

### ***A Review of Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship***

Author Robin Parry writes this book out of a deep concern that Christian worship be about the Christian God, the Trinity. His concern stems from the observation that there seems to be little emphasis on the Trinity, especially the Father and the Spirit, in today's worship gatherings. Parry argues that right theology is intimately connected with and influences right worship; hence he sets out to develop and recapture a Christian theology of worship, which is overtly Trinitarian. This review moves chronologically through Parry's book, starting with motivation, then general theology of the Trinity, followed by how worship is connected with the Trinity, and how this plays out in our singing, prayer, and other mediums for worship.

In Chapter 1, Parry begins by noting that much of contemporary worship music has been watered down to the point where it contains very little "meat" or content on God the Father, God the Spirit, God's interaction with Israel, or even many of the narratives of Jesus – His incarnation, ministry, resurrection, and ascension. He further observes that many people in the church do not have a good or even basic understanding of the Trinity. Parry believes that, while explicit teaching on the Trinity is helpful, the main solution is that we must *integrate* Trinitarian theology into our lives of faith and worship. To motivate us, Parry proclaims that "the Triune God is the boast of the Christian faith." He also argues that *good* worship depends on *good* theology. Worship in turn provides for communal encounters with God that shape our spirituality, how we think of and relate to Him. This last point completes the circle of influence between worship and theology. However, Parry tackles the link from theology to worship because, if good theology can just be transferred to worship leaders and songwriters, then good worship will take place and will influence the theology of everyone in the congregation through "participatory knowledge." Participation in communal, Trinitarian worship will teach people the "grammar of God" and the "language of faith." The author defines Christian or Trinitarian worship as "nothing more, nor less, than the Spirit enabling us to join in with Christ's worship of the Father."

Parry dives in to general theology of the Trinity in Chapters 2 and 3 by looking at God Himself, His story, and how He relates to us. In creation, we see the Father as the initiator, but it is

Christ *through* whom all things were made; Christ is the “firstborn,” because He created all things; He sustains and holds all things together (1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3; John 1:1-3). Christ is the radiance of God’s glory and the perfect image of God’s being. Further, we see the Spirit of God as the breath or wind of God that gives life and animates, drawing creation toward its glorious goal (Gen. 1:1-2; 2:7; Ps. 104:29-30; 33:6). As human beings, we are created to represent this Trinitarian God on earth. At this point, Parry introduces the analogy of the hand (God) and the glove (us). The analogy does not seem that enlightening at first, but later on it helps shed light on Christ’s role in being both the hand and the glove. Parry points out the singular use of humanity or “man” in Gen. 1:27, which is expressed by male and female and their *relationship*. Thus, relationship is a key component of being in the image of the Trinity.

Sin fractured humanity’s relationships – with God, each other, and the environment. Therefore, God chose Abraham and his descendants, so that He could save (not condemn) the whole world through them. God rescued Israel out of Egypt and made them His covenant people, but they still sinned and eventually had to go into exile, like Adam. However, Jesus was incarnated to represent Israel and Adam. He fulfilled God’s covenant in perfect obedience, paved the return from exile in His resurrection, and poured out His Spirit on people, so that Gentiles could also begin worshiping with Israel. In Phil. 2, Christ saw His position as a means to serve others, not to be served. He became fully human, putting on the glove of humanity so that He could reshape and renew it. The Father is seen in the incarnation through His initiation and sending of His Son. The Spirit gives life and enables the Son to be conceived as a human in Mary.

In his ministry, Jesus spoke the Father’s words and performed the Father’s works by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit also enabled people to hear the Father through Jesus, as He still does. As the hand, Jesus acted as God to *save* us; as the glove, He represented God, living a perfect human life to *save us*. On the cross, the Son suffered being forsaken by the Father, but the Father also suffered the grief of His Son’s death. Christ was enabled by the Spirit to offer Himself “through the eternal Spirit” as an acceptable sacrifice to God (Heb. 9:14). The Spirit also functions on an ongoing basis to open people’s eyes to the foolishness of the cross as God’s wisdom, power,

and way of salvation (1 Cor. 1:18-2:16). Continuing to the resurrection and ascension, the Father raised Christ from the dead through the Spirit, who also gives us life and will resurrect our bodies when Christ returns (Rom. 8:11). Jesus ascended into heaven and is now ruling as a glorified human and as the divine Lord. He receives the worship of all of creation in Rev. 5 and shares God's throne in Rev. 22:1, 3. When Jesus ascended, He received the promised Holy Spirit and poured the Spirit out on the church (Acts 2:33). Christ is now in the throne room of the Father, interceding for us as our High Priest and offering up His perfect sacrifice in worship to the Father.

