

## FOCUS: Faithful Worship

Sunday, September 22, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 4:7-26

Mark Dever is the senior pastor of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and the president of 9Marks, a Christian ministry he co-founded "in an effort to build biblically faithful churches in America." According to Dever, the four most important qualities of congregational life are Worship, Word, Witness, and With-ness. These four qualities are deeply interrelated, and truly meaningful for us as we kickoff our "Focus on Discipleship" campaign today. We begin today with Faithful Worship.

**Worship.** For Christians, worship is both praise due to God and the means by which God's grace strengthens and guides people. Earliest Christian worship resembled worship in the synagogue, but before long Christian worship took on its own distinctive shape. Christians gathered on Sundays for worship in celebration of Christ's resurrection on the first day of the week. Then Paul described the nature of worship and the practice of the Lord's Supper, a communal meal which should include taking the bread and cup "in remembrance" of Christ's death for us (1 Corinthians 11). He also proposed that every gathering of Christians include lessons, psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).

Singing is a fundamental part of worship for God's people because God commands us to sing. *Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, God's praise in the assembly of the faithful* (Psalm 149:1), says the Psalmist. (See also psalms 9:11; 18:49; 21:13; 57:9; 95:1.) We are to sing God's praises. Where? In the assembly of the faithful: in worship. Why? Because God is faithful to God's people, loving and just, merciful and forgiving, and when we sing, we show our gratitude to God. Paul advised the Colossian church: *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God* (3:16). Faithful worship includes the songs of God's people raised in praise to God. *For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; God is to be revered above all gods* (Psalm 96:4).

**Word.** Faithful worship includes the hearing and explanation of God's Word for us. God's Word, the Bible, is God's self-disclosure to humanity, God's gift of grace for us. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Israel, our God is different from all other gods. Our God gathered a people, blessed them, and charged them with bringing about God's reign of peace and justice for all people. Our God took on human form in Jesus of Nazareth,

living our life, dying our death, then rising to deliver us from evil and into eternal life. Our God speaks to us while all other gods are silent. God's Word details for us all the things God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

The great Reformer Martin Luther said that the noblest part of worship is the preaching of God's Word. Hearing God's Word is the pinnacle of worship, the climax of worship. This is the moment we are let in on God's thoughts and plans for the world. Everything builds to this moment and everything flows from it. The prayers we pray and the songs we sing all reinforce the lesson of God's Word to God's people.

The chief act of worship is to hear God's Word for us, to understand it, and to respond to it in some way. We can't expect to encounter the Living God, whose power created the universe, and come away unchanged by the experience. For how did God create the universe? God spoke it into existence! God said, *"Let there be light!" and there was light* (Genesis 1:3). God spoke life to the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, and they came to life (Ezekiel 37). These are just two examples of the tremendous power in God's Word.

To hear God's Word is to begin experiencing God's transformative power. It is through God's Word that we come to know the Living God. God's Word has a purpose for us. Through the prophet Isaiah, God said: *"so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it"* (Isaiah 55:10-11). The purpose of God's Word is to draw us into the saving grace of God as revealed to us in Jesus Christ and made real for us through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit within us.

It is the Word of God (*logos*), Jesus Christ himself, who is revealed to us. In him is light and life, forgiveness and faith. Paul wrote: *"So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from the word of Christ"* (Romans 10:17). Faithful worship centers on God's Word, shown through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and made known to us with the help of the Holy Spirit. Faithful worship flows to God's Word, and from God's Word flows our response, our witness to the tremendous power of our God.

**Witness.** A witness is someone who tells what they believe to be the truth. A witness to a crime tells the authorities what he or she saw happen. A witness to the Gospel tells what he or she knows to be true about God as revealed through the love and grace and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Most often that testimony comes from personal experience, sharing how knowing Jesus changed the trajectory of a life or transformed a tragedy into

a triumph. Such testimony is shared in corporate worship, through individual conversation, and by the way we live. We tell the people close to us about this wonderful truth we know. Our witness flows from our worship together and our hearing and understanding God's Word for our lives, and by how it influences our actions.

