

30 Years of Following the Spirit in Worship

Rich Nathan
September 9 & 10, 2017
30 Years of Following the Spirit
John 4:21-24

This month here at Vineyard Columbus we're celebrating 30 years of our church being part of the Vineyard movement and this month is also my 30th anniversary of being our first senior pastor. I mentioned last week that before our church joined Vineyard we had a nice inoffensive little church in Columbus that wasn't bothering anyone. We met in a variety of places including Brookhaven High School for about five years.

If you asked people in our church back then, what was the center of the church, almost everyone would have said, "We have come together to practice biblical community." Many of us moved into a neighborhood together in Linden, right off of Hudson and Cleveland Ave. on the northeast side of town. At one time, we had over 20 families in the church living in the neighborhood. It represented about a third of the church. We were living right next to one another. Like many young people back then, we had huge gardens. We canned our own food. We made our own bread. We shared babysitting and chainsaws. Many of us had huge wood stoves and we heated our houses with wood.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, there was lots of sharing going on in that community. We used to joke about how much sharing took place in this community. We said, "We ought to have a statement of faith that reads, 'We believe in one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one toothbrush!'" So, to some degree, we had in those days a Christianized version of the communes of the 1960's and 70's. But the center of our church for many years was the practice of community or to use the biblical term, it was *koinonia* – shared life together.

I told you last week that the Vineyard movement started in southern California under the leadership of a man named John Wimber and we met the Vineyard in 1985. Along with the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit, what was so striking about the Vineyard was their worship. We discovered in the Vineyard a people who worshipped God with all their hearts. Vineyard worship leaders weren't performers on a stage looking for applause. They were first and foremost worshippers themselves who worshipped God down to their toes. They led worship by modeling worship for the congregation.

For me, as I began worshipping God in Vineyard settings, my spiritual experience was like I was coming up from being underwater, after holding my breath for years. But as I learned to worship, my soul was breathing again. You see, our nice little inoffensive

church that wasn't bothering anyone made a fatal error by centering our church life on the practice of Christian community. We substituted the church for Jesus. We substituted a good thing (church and fellowship) for the best thing (Jesus Christ our Lord).

We became like the 1st century church in Ephesus that Jesus rebuked in the book of Revelation. We were doing many good things, but we forgot our first love. Here's what we read in Revelation:

Revelation 2:4

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.

And let me just ask those of you who are long time followers of Jesus, I know that not everyone listening to me right now would consider themselves to be a follower of Jesus, but for those of you who have been followers of Jesus for a long time: have you ever been in a church which drifted away from centering on Jesus? Or you personally substituted in his place something that was good? Maybe the church or maybe service or maybe justice for the poor or care for women facing unintended pregnancies or mentoring kids or your family – something that's good. But you took what ought to be second and you made it first. Have you ever done that?

Somehow along the way, like lots of Christians in lots of different churches over the ages, our little church traded Jesus in for the church. When I personally did that, I began to spiritually suffocate. It was like I was standing on the hose that was supplying me with spiritual oxygen.

I praise God that the Holy Spirit pushed me off and pushed our church off of our own air hose. As the Holy Spirit led us back to our first love through worship, our little church came alive! Signs of life and vibrancy were everywhere because we centered back again on the only one who is ever first, Jesus. Is the church important? Yes. But like every other good thing in creation, it's never first. It always must occupy second place after Jesus, the Lord.

Today, as we continue a month of celebration for our 30th anniversary in the Vineyard my sermon is titled, "30 Years of Following the Spirit in Worship."

Let's Pray

John 4:21-24

²¹ "Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the

Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

Now, there are lots of definitions of worship. Some of you know that our word worship comes from an Old English word – worthship – which means to ascribe ultimate worth, homage, honor or value to someone. In the case of us Christians, it’s to the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By worship today, I’m primarily focusing my remarks on giving praise to God for who he is and giving thanks to God for what he’s done. So, if you want a simple definition of worship, it’s giving praise to God for who he is and giving thanks to God for what he’s done.

Biblically, all of life can be worship. But today I want to focus more on the kind of worship we would find in the Bible in the book of Psalms. If you think about worship in the Psalms, it consists of four things. In Psalms we sing to God, that’s *adoration*. We sing to other Christians about God, that’s *celebration*. We sing to the world, that’s *declaration*. And we offer ourselves and our money to God, that’s *consecration*. What is worship? It’s adoration, celebration, declaration and consecration.

And God is seeking people who will worship him in these ways. Before we look at this text in John 4 in detail, I just want to ask you a simple question. How important is our worship to God? I mean, with all the other things we have going on, taking care of kids, taking care of aging parents, walking the dog, cooking meals, earning a living, paying bills, getting in shape, watching TV, posting new photos on our Facebook page. And even good Christian things like sharing our faith and serving the poor. Where does worshipping God rank in the scheme of things to God?

