

“Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations: #2 Passionate Worship”

Psalm 122:1 ¹

One of the ways our Dad awakened Dan and me on Sunday when we were growing up was by quoting the verse that is our text this morning. I have vivid images of awakening to hear my Dad say with conviction, “*I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD’*” (Psalm 122:1).

My Dad loved to worship, and he wasn’t a pastor or vocational religious person. He was the Director of the Cotton Cladding Division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But of all the people I’ve ever known, my Dad was one of those few for whom life was always about worship. It was always about the investment of his life in Kingdom causes. It was always about his relationship with God.

You probably know that we’re in the midst of baseball season. In baseball, if the pitcher isn’t putting balls into play, nothing else happens. And, much like baseball, if God isn’t empowering our common life in the church through our worship, nothing else happens—at least nothing that really matters.

As you’ve probably discovered, it’s actually quite possible for us to be very busy in our work in the church and yet for there still to be no “Fire.” All the other dimensions of our spiritual life find their power in Passionate Worship. Worship is the key. It is the Source of Fire.

We come this morning to the second of the *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, which is **Passionate Worship**. Like the **Radical Hospitality** we considered last week, worship is both an individual and a shared experience, both private and public.

Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase, the author of the books that underlie this series of sermons, noted 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.”²

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.³ We worship God because, like Isaiah in his Temple vision (Isaiah 6), once we’ve seen God, we can’t help worshiping God. To see God, to experience God’s Presence, demands the response of worship, because God is worthy of worship.

If you know anything about Baptist history, Baptists have pretty much always been about missions. Indeed, William Carey, the “father of modern missions,” was an English Baptist. But as surprising as it may seem at first, **missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is.**

I’ve told you before about John Piper’s comment that **missions exists because worship doesn’t**. “When this present age is over,” Piper wrote, “and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more . . . but worship abides”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on June 1, 2014.

² Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), pp. 33-34.

³ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), p. 47.

forever.”⁴ We humans were created to worship God, and missionary endeavor exists to lead persons into lives of worship after they’ve been born a second time through their faith in Jesus.

It’s worth repeating that worship is not about what happens up here in the front of the sanctuary. Worship is about what happens in each of our hearts as we experience God’s Presence. There is one, and only one, audience for worship, and that audience is our creating, sustaining, forgiving, and redeeming God. 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 really is unique and special.

Bishop Schnase reminds us that we don’t come to worship to observe and evaluate “from the stands,” but to be players who “leave it all on the field.” Even when the Scripture is read imperfectly, we can still ask, “What is God saying to me through these inspired words?” Even when the music is too slow, too fast, too loud, or too soft, we can still choose to lift our voices in heartfelt praise to God. Even when the sermon meanders and the illustrations are weak, we can still ask ourselves, “What might God be saying to me even through such muddle? Am I allowing God’s Spirit to shape me through these experiences, or am I just evaluating this hour as though it were merely entertainment?”⁵

In spiritually passionate communities, you can sense a tangible air of expectancy as people gather for worship. Musicians, ushers, greeters, and other hosts arrive early, preparing for worship with eagerness and gladness. Members of the congregation arrive with that same sense of expectancy, wondering what they will experience of God’s presence, forgiveness, hope or direction in this hour together.

In spiritually passionate communities, worshipers join their voices in praise with gladness and vigor whether they can “carry a tune” or not. They give their best effort to “making a joyful noise” to the Lord. For churches that are passionate about worship, this is clearly the most important hour of the week.⁶

Now although I appreciate and agree with Bishop Schnase’s thoughts about Passionate Worship, “passionate” is not a word I often associate with myself. I’m *committed* to some things, to some people, and to some ideas, but am I *passionate*? I’m not so sure about that.

The Bible tends to talk about Passionate Worship in terms of “yearning.” Psalm 84 notes that “*My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God*” (vv. 1-2); and in Psalm 42, “*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God*” (vv. 1-2). How often would words like these describe your experience of worship?

One of my most memorable experiences of passionate, yearning worship took place when I attended my first Promise Keepers event about fifteen years ago. I went because I was curious to discover what the men of our church were finding so powerful about PK weekends. What I found was Louisville’s Freedom Hall filled with 20,000 men of all ages who were worshiping God with the help of a loud praise band and praise songs that were unfamiliar to me. The song lyrics were projected on huge Jumbotron screens, and many of the men lifted their hands to God as they sang. I was uncomfortable.

⁴John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, p. 11.

⁵ Schnase, *Congregations*, pp. 38-39.

⁶ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 38.

