

# Worship

Traveling Together: Pathways for Discipleship

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## *Too Big for One Car*

Our family has become too big to fit into one car. We used to have a big van that fit everybody, but for various reasons we sold it. So now when we all go somewhere together we have to take two vehicles. This requires some coordination when we take a long trip. It's important for us to make sure we've clearly identified the roads we're going to take, so we can travel together as a family. Usually I drive one car and Hattie drives the other car and follows me. But in case we get separated, we need to have an agreed upon route so we don't get separated.

That's kind of the situation we have as a church. We're a bit too big to all fit in the same car, so to speak. We can't all be in the same small group—it wouldn't be very small! And we can't all be in the same class—there's not a room big enough for all of us. We can't even fit in the same room to worship together. So we're in separate cars, so to speak. We have two services. We have multiple classes. And we have many small groups. But we're all going to the same place as a church.

Our mission is our destination. We're all about the same thing. Our destination is maturity in Christ. And because we're one church, it's important that we travel together as a family. So what roads are we taking?

We know that our mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. But how do we do it? How do we purposefully grow in discipleship and invite others to join us? The possibilities seem endless, but as a church we believe we're called to specific pathways for discipleship.

Our family just traveled to Kansas City and back over Christmas break. As you know there's more than one way to get from Kansas City to Wichita. But depending on where you're at in Kansas City and where you're going in Wichita, there are some ways that are better than others. We were traveling from Olathe to Northeast Wichita. And so the best way to get home is to simply take I-35 all the way back.

The same concept is true in the church. There's more than one way to make disciples. But depending on who you are as a church and where you're at, there are some ways that are better than others.

We don't want to be arrogant and say that the way we do church is the only way to make disciples. But we do want to be thoughtful and think through the best ways for us at First Free to make disciples together as a church.

And so this morning, we begin a new series on our specific pathways for discipleship that we emphasize at First Free. We've identified three big pathways: Gather, Know, Go. We want to gather together on Sunday morning to worship, serve, and learn. We also want to be in small groups with other people where we really know others and are known by them. And we want to go together in evangelism and missions.

So although there are three big pathways, there are also six smaller pathways: Worship, Service, Learning, Groups, Evangelism, and Missions. These aren't the only ways to make disciples. And they aren't the only ministries at First Free. But we feel we are called to these pathways and we

believe these pathways are the best way for us to make disciples together as a church. Over the next six weeks we're going to look at these pathways together. Let's begin with the first pathway, corporate worship.

### *Primary for Spiritual Formation*

As I've interacted with Christians over the years I've picked up on a common belief. I don't think most Christians see corporate worship as the most important thing in their spiritual formation. Sure, most Christians think it's important to go to church and worship. But they don't generally think it's *as* important as other things—things like their personal quiet time, or their one-on-one discipleship relationship, or their small group, or even the ministries they're involved in.

But we believe that corporate worship should be the primary pathway in discipleship. There are other things that are very important. There are individual spiritual disciplines, like reading the Bible and prayer. There are corporate disciplines like fellowship and service. And all of these contribute greatly to your growth as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But we believe corporate worship is primary.

Why do I say that? Well, I want to offer three reasons this morning. I hope that after sharing these reasons with you that you'll have a growing desire to prioritize corporate worship. And I hope you'll see that attending corporate worship is not just something that we want *from* you as your spiritual leaders, but that it's something we want *for* you. We hope you'll see that it is for your good to prioritize it!

### **WE NEED TO GROW IN GRACE.**

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Let's begin with the first reason we believe corporate worship should be primary. It's because we need to grow in grace. Second Peter 3:18 calls us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We're commanded to grow in grace. And thankfully, God's given us certain means of grace. We covered these last January.<sup>1</sup> We don't have to manufacture spiritual growth. God's given us things like his Word, prayer, and fellowship. These means of grace are effective. They get God's work done in our hearts and in our lives. The Word does the work, the ordinances nourish and confirm, prayer is powerful, and we need each other to grow as disciples.

One of the reasons we believe corporate worship should be primary in our discipleship is because corporate worship is chock full of God's means of ministering the grace of the gospel.