The importance of worship

How important is our worship to God? We were saved to worship. Some of you know the story in the book of Exodus. The Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians. God sends a savior to rescue the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage named Moses. God sent Moses to Pharaoh with this simple message,

“Let my people go that they may worship me!”

Now, I want you to notice that the message that God had Moses speak to Pharaoh was not simply, “Let my people go.” Salvation is not an end in itself. Being saved, being set free is not an end in itself. Rather, the purpose of salvation God says is “so they may worship me”. God commands Moses seven times in the book of Exodus to tell Pharaoh this.

In Pastor John Piper’s book on world missions titled *Let the Nations be Glad*, he makes this famous statement:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more.

We're not going to be sharing our faith in the kingdom of God, but we will be worshipping. We share our faith now so that people can learn to worship God and put him above everything else in their lives. The Holy Spirit, over the years, has led the Vineyard to understand that worship is of ultimate importance. Another way to express what the Spirit has done in our church over the last 30 years is that he has led us to understand that worship is central.

The centrality of worship

What do I mean by the centrality of worship? Every human being needs a center in our lives around which our day goes, around which our life goes. You know, people talk about "getting centered". Have you ever heard that language? You know, I just need to "get centered". What does that mean? It means having a place, having a home, having a reference point to come back to when life gets crazy. When we're under stress, we can recollect ourselves in this center that we have in ourselves. We have a place to go to find ourselves again and to find God.

How do you get centered? How do you find the center, your true spiritual home, the place to run to when everything is crazy and you're stressed out? You know, in the Old Testament book of Numbers, God told the nation of Israel how he wanted their camp to be arranged as they made their way across the wilderness toward the Promised Land. God said to them, "I want you to take the 12 tribes of Israel and I want you to set three tribes on the north and three tribes on the south, three tribes on the east and three tribes on the west. But in the very center of the camp, I want you to put the Tabernacle that contains the Ark of the Covenant."

You might ask why it would matter what was in the center of the camp for the nation of Israel. Because God was communicating a spiritual principle for all time through this physical lesson. The spiritual principle was that no matter what the Israelite community was doing – playing some ancient form of baseball or spending time inventing fire or finding new ways to cook manna, I can imagine the Israelites swapping recipes,

"Have you tried that new Pad Thai manna restaurant?" "No, I haven't."

It's really not that hard to make at home. Last night, I made Manna Parmesan. It's our family's favorite.

Whatever else they were doing, conducting business, playing sports, having sex, God wanted the Israelites to know that the very center of their lives was to worship. They went to the Tabernacle to worship. And all of their lives revolved around worship.

We were made to worship God and we learned that over the last 30 years as we have followed the Holy Spirit. If you stay in the Christian life long enough and you earnestly seek to follow God, if you ride the Christian train long enough eventually the train will bring you to worship. The last stop on the train is not church activities however good and important they are. The last stop is God and the worship of him.

Jesus says in John 4:23 that God is seeking worshippers.

John 4:23

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.

He's looking out on the earth and he's seeking people who will worship him. He's asking, "Will you be the kind of person who gets it?" Will you put first things first? Will you make worship central in your life?

This woman in John 4 raised a question regarding the proper place of worship. Here's what we read:

John 4:20

²⁰Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem."

And Jesus replies this way:

John 4:21-24

²¹"Woman," Jesus replied, "believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

You know, Jesus' answer to the woman about worship is one of the most profound answers ever given in any religion in all of history. Because Jesus speaks to the woman and he speaks to us about

The liberation of worship

Jesus says that worship is set free from being confined to a particular place.

John 4:21

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.

No particular place

The worship God seeks is not about the where but the who and the how. You have to become a certain kind of worshipper and you have to worship God in Spirit and truth, but the where doesn't matter. You don't have to worship God in a church building. You can worship God in your home. You can worship God outside in nature. You can even worship God in your car so long as you keep your eyes open and your hands on the steering wheel.

As I mentioned, Jesus is saying something new that's happened as a result of him coming into the world. I believe it is a first in the history of religion. Jesus says that God is not linked anymore to a location – an altar, a nation, a city, a sacred stone, a temple. Every religion in the world has historically linked God with a place. Jerusalem, Mecca, the Ganges River. New Agers talk about spiritual vortexes and they're always in really attractive places like Boulder, Colorado, Sedona, Arizona, Stonehenge in England. Where is God now? Where does God live? The dwelling place of God right now is the Christian believer.