In our story, Jesus meets a Samaritan woman at a well. She comes to draw water at noon, during the heat of the day, not because she is a late riser, but because she is ashamed and hopes to avoid the gossip of her neighbors. Her life is not a model of moral virtue. She played the field extensively, marrying five men, and is now living with a man who is not her husband. She is condemned and shunned by the conventions of her culture.

The woman, uncomfortable that Jesus knows so much about her, tried to change the subject to matters of religion, asking where the proper place is to worship God. Jesus refused to be distracted and gets right to the heart of the matter: *"the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such to worship him"* (John 4:23). By this, Jesus indicates that the true worship of God is not confined to one place or to one people. With the coming of Jesus, all of God's children gained equal access to God through him. Worship is a matter of the heart, says Jesus, not a matter of saying the right prayers or performing the right liturgy.

This echoes the words of Moses: *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might"* (Deuteronomy 6). True worship means giving God our whole self: heart, mind, and will. True worship must be "in spirit," engaging the heart, and it must be "in truth," properly educated about God and God's intentions. True worship is best shown by how we live our lives, by our witness before the world. Faithful lives are the best form of Christian witness. Faithful worship is passionate, informed, and witnessing. When the Samaritan woman learned who Jesus was, she went and invited others to join her.

**With-ness.** Faithful worship has an element of "with-ness." Worship is not an individual act. Worship is a public, praise-filled demonstration of our love for God, a profession of our faith in Jesus Christ, and a surrender of our will to the guiding of God's Holy Spirit. With-ness means joining the chorus of praise to God. With-ness means assembling to hear God's Word explained and applied to daily life. With-ness means gathering for mutual support and encouragement in our mission and ministries. With-ness means proclaiming that we are God's people and we have something special and life-affirming to offer the world. With-ness means we pledge to show up, listen up, sing out, and step out in God's name.

Worship, Word, Witness, and With-ness will be our FOCUS as disciples of Christ. As we FOCUS on our discipleship, we will "follow one course until successful." To improve the faithfulness of our worship life we've set three goals:

- *We will offer 20 new worship opportunities* over the next twenty months. They may be on days and at times other than Sunday mornings. They may feature a variety of musical styles and liturgies. They may be more experiential than our typical Sunday service. They may involve conversation around meals. Stay tuned!
- *We will increase our worship attendance by 20 percent.* We currently average 125 people in worship. Adding twenty percent means twenty-five additional worshippers on Sunday mornings. That's easily achievable if everyone here commits to attending just one more worship service per month. There's strength in numbers and our worship is better when we are together.
- *We will expand our praise band members by 20 percent.* We're looking for a couple of musicians to enhance the praise band's sound. A few more instruments backing up our incredible singers will enhance the musical leadership the band brings to worship.

The work of God's people is to praise God's name, to hear God's Word, and to respond in witness and with-ness. We are to proclaim God's name in gratitude for all that God has done and continues to do for us. With the Prophet Isaiah, we say, *"Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago"* (Isaiah 25:1). With the Psalmist we exclaim, *"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD"* (Psalm 150:6).

Prayer: We come to worship because for us to live is Christ. We live for Christ, we live by Christ, we live with Christ, we live through Christ, we live in Christ. God of Grace, let Christ be praised in all we say and do, in all we think and speak, in this hour of worship and in every moment of our lives. Amen.

Sources:

- Mark Dever at "SING! 2019: The Life of Christ." The Getty Music Worship Conference. Nashville, TN. August 19, 2019. (From Pastor Doug Dent's notes!)
- "Worship." Donald W. Musser & Joseph L. Price, eds. *A New Handbook of Christian Theology*. (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1992), 513.
- "What Does It Mean to Worship the Lord in Spirit and Truth?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/worship-spirit-truth.html> (Site visited September 4, 2019)