In salvation, the Father drew us to Himself by first reconciling us in the death of Christ. Then, the Father stretched out His Spirit to take off the blindfold of sin and help us see the truth of the gospel (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Rom. 8:5-8; Eph. 2:1). Finally, through His Spirit, the Father drew us to His Son and enabled us to believe and repent. Here I differ from the author's perspective a little since a careful dissection of Eph. 2:8-9 implies that the "gift of God" refers to salvation, not faith. While other Scripture does support the idea that God is involved in our faith, a good case can be made that faith is largely our response, our gift to God, the one thing that He desires from us and that pleases Him (Heb. 11:6). Moving on, the author's imagery of being held in a "Trinitarian embrace" is well founded and makes me feel very loved and secure.

As a church, we share one Father and live as Christ's body and bride. In Christ our head, we are: the temple of the Holy Spirit, a loving community of people, a unified body, God's holy nation (Israel), and the family of God. We are placed in Christ by the Spirit, and we relate *to* the Father, *in* the Son, *by* the Spirit. We reflect the community of the Trinity by our love, recognizing each other as equals, valuing our differences, and by the flow of our relationships and communication. Here, Parry poses a very important question: If this is so, then do our church structures encourage inclusiveness, interdependence, and cooperation, or elitism, discrimination, and competition? My take is that many churches in America unfortunately foster the latter because they focus too much on the individual, especially key leadership positions. This focus is emphasized by the salary *system* (as opposed to the idea of monetary compensation, which has Biblical support).

The Trinity is also evident in mission, which is God's calling and our sharing in the Son's mission to the world on behalf of the Father. We participate in God's mission by the power of the Spirit. In Christian ethics, the Spirit helps us to participate in the Son's holy obedience to the Father. We can do this because Christ has broken the power of sin in our lives, and the Holy Spirit is sanctifying us through the power of the cross (Rom. 6). God's Spirit convicts and guides us when we read the Bible, and He has done this for the church over the centuries. Thus, we should be careful when considering how to regard Biblical interpretation traditions; they may well be the wisdom of the Spirit given to previous generations. Finally, in eternal life, we are joined in Christ to "the very inner life of God." The Spirit lives in us as God's life and is described as "streams of living water" (John 7:38-39).

In Chapter 4, Parry nails down the essentials of the Trinity from early church history and creeds. He notes that there was no concept of the Trinity before Jesus came, and yet early Jewish Christians worshiped Jesus and saw Him as part of the one God of Israel. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the church was finally able to hammer out the doctrine of the Trinity, based on its key components that were in the NT all along. This process was necessitated by disagreements and the need to defend the truth of the gospel. In brief, the essentials of the doctrine are:

1. one God (Nicene Creed)...not 3; to worship any other is idolatry
2. neither confusing the Persons (Athanasian Creed)...not Modalism, otherwise relations are just charades
3. their glory equal, their majesty co-eternal (Athanasian Creed)...God didn't create Jesus, then leave everything to Him; Jesus is to be worshiped, and only God can save
4. divinity of the Spirit (Nicene Creed)...enables the Spirit to reveal God reliably
5. three Persons...including the Spirit, who has a mind (Rom. 8:26-27), is grieved by our sin (Eph. 4:30), desires, groans, prays for us, speaks
6. all members of the Trinity indwell each other...impossible to encounter one without the others
7. Co-workers...working in unity to bring about God's purposes

In Chapters 5 and 6, Parry shifts specifically to how worship is connected with the Trinity. He again emphasizes that, in Christian worship, we come *to* the Father, *through* the Son, *enabled* by the Holy Spirit. The fact that we come through the Son is significant. In Hebrews, the picture of Christ as our High Priest is developed, building on the OT. In the OT, the high priest was a fellow Israelite, represented the nation of Israel, offered sacrifices for his own sins and those of the people, and entered into the presence of God in the temple to present the sacrificial, cleansing blood and intercede for Israel. The problems with this system were that the high priest was sinful and mortal, the sanctuary he entered was only a dim copy of heaven, and the sacrifices did not take care of sin permanently or cleanse the conscience. However, Christ fulfilled the high-priestly qualifications and roles, and He also solved the problems with the old system and so became our perfect High Priest! Thus, worship for the Christian means participating in Christ's own perfect worship of the Father and sharing in His open communion with the Father (Parry is drawing from James Torrance here). Our worship is acceptable to God only through Christ's perfection, which is sobering but provides immense freedom and relief.