Later on in John 14, Jesus says:

John 14:23

²³ Jesus replied, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Believers, you who love God and have invited the Lord into your lives, you have become the dwelling place of God. If you have turned the management of your life over to Jesus, if you have opened up your heart and asked Christ to come in by the Holy Spirit you have become sacred space. You don't go to sacred space. You carry sacred space with you. You walk into your home, into your bedroom, into your school, into your dormitory, into your apartment, into your health club, and holiness is being brought in. All week long, sacred space is invading this world's space when you show up because the Holy Spirit is in you.

There's no particular place you need to worship. And there's no particular day that you need to worship God.

No particular day

Every religion has linked God with a day, whether it's Sabbath for Jews or Friday for Muslims or Sunday for Christians. Some people think that certain days are holier than other days. The Apostle Paul in Romans 14 underlines this de-linking of worship and a certain day. Jesus is saying something enormous here. He's saying that because God is Spirit, he is de-linked from almost any externals, from a place or a time or even a form.

Now, most of us have no problem with the liberation of worship from a particular place or even the thought that worshipping God is liberated from a particular day. But how about the liberation of worship from a particular form?

No particular form

Because God is Spirit, we learned in the Vineyard that we don't have to worship God with a particular style of music. The founder of the Vineyard, John Wimber, taught us that there is no particular style that's good or bad, and there is no truth to the notion that certain music styles are sacred and certain styles are secular. The kind of music that we like is determined by our cultural backgrounds. Certain tones, certain scales sound good to Middle Eastern ears. Others sound pleasant to Asian ears. Others sound pleasant to Western ears. We all have musical preferences.

If you have been a follower of Jesus for any length of time, I'm sure you have a musical preference for your worship. There are certain songs, certain styles that connect with you better than others. There are certain songs that bring about memories of times when we've met with God. Those songs are precious to us.

But whenever I hear Christians, any usually they are older Christians, bemoaning the fact that contemporary worship songs are not as good as some of the older songs. I think to myself, "How old of a song do you want?" Do you want to go back to Gregorian chants from the Middle Ages? Do you want to go back to Aramaic songs that they sang in the first century? Do you want to go back even further to the book of Psalms?

Contemporary worship music has been criticized in every age of the church. Songs that we consider to be sacred classics today were criticized by people when they were written. What could be more beautiful than Silent Night? But when Silent Night was first published in Germany, George Weber, the music director of the Mainz Cathedral called it, "Vulgar mischief" and "void of all religious and Christian feeling". And as hard as it is to believe, Handel's Messiah was condemned as "vulgar theater" by the churchmen of his day. They particularly didn't like the amount of repetition in Handel's Messiah. You know, Hallelujah is repeated 100 times. They said there's too much repetition.

Have you ever criticized a song and said, “Gosh, how many times are we going to sing that line?” Handel’s Messiah is “Hallelujah, Hallelujah!” over and over again.

The form of worship has created so much conflict in the church throughout the ages. Charles Spurgeon, the great 19th century English Baptist preacher, used to call his worship ministry his war ministry. Because that’s where all the battles were fought. James Dobson from “Focus on the Family” once said that the program that he got the most heat on of anything – and he ventured into politics and abortion and pornography and everything else – he said the radio program that he got the most heat about was a program that he did concerning contemporary worship music. If you want to get people heated up in a church, start playing around with their worship preferences.

But as the Holy Spirit led our church, we started getting freed up from a particular form. And that’s especially important in a multi-ethnic church like ours. We’re a church that is made up of 125 different countries. 2/3 of the United Nations is represented at Vineyard Columbus. So, over the last decade or so, Vineyard Columbus members by the Holy Spirit have had to learn to flex and to bend, to allow other people have their preferences and allow other people to have their cultural needs met in worship. Everyone who attends VC has had to learn by the Spirit to subordinate our own preferences and our own cultural needs to the needs of others.

Philippians 2:3b-4

Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Sometimes I think about worship as being like serving a family meal. Grandma’s coming over and we know that Grandma’s favorite dish is corned beef and cabbage. So, Mom announces that Grandma’s coming and we’re going to be having corned beef and cabbage for dinner. How many families would tolerate a teenager getting up from the table and saying, “I’m not eating corned beef and cabbage. I’m ordering a pizza! I’m not sitting at the table with that stinky food.” I hope that most of us would say, “You know, we’re a family. There are times that Grandma gets what Grandma wants. There are times when you get what you want. In worship, there are times when a person who looks different than me or you gets what they want. And there are times when you get what you want.

The Holy Spirit doesn’t care what form the worship is – gospel or hymns or rhythm and blues or rock or Gregorian chants or choirs or acapella. Worship is liberated by the Spirit.

