's God. Where's God? Well, God's in church. And he says, 'I don't want to go to church!' And yet he's driven there by this emptiness, by this hunger to get this need satisfied. So when he walks through the doors of the church, where's he looking? He's really not looking on the platform. He's looking in the seats. [He's not looking at me. He's looking at you.] And he's asking the question, 'Are you getting your emptiness filled? Are you really experiencing this God I've been hearing about?

"Are you really *satisfied*?' he wonders. 'Or are you just here getting your ticket punched so you can get into heaven? Are you walking through liturgy and ritual because somebody told you you have to? Because if that's all it is, then I'm outta here . . . . But if I look in the seats and I see people truly experiencing the very presence of God, I may not know what it is, but you know what, I'm not leaving until I get it, because I want to have that.'"<sup>9</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was right when she wrote, "Earth's crammed with heaven, and every common bush is afire with God. Those who see take off their shoes; the rest sit round it and pluck blackberries."<sup>10</sup> So what do you see here this morning? Have you taken your shoes off yet? And nearly as important as this, what do the people around you see when they look at you? Do they see someone who has discovered the Source of Fire? Do they see someone whose life can only be explained in terms of the action of God? Do they see anything that would make them want to be a part of what God is doing here?

The good news is that, just as the potter squashed the clay and began again, so God is able to reshape your life, no matter what shape you're in at the moment. Are you still arguing with God about who's in charge of your life? Are you still trying to make a piece of kindergarten pottery out of your life, or are you offering yourself to the Great Potter to be shaped for eternal purposes?

And what decisions might you need to make about all that right now?

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<sup>9</sup> Jeff Merry, audiotope: *Focusing Worship: Worship & Outreach* (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Book VII, l. 820-823.