So many people think the call to go to church is legalistic. And that may be, in some situations. But when I think of going to church, I don't think of legalism at all. I think of grace. Legalism is working to earn God's favor. Grace is receiving God's favor, not working for it.

Legalism is like pumping water out of a well. Grace is like standing in a river. We don't have to do anything. We simply stand in the way of grace and let it pour over us. Corporate worship is like the confluence of multiple rivers of grace. There is more of a concentration of God's means of grace in corporate worship than any other place I know.

Think about it. Think of the means of grace God has given us. And the ways he's commanded us to grow. He's called the church to read the Word together as a church. He commanded Timothy, "...devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture..."<sup>2</sup> (1 Tim. 4:13). He's called the church to preach the Word. Again to Timothy he said, "...preach the word; be ready in season and out of

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<sup>1</sup> See the [Means of Grace](#) series.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.” (2 Tim. 4:2). He’s called the church to pray together as a body. We learned that in Acts, they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and the prayers (Acts 2:42). He’s called the church to sing the Word. In Colossians 3:16 he calls us to “Let the word of Christ dwell in your richly...singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” We’re also called to see the Word. And that happens when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. These ordinances visibly and tangibly express the gospel.

These are God’s means of grace. They’re his ways of transforming us into the image of Christ. There are other ways. But it’s amazing to me, in corporate worship so many of God’s means of grace converge together in one place like rivers of grace.

Jamie Smith says “that the most potent, charged, transformative site of the Spirit’s work is found in the most unlikely of places—the church! The church’s worship is the heart of discipleship.”<sup>3</sup> I agree with him. That’s why we think corporate worship should be primary in your spiritual formation.

### *Application*

So with that reason in mind, how should you respond? Let me offer two ways.

First, plan to just show up. In other words, make corporate worship a priority. And prepare for corporate worship. When I was a young man, just starting my family, I remember Tom Macy teaching on this point. He challenged us to begin preparing for corporate worship on Saturday night. He challenged us to prepare our minds by reading the passage for that week. He also encouraged us to prepare our hearts by praying for Sunday morning. But then he said something that I don’t think occurs to a lot of younger people. He challenged us to get to bed at a reasonable hour. That’s to prepare your body. How many people skip church on Sunday because they stayed up too late? Or how many are here physically, but absent mentally because they’re so tired. If corporate worship is the heart of Christian discipleship, then we should plan to be here—body, heart, and mind.

Secondly, don’t plan to not show up. Now maybe this seems redundant, but I think this is a big reason people don’t prioritize worship. People plan to *not* be here. They do that in a number of ways. Some people plan to travel...a lot. They plan to be away from their church family and worship almost as much as they plan to be here. That to me seems to be a liability to discipleship.

Others plan to not be here by planning to serve in a ministry or planning to go to a class. And don’t get me wrong. Serving is really important. And so are our classes. We’ll talk about them over the next couple of weeks. But we believe that corporate worship is the priority.

And so the elders at First Free would love it if you could plan to come to both hours on Sunday morning. We would like you to worship one hour and to either serve or learn during the other hour. But we realize that some people are simply not able to be here both hours. And if that’s where you find yourself, we’d like to call you to prioritize worship over serving and learning.

That’s not because we’re on a power trip or because we’re legalists. It’s because we believe you need God’s grace more than anything if you’re going to be effective as a disciple of Jesus Christ. And corporate worship’s the main place to receive grace.

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<sup>3</sup> James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*, 25, 68

## WE NEED TO BE FORMED IN THE GOSPEL.

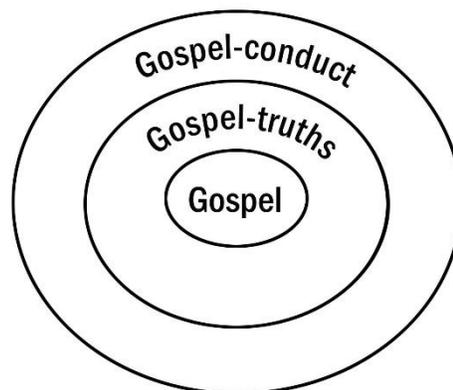
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Let's look now at the second reason corporate worship should be primary in your discipleship. We need to be formed in the gospel.