Jesus not only talks about the liberation of worship, but he talks about

The heart of worship

John 4:22-24

²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth

He tells the Samaritan woman, “You Samaritans worship what you do not know. We Jews worship what we do know.” He says something hard here. Samaritan worship is founded on ignorance. “You worship what you don’t know.” It’s not enough to sincerely believe to please God in worship, our worship must be built on the truth and not lies about God. Samaritans had cut out most of the Old Testament. They only held on to the first five books. They rejected the Prophets and the histories and writings. In order to worship God acceptably by the Spirit, we need the whole Bible to be open to us, not just the cut up parts of the Bible. God has to be worshipped in truth the way he is.

Worshipping God in truth has multiple layers of meaning. John tells us that Jesus is full of truth. Jesus himself says, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The Spirit is the Spirit of truth. God’s Word is truth. To worship God in truth is to worship God through Jesus Christ and to worship God according to the Spirit’s revelation of truth, which is God’s Word, the Bible.

For 30 years, I have attempted to faithfully communicate to you God’s thoughts by having us worship God with an open Bible. My approach to preaching has been to offer Vineyard Columbus a balanced diet. When I set my preaching calendar over the course of two years, what I’m looking for is to feed our church a balanced meal. I know that just like some people want to eat cookies all day and some want to eat chips all day, some Christians want to spend all of their time discussing the latest end times schemes, about what these hurricanes mean in terms of the date in which the Lord comes. But I’ve made it my aim to offer the people of Vineyard Columbus a balanced diet.

So, I look over the course of two years and I say, “Have we been too horizontal? Have we simply talked about our friendships, our finances, our families, our emotions? Then we need to become vertical. We need a series that calls us to think about who God is – what are his attributes, to talk about worship and the Holy Spirit and the cross and the meaning of salvation. Have we been too topical? We need a series where I preach verse by verse through a book. Have we spent too much time in the New Testament? Then we need to go back to the Old Testament. Are there particular doctrines or areas of life that we’ve neglected as a church? Then that needs to be taught.”

My approach has been to teach a Both-And Christianity – loving God and loving people, grace and truth, evangelism and justice, proclamation and demonstration, personal and social holiness. The goal has been to form holistic disciples who know God and know his Word.

Worshipping God in truth is not only worshipping God with an open Bible. It's also worshipping God with the truth about ourselves. God is seeking worshippers who will take their church masks off and worship God with authenticity and genuineness. God is seeking worshippers who will not hide the ugly places, the damaged places, the infected places of our lives. We need to bring all the ugly stuff, all that we are, into the presence of God. God is seeking worshippers who will not try to fake him out. Worshippers who say, "I am going to be utterly and completely spiritually naked before you, Lord! This is who I am. This is where I'm at. This is how I hurt. This is where my thoughts have been going. Take me as I am. I give you myself. Not an airbrushed picture of what I think you want, not my Facebook self carefully curated from a bunch of selectively chosen photos and statements. We come to God with the truth about who he is and the truth about who we are, and we come to God in Spirit."

What does that mean? The only way you and I can ever come to God is *by* the Holy Spirit. The worship of the Triune God properly speaking means we come to the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit. It's only as the Holy Spirit opens our hearts that we are drawn to God and empowered to come to him.

With respect to worship in Spirit, we're not only talking about God's Spirit, we're also talking about our human spirits. God is seeking worshippers who will worship him in the deepest part of our beings, our spirits. Not with a bunch of externals that other people can see, not just with the externals of a place and a day and a form, but Lord I come to you with my whole heart. I worship you with the deepest part of me.

And worship is not just a one way street of our activity before God.

The fruit of worship

What we discovered when we encountered Vineyard more than 30 years ago was worship by the Holy Spirit is not just a human activity in which we tried to give God ourselves. Worship is also a relationship in which God gives himself to us. In 2 Chronicles 5, people gathered to worship God and here's what we read:

2 Chronicles 5:13-14

¹³ The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang:

“He is good;
his love endures forever.”

Then the temple of the LORD was filled with the cloud, ¹⁴ and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God.

There have been many times like this over the last 30 years here at Vineyard Columbus. Some have been in our public gatherings on the weekend. Some have been in small group settings or evenings devoted to worship. We came before God in sincere worship. We honestly gave ourselves to the Lord and he came. He visited us with his presence, his power, his love and his healing. To understand the Vineyard, you need to understand that for 30 years the Holy Spirit has taken us on this wonderful journey of following him in worship.

Let’s pray.

30 Years of Following the Spirit in Worship

**Rich Nathan
September 9 & 10, 2017
30 Years of Following the Spirit
John 4:21-24**

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 - A. No particular place
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 - C. No particular form
- IV. The heart of worship
- V. The fruit of worship