

A Review of Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace

The one thing author James B. Torrance wants to get across to the reader in this book is that “Christian worship is...our participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father.” This theme is repeated over and over throughout his writing, in different contexts. Torrance’s reason for writing is that our view of God influences our understanding of worship and humanity. Without a doctrine of the Trinity, our worship becomes unitarian, and we diverge toward an individualistic anthropology. Torrance is also concerned that we regain a focus on the continuing priesthood of Christ, who is now interceding for us. Torrance cites a number of Scripture references in describing trinitarian worship, but he also references Calvin frequently. This review will start with the author’s introduction and then move through the four chapters chronologically with interwoven discussion.

Christian worship is possible today because Jesus Christ came to “stand in” for us, to offer to the Father perfect love and obedience, worship and praise, on our behalf. He calls us to be united with Him by the Spirit 1) in His communion with the Father, 2) in His priestly ministry of intercession for the world, and 3) in His mission to the world. Christ takes our broken lives and unworthy prayers, sanctifies them, and offers them as perfect to the Father, that we might “feed” on Him in thanksgiving. Our worship is a response to Christ’s response of worship. He is “the leader of our worship” (Heb. 8:2; 9:11-15; 10:1-25). As Calvin expounds, in baptism, Christ’s baptism is ours; at the table, Christ’s sacrifice is ours; and in worship and prayer, Christ’s worship is ours.

In Chapter 1, Torrance describes two types of worship: unitarian and trinitarian. Unitarian worship is about what *we* do before God – go to church, sing our songs to God, listen to the sermon, offer our time, talents, and treasure to God, and obey Jesus’ commands. The only priesthood is our priesthood, and the only offering is our offering. Unitarian worship leads to false confidence in the flesh, legalism, weariness, and division. Torrance introduces the Harnack (Hick) Model, which visualizes a unitarian way of relating to God. The distinguishing features of this model are a *generic* Father-Son relationship (God the Father’s relationship to Jesus is the same as His relationship to us)

and a strong focus on our immediate relationship with God. There is no doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation, the Spirit, atonement, or unconditional free grace.

Thankfully, in trinitarian worship, there is only one true Priest through whom we draw near to the Father, one Mediator between us and God, and one offering acceptable to God: Jesus. Thus, our worship is participation through the Spirit in what Christ *has done* and *is continuing to do* for us, and in His communion with the Father. Our baptism, through water and Spirit, is participation in His baptism – in the Jordan and in blood upon the cross to wash away our sins. We also participate with Christ in His intercession and mission to the world; after all, He is “the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (Heb. 3:1). In other words, trinitarian worship involves participation in the saving life of Christ, through the Spirit. Through the Son and the Spirit, God our Father “lifts us up out of ourselves to participate in the very life of the Godhead, that life of communion for which we were created.” Trinitarian worship produces joy, ecstasy, and unification, since there’s only one *way* no matter what outward form the worship takes.

Torrance introduces the Incarnational Trinitarian Model to illustrate the relations in trinitarian worship. First, there is the unique relationship of mutual love, mutual self-giving, and mutual glorification between the Father and Jesus, which we are drawn to participate in by the Spirit. Second, there is the relationship between Christ and His body in the communion of the Spirit. Third, there is the relationship between the members of the church by life in the Spirit. Further, we see a “double movement of grace”: from God the Father to humanity, through the Son in the Spirit (incarnation); and from humanity to God the Father, through the Son in the Spirit (sanctification). Torrance also introduces a third model, the Existential, Present-day Experience Model, which falls between the other two in terms of unitarian and trinitarian influence. This model does stress the incarnation and Christ’s work on the cross as the way to a relationship with God. However, *our* faith, *our* decision, and *our* response to these events are also emphasized while the person, vicarious humanity and high-priesthood of Jesus Christ are virtually ignored.