But uncomfortable or not, I saw literally hundreds of men making professions of faith in Jesus that night, with hundreds more recommitting their lives to him. I saw burly men crying as they literally nailed their sins to a fifteen-foot cross, and I was able to pray with some of those men.

The next morning, I and the very proper attorney friend with whom I had come decided to risk a little more in our worship. There was no one nearby whom we knew, so we decided to see what it's like to lift one's hands in worship as many of the men were doing. I was both surprised and overwhelmed by what happened when I did.

As I lifted my hands to sing "Take this life as I live, and all I have to give. Take this life as a worship offering,"⁷ I began to cry. I couldn't stop crying. I cried all afternoon as we sang "Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness, opened my eyes, let me see. Beauty that made this heart adore you, hope of a life spent with you. So here I am to worship, here I am to bow down, here I am to say that you're my God. You're altogether lovely, altogether worthy, altogether wonderful to me."⁸

I was surprised to discover at that first PK experience that lifting my hands to God was a powerful means of praise and prayer, connecting me to yearning, passionate, emotional worship in ways that I had seldom experienced before. The fact of the matter is that both the Old Testament and the New Testament encourage—even command—us to worship in such fashion (Psalm 134:2; 1 Timothy 2:8), and I encourage you to try it. You could start at home by yourself, perhaps as you sing in the shower. But there's more to worship than even this.

You've probably noticed that many of our electronic doodads need rebooting or resetting from time to time. I'm not sure just what happens to them, but prolonged use apparently causes things to accumulate that aren't helpful, and rebooting or resetting clears those things out.

It seems to me that our lives are a lot like those doodads. All day long, every day, the debris of life and of sin are accumulating in our spirits, and worship "**reboots**" or "**resets**" our spirits, clears out all that junk, and gives us a fresh start.

Beyond "rebooting," there are at least four other things that corporate worship does for us. The second thing corporate worship does for us is that it **re-members** us to the Body of Christ and to each other, joining our lives once more with others who follow Jesus. Through worship, we bind ourselves once again 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.⁹

The third thing worship does for us is that it **realigns** our spiritual lives with the "True North" of the Spirit. Like children's toys that create patterns with magnets and iron filings, you and I become distracted by the multitude of cares and worries that life brings each week and we need the realignment of heaven's "magnetism" to get the various pieces of our lives all going in the same direction again. "Worship reconfigures our interior lives and aligns us with the life of Christ."¹⁰

Fourth, like the clay on the famous potter's wheel in Jeremiah, God uses worship to **reshape** our souls in ways that we desperately need (Jeremiah 18:1-10). God uses worship to crack open closed hearts, to reconcile broken relationships, to renew hope, to restrain sinful tendencies, to heal

⁷ Jachin Mullen, Doulos Publishing, 2000.

⁸ Tim Hughes.

⁹ Schnase, *Living*, p. 50.

¹⁰ Schnase, *Congregations*, p. 45.

wounded spirits, to shape personal decisions, to interrupt destructive habits, to stimulate spiritual growth, and by all these means to transform our lives into the likeness of Christ.¹¹

And finally, we do well to remember that the point of worship is not that God *needs* our worship or our praise. God wants us to worship because, as our Creator, God knows that it is through the praise, confession, and pardon of worship that we **reconstruct** the pathway through which God's power, love, and healing flow into our lives and through us into the world.¹²

Worship helps us move beyond haphazard and harried lives toward lives that are focused, connected, and grounded in what really matters. Worship is the key that unlocks the door to Lives that Matter and Relationships that Last.¹³

I can't speak for you, but I know that my life needs frequent rebooting, re-mem-bering, realignment, reshaping, and reconstructing, and those are some of the things that, together with deep gratitude and love, bring me regularly to public and private worship. I don't worship week in and week out because it's my job. I worship because I love it . . . and because I need it.

I began this morning by speaking of worship as "the Source of Fire." To return to that idea for a moment, I wonder what 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 a spiritual power that they deeply desire for themselves?

As we come to the Lord's Table, I ask you to consider whether your walk with God is as passionate today as it was at first. Is your walk with God, your worship of God, what you thought it would be when you signed on? Is your walk with God, your worship of God, what your heart hungers for it to be? If it is, that's absolutely *wonderful*, and I hope you'll keep on doing what you're already doing! But if it's not, my prayer is that this experience of God's Presence in Communion will take you closer to your heart's desire.

The Good News is that, no matter what shape your life is in at this moment, God is able to reboot, re-member, realign, reshape, and reconstruct your life. Are you still arguing with God about who's in charge? 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?

¹¹ Schnase, *Living*, p. 46.

¹² Schnase, *Living*, p. 51.

¹³ Schnase, *Living*, p. 49.