We must also remember that we come in the Spirit (John 4:23-24). While worship is our response to God's love, Parry states that it is really the *Spirit's* gift of response to us (Rom. 5:5; Gal. 4:6). I would tend to agree, but must hold some reservations based on the earlier discussion of God's role and our role in faith. Spirit-led worship can be summed up as honest, humble, confident, not self-promoting, and empowering all to worship.

While the Father is the object of worship in that we come *to* Him in relationship, it is Biblical and appropriate that we worship all three Persons of the Godhead, for all three are divine. The Bible gives direct examples of the Son receiving worship (Rev. 5:11-14; Phil. 2:6-11), but none are given for the Spirit. However, since the Bible teaches that 1) the Spirit is divine and 2) worship and prayer are appropriate response to such a divine being, we can conclude that worshipping the Spirit is Biblical. However, Parry points out that establishing (1) and (2) requires considerable exegesis. Although the Holy Spirit seems less personal and is not directly addressed in the Bible's prayers and songs, we need to embrace and perhaps rediscover the mysterious person of the Spirit in

our worship. Parry notices that many churches focus mainly on Jesus, to the exclusion of the Spirit and/or the Father. Narratives that really define the Jesus being worshiped are also often lacking. We must avoid these traps and worship all three persons of the Trinity, and their unity. A helpful picture for maintaining this balance is that of three persons: while one person may be in focus or in the foreground, all three remain visible.

Parry moves on in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 to look at how our singing, prayer, and other mediums of worship can highlight or obscure the Trinity. First, songs can be written about the Trinity, such as Charles Wesley's 188 *Hymns on the Trinity*, or Keith Getty's more contemporary (hymn) examples. Songs can also be written that highlight Trinitarian "syntax," i.e. that "bring out the Trinitarian dimensions of God." Here, all themes are up for grabs (creation, repentance, lament, the cross, resurrection, sanctification, mission), but sadly many have not been utilized in this way, according to the author. Finally, songs can have a Trinitarian doxology to remind the worshiper who they are singing to. The doxology we are all familiar with, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," was originally the end of William Kethe's hymn, "All people that on earth do dwell" (1561). After defining four main categories of songs (three-person, two-person, one-person, and "You Lord" songs), Parry shares some disturbing news. "You-Lord" and one-person/Jesus songs made up 83% of a survey of 28 Vineyard albums from 1999-2004. The results were similar for Hillsong. Thus, Parry exhorts worship leaders and songwriters especially to focus more on the Trinity. In addition to previous suggestions, he encourages the writing of more three-person songs; the intentional selection of songs for corporate worship (perhaps aided by color-coding or, more holistically, liturgy); and providing context (through prayer, Scripture, etc.) for "You Lord" songs that seem ambiguous as to which Persons of the Godhead one is singing to.

Parry makes similar comments and encouragements for prayer in a way that highlights the Trinity. I like the author's visual language of dynamically weaving between the three Persons and the one God in prayer. Prayer is a learning process, and we should not feel awkward about feeling awkward in our endeavors to pray with the right language. In time, it will come naturally. Written prayers can also be of great help by teaching us and giving us supplemental language for prayer.

Good liturgy can also provide structure for prayer and worship songs that nurtures a Trinitarian spirituality. Liturgy is not necessary, but we need to review and carefully consider how we structure our worship and public prayer in light of God's nature as Trinity.

The author also mentions other ideas/mediums where we can bring out the Trinity more. For example, in the Lord's Supper, we can focus not only on Christ, but also on the Father who sent Him and on the Spirit through whom we know Christ's presence. Other mediums are Scripture reading, preaching, spiritual gifts, dance, visual art, art and music creation, and poetry/creative writing. Of particular note is the mention of "Dance of the Trinity," which was witnessed by the author and involved an intricate dance by three people to hint at what the Trinity is like.

Parry concludes by stressing that we must help God's church dynamically encounter the Trinity. We must learn to move back and forth seamlessly between the Three and the One. While one Person is sometimes in focus, we should never lose sight of all three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In addition, worship leaders and songwriters need to be trained in good (Trinitarian) theology, and they need to team up with (good) theologians and get feedback on lyrics.