A number of Scripture passages support the concept of trinitarian worship: Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:15-16, where the Spirit testifies that we are God’s children and enables us to cry, “*Abba*,

Father”; Rom. 8, where we are “co-heirs” and brothers with Christ and “sons of God”; 1 John 1:3, where “our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son”; John 17, where we see the mutual-indwelling (*perichoresis*), which characterizes the relationship between Jesus and the Father and between Christ and His body; and perhaps most explicitly, Eph. 2:18, “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.” Because God is love and has His very “Being-in-communion,” Gen. 1:26-27 and John 17:3 infer that we also were created to find our true being-in-communion – with Him and one another. Indeed, much more Scripture can be given here.

Chapter 2 focuses on the sole priesthood of Christ, our Mediator of worship. Recall that this key element of trinitarian worship is absent in the Existential, Present-day Experience Model, which describes how a large number of churches worship today. Torrance insists that we cannot “throw people back on themselves with exhortations and instructions as to what to do and how to do it.” Rather, we must direct them to Jesus, who has experienced what we have, and who can lead them by the Spirit to the Father. As our Interceder, Christ is now standing in for us, to do for and in us what we cannot do (Heb. 6:20; 7:25-28; 8:1-6).

In the OT, when the high priest entered into God’s presence, he represented all Israel to God. Similarly, Jesus represented all of humanity in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the Father. In Him, we are presented to the Father as dearly loved children, and our life is “now hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). Secondly, when the OT high priest vicariously confessed people’s sins and interceded for them before God, “God accepted them as His forgiven people in the person of the high priest.” Similarly, Jesus offered Himself through the eternal Spirit without blemish to the Father, in our name and on our behalf, so God accepts us in Him. These two statements fill out the concept of “the one and the many,” where the high priest/Christ is the “one,” and Israel/we are the “many.” Thus, Christ not only represents God to humanity but also represents humanity to God.

Another significant contribution in Chapter 2 is the contrast between “legal repentance” and “evangelical repentance.” In legal repentance, we must first repent in order to be forgiven. This is how I viewed God’s forgiveness until recently. In evangelical repentance, we repent because we

have already been forgiven through Christ's death. I see now how my view of God's forgiveness influenced my forgiveness of others, especially in my marriage; I thank God for how He is redeeming this area of my life. When we worship through repentance, it is noteworthy that we are both accepting God's love and forgiveness already given, but also humbly submitting to the verdict of guilty. This is undoubtedly what keeps many people from such worship. How wonderful that our innocent Savior did not resist but accepted the verdict of guilty on the cross and submitted to divine judgment, for our sins.

Hebrews was written to a group of Christians who had taken their eyes off Jesus as their High Priest. They had turned to religious practices and put (false) self-confidence in human ordinances and traditions. They had ceased leaning on Christ's self-offering and on Him as their Mediator of worship. They had turned from trinitarian worship to unitarian worship. They had forgotten that the way of worship has always been defined by God. This is a call to present-day churches to not make the same mistake, for God hates false worship as much today as He did back then and in the OT. Let us give God what *He* desires; let us reserve the role of high priest for humanity, to Christ alone. Let us remember God's double movement of grace: as in a hug, God our Father stretched out His two hands in the Word and the Spirit to create and redeem us (Irenaeus), *to give Himself* to us, but also *to draw us* near to His heart in intimate communion.

Torrance begins Chapter 3 on baptism and the Lord's Supper by discussing what will allow us to view them properly. The starting point for all theology should be "who," not "how." Who is God? Who is Jesus? Who is the Holy Spirit? Only through the answers to these questions does the "how" become apparent. Protestantism often tends to see Christianity as a way to solve practical problems instead of a way to know Christ. We tend to look for utility instead of beauty. But we need to come to Christ motivated by love; as the author puts it, "we worship God for God's sake." Moreover, we need to realize that our view of God influences our view of worship and humanity. For example, if we view God as a "contract-God," this can lead to doctrines of human penance, a Protestant work ethic, or the use of prosperity as a motive for giving. However, if we view God as

trinitarian in nature, this leads to an understanding that we were created to find our true being in intimate communion with Him and one another.