The goal of discipleship is to become like Jesus. Disciples are fundamentally learners. But a mature disciple is not simply one who is full of *information*. Discipleship involves *imitation*. We imitate those who disciple us. Remember Paul said, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). But ultimately we're called to imitate Jesus, the one who's full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14).

We believe that corporate worship is the primary way for us to be formed into people who are like Jesus, full of grace and truth. Our worship services help us to be formed by the gospel.

We believe in what Mike Bullmore calls the functional centrality of the gospel. What that means is our lives need to be formed by the gospel. This is how the functional centrality of the gospel works. At the center is the gospel itself. This is what God has done in Christ to save us from our sins. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3). Flowing from the gospel are certain gospel truths—who we are as a result of what God has done. For example, we're no longer condemned if we're in Christ (Rom. 8:1). We're loved by God. We're members of the family of God. Then comes gospel-conduct; what we do as a result of what God has done and who we are in Christ. For example, husbands are called to love their wives. Why? Because Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (Eph. 5:25). We're called to flee sexual immorality. Why? Because we're not our own; we were bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:18-19).



Our conduct should be formed by the gospel—formed by Christ. So if we want to imitate Christ, if we want to be formed by the gospel, we need to marinate in the gospel. We need to understand how it works, not just at an informational level, not just at a head level, but at a deep heart level.

Our worship services are designed to do just that, not only in their content but in the shape (or the form) of the worship services. The form of the services is designed to form us in the gospel. What do I mean? All our worship services help us to understand the gospel at a gut level because they have a framework that helps us understand the gospel. They all have a revelation-response rhythm. They begin with God's revelation in his Word. Then they continue with our response to God's Word in prayer and praise. The gospel is God's initiation. We don't seek God without him first seeking us. We don't love God without him first loving us. That's grace. We need to be trained in this revelation-response rhythm if we want to be gospel-centered Christians.

Also, our order of service, or our liturgy, is shaped by the gospel. It begins with the glory of God. But in view of God's glory, we see our own sinfulness and guilt. This leads us to confess our sins. But the acknowledgement of our sins leads us back to God and to his grace shown in the gospel. Through Christ we can have forgiveness of sins. In light of God's grace in the gospel we give gratitude for that grace. We do this in our assurance of pardon and our song of pardon. Then we hear the Word preached to be reminded again of God's grace and how to live in light of that grace. Last, we're sent out into the world to declare and demonstrate the gospel.

This liturgy is designed to help us get the gospel not only in our head, but in our heart and in our bones. Engaging in worship is not just something we do. It's something that's done to us.<sup>4</sup> It's intended to form us week in and week out so the gospel gets deep in us so that it can go wide through us.

It's interesting in Colossians 3 Paul calls the church to put on Christ. He calls them to be conformed into the image of Christ. He gives a long list of gospel characteristics we need to put on: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace. Then at the end of his list what does he call the church to do? He calls them to gather together for worship! He says, "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" (Col. 3:16).

How are we formed in Christ? Paul's answer is through our corporate worship.<sup>5</sup>

### *Application*

So how should we respond to this profound truth? Let me offer a simple application. Engage consciously in the liturgy. We believe the liturgy will have an effect on you even if you don't quite understand how it works. But it will have a greater effect if you get the deep structure of our worship services. Simply be mindful of the revelation-response rhythm of the service. And be mindful of the glory-grace-go structure of the service. It will help form you as a disciple.

Once Eugene Peterson was asked how we learn how to pray. His answer is encouraging to me as a pastor. He said we learn how to pray in community. He said,

*If somebody comes to me and says, "Teach me how to pray," I say, "Be at this church at nine o'clock on Sunday morning." That's where you learn how to pray. Of course, prayer is continued and has alternate forms when you're by yourself. But the American experience has the order reversed. In the long history of Christian spirituality, community prayer is most important, then individual prayer.*<sup>6</sup>

I think this applies to more than prayer. Where do you learn how to read your Bible? Where do you learn how to live out the Christian life? Where are you formed as a disciple of Jesus Christ? In many places and in many ways. But the primary way should be in corporate worship. It's not the only way. But everything flows from it.