Baptism is a sign of God's work in making us His children. In other words, when Christ died, we died with Him to our old identity; when He was buried, our sins were buried with Him; when He rose, we rose into a new identity and life – His life; when He ascended into heaven, He ushered us into the Father's presence. The author secondly argues that baptism is a sign of God's unilateral covenant of grace, which I don't see. Third, Baptism is a sign of Christ's baptism in blood upon the cross for us (Eph. 4:5). Fourth, it symbolizes being united with Christ into a life of (daily) dying to the flesh and rising/living with Him (Gal. 5:24; Rom. 6). I believe dying is at the heart of worship because in it we are giving up something of great value to us for something infinitely more valuable: Christ and His life in us. Finally, baptism is a sign of being placed by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ and thereby sharing in His communion with the Father.

I find the argument for immersion, sprinkling, and pouring as equally valid forms of baptism to be weak. While sprinkling and pouring of water may be a symbol of cleansing, they are not a symbol of death, as is immersion. Further, the author does not mention the definition of the word *baptizo*, which is "to dip" according to Vine's Dictionary. Second, I find the argument for infant baptism equally weak. Again, only one specific reference is used to defend the position biblically (Acts 2:39), and it is out of context. The author also says, "In the practice of infant baptism, we believe in faith that we are doing something for the child," which appears contradictory considering his Reformed perspective throughout the book. If the gospel is wholly based on God's grace, then what exactly does Torrance believe we humans are doing for the child in infant baptism? There are numerous examples in Acts of baptism *following* belief – immediately in many cases, but not before (Acts 2:41; 8:12-13; 9:17-18; 10:47-48; 16:14-15; 16:31-33 18:8; 19:4-5; 22:16).

In the Lord's Supper, we participate by the Spirit in the life of the ascended Christ, our High Priest, in memory and in communion. First, Christ through the Spirit brings to our *remembrance* His earthly worship and self-offering for us. Second, Christ through the Spirit lifts us up into His *communion* with the Father. When we feed on the "Bread of Life," we are reminded that Christ's

worship is ours through a wonderful exchange: He took our life in judgment and now gives us His life in victory and freedom. Torrance notes that, while there are differences between Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed traditions, all believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ and that we commune with the whole Christ, the God-Man. There is a real presence in His Spirit and yet an eschatological absence in His risen humanity. But again, the Who is more important than the how.

Torrance addresses a serious question in his last chapter: If we may use masculine language, can we not use feminine language and images of God, and add the concept of motherliness to more fully express God's heart – His love and compassion? Also, can we use “inclusive language in worship? The author's short answer is that we must contend for the gospel of grace and the trinitarian nature of our faith and worship. He briefly outlines the issues of the debate. First, we cannot project our images of father and son onto God, as in today's version of the Arian-Nicene controversy. Jesus and the Father are eternal, and *Jesus* reveals who the Father is, not our limited, sexist notions of father and son. Second, the author believes that there is a “legitimate demand for justice and equality” from women, and that many of us have ugly images of “father” that need to be remolded by God. However, both men and women must find their humanity in the incarnate Son of God and interpret themselves in light of the Trinity.

Finally, we must be careful of two extremes: postmodernism and fundamentalism. Postmodernism starts with taking a valid idea, detaching it from Jesus and the gospel of grace, and attaching it to the self, filling it with experience and self-expression. This leads to an ideology to serve vested interests, which eventually leads to an attack of the gospel and doctrines of the Trinity. Next, the authority of the Bible is attacked, which leads to the acceptance of the Bible *plus tradition* as authoritative. As a result, fundamentalism is stirred up, which promotes legalism but still fails to interpret the Bible christologically. This in turn leads to an individual pietism. In the end, both extremes fall into unitarian worship and a false confidence in the flesh. To the contrary, let us keep our eyes on Jesus, our High Priest and the only Way to the Father, through the Spirit.