## **WE NEED EACH OTHER.**

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Let's look now at the final reason corporate worship should be primary in your discipleship. We need each other. We learned this point last year in our means of grace series. Our fellowship is a significant means of grace. And one of the ways we engage in fellowship is through gathering for corporate worship.

Remember what Hebrews 10:24-25 says? "Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."

When Hebrews calls us to not neglect meeting together, it's not simply calling us to get together in small groups or in so-called discipleship relationships. The word used is the word for synagogue.

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, 22

<sup>5</sup> Smith, 24-25

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*

Hebrews is calling us to gather together regularly for corporate worship. Weekly corporate worship is one of the ways we stir up one another toward love and good deeds. This is one way we disciple one another.

When you think about worship, who's the primary audience? The "spiritual" answer is God, right? And there's a sense in which that is right. Romans 12:1 says, "Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." There's a sense in which all of life is worship unto God. And maybe that's why some people say, "I don't need to go to church to worship God. I can worship in the comfort of my own home, or I can worship in a deer stand out in God's good creation."

But the Bible also calls us to worship together corporately. And one of the reasons we're called to worship together is because it's a way we build one another up in the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians talks a lot about this (cf. 1 Cor. 11-12).

There are a number of ways that we build one another up in our worship services. But for the sake of time, I want to focus on one way this morning. I want to talk about singing in church. And to do this, I want to return to Colossians 3:16, which we've already read twice this morning.

Let's read it again. "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."

Who's the primary audience in corporate worship according to this verse? Sure, God is the audience. When we sing in church we sing with thankfulness in our hearts to God. But the first audience Colossians 3 directs our musical worship toward is one another—it's toward other members in the church.

Singing in church is relational. It's bound up in our vertical relationship with God, but also in our horizontal relationship with one another in the body. We sing to one another so that the Word of Christ can dwell richly in the body. Singing is not just *worship*; it's also a *ministry* to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Is that how you view our musical worship on Sunday mornings? Many people think of the singing time as a time for them to have an intimate moment with Jesus. And that's fine and well. When you sing, you should have your hearts moved to thankfulness for all that God has done for you in Christ. But it's more than that. It's also a way to stir up your brothers and sisters toward love and good deeds.

### ***Application***

How might that view of singing change the way you come to church on Sunday mornings? And how should this affect the way we view our musical worship as a church? Let me offer a few implications for us as a church and a couple of applications for you as a participant in worship.

First, Colossians says our singing is a way that the Word of Christ dwells richly in us. That's why we're committed to songs with Word-rich lyrics. That's why most of our songs are hymn-like. It's not that we're trying to hold on to the past (though we do have so much to learn from the past!). It's because we feel that strophic, or hymn-like songs, can carry so much more biblical freight than more contemporary forms.

Second, we want the voice of the congregation to be the primary instrument in corporate worship. We use a lot of different instruments, but having the congregation singing is our main goal. And we never want the instruments in this church or the volume to drown out the sound of the human voice singing to God and to one another.

Third, our songs will be primarily participatory. We do special music from time to time. And we have a choir. But the songs we sing are designed to facilitate congregational singing.

And that leads me to the first application for you. It's simply this—sing. I know some of you don't have a very good voice. I understand. I'm part of that club. Or maybe you don't like to sing. But everyone *can* sing. So, plan to show up in time to sing to one another. You're called to do so for God's glory and others' good.

The final application has to do with a paradigm shift. I'd like for you to pray about moving from a mindset that views worship as mainly about you to a mindset that views corporate worship as mainly about others. Come to worship to build others up. Come to be transformed, yes. But also come to be used by God to transform others.

Hopefully, this has all helped you to see that corporate worship should be the primary way that we make disciples as a church. And hopefully you see that this is not just something that we want *from* you as members of the church. Hopefully you see that this is something we want *for* you as disciples of Jesus Christ.