

A Christian View of Worship

By Peter Gray

Introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to outline a Trinitarian theology of worship. The underlying question of this assignment, as I see it, is 'What is the place of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our worship of the Father?'. In order to answer this, I will firstly present the contrasting unitarian model and follow this with an investigation into the Trinitarian model. Further from this, I will include a section on how this paper has changed my view on worship, and I will then finalise with a conclusion.

The Unitarian Model:

There is a widespread belief that worship is something that is done by us, particularly on Sunday morning in church. Some people may include listening to the sermon and the taking of communion as part of worship, others may even include the offering of our money, and even time and giftings, to the church as part of our worship. But most would understand worship to be just that part of the Sunday service where we sing hymns or songs. This is seen as us singing our praises to God, us worshipping our God. Regardless of how much of the Sunday service we choose to include in our definition of worship, the conclusion we draw is that worship is something that we do. *"No doubt we need God's grace to help us do it. We do it because Jesus taught us to do it and left us an example of how to do it. But worship is what we do before God."* (Torrance, 1996: 20).

This view is inescapably unitarian in practice, as it contains no space for the sole priesthood of Jesus Christ and no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Further problems include 1) it is man centred, 2) it is basically non-sacramental, and 3) it can engender weariness and fatigue. (Kruger, 1994: 2). We sit in our seats and watch the minister 'do his thing', which invariably involves an exhortation for us to 'do our thing', and we go home pleased with, or proud of, ourselves for completing our weekly duty. Our church fathers would have called this 'legal worship' and not 'evangelical worship'. It is most certainly not Trinitarian. (Torrance, 1996: 20).

We must ask ourselves what place the doctrine of the Trinity holds in our faith. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner suggests that in reality, it holds no place at all. He says, *"We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged. . . . One has the feeling that...the Christian idea of the incarnation would not have changed at all if there were no Trinity."* (1997: 10,11). The same opinion is voiced by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who says that when Christians in the West say the name 'God', they are not thinking of the Trinity. (Torrance, 1996: 20).

Even when we consider the Trinity and attempt to make our worship a Trinitarian worship, we invent ways of incorporating the Father, Son and Spirit, as if by mere

acknowledgment of their existence, our worship is now Trinitarian. One author concerned to make worship Trinitarian writes *“But when our worship praises the Father, gives thanks for the Son and experiences the presence of the Spirit, we will know that we have been with the God with whom we have a real relationship that finds expression in the language of praise, thankfulness and presence.”* (Weber, online: 2002). Yet even this is still unitarian. Even though we may acknowledge the Father, Son and Spirit, we still view worship as something that we do for God, apart from Jesus and the Holy Spirit (even though He may be there), and is therefore strictly unitarian. We must seek to find a theology of worship that takes seriously the Incarnation, the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, in order to come to a truly Trinitarian theology of worship.

The Trinitarian Model:

The Trinitarian viewpoint, holds that worship is something that Jesus Christ alone does, and the worship that we experience is the gift of participation through the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father. It is not only participating in what Christ has already done, in his life and crucifixion and resurrection, but also in what He continues to do now in the presence of the Father and in His mission from the Father to the world. There is only one true Priest by whom humanity is drawn near to God. There is only one mediator between God and man. There is only one offering that is acceptable to God, and that is the offering of His Son, Jesus Christ. (Torrance, 1996: 21). *“The Son of God comes that He might present to the Father that life of worship, prayer, communion and obedience, that we fail to offer.”* (Torrance, audio: 1997)

Now we can re-interpret the Eucharist, prayer and baptism all in this Trinitarian light. Our prayers are now seen not as our prayers, but as the prayers of Christ Himself, in which we participate through grace. Our baptism, far from being something that we do in order to create something that does not exist, is now seen as our participation through water and the Spirit, in Christ’s baptism for us in the Jordan. (Torrance, 1996: 21). The bread that we break and the cup from which we drink is done in remembrance of Jesus, as He commanded (Lk 22:19, 1 Cor 11:24-25), but what does ‘remembrance’ mean? The Greek word used is *anamnesis* and is of rich liturgical significance. It does not merely mean recollecting a past event, rather it means to remember in such a way that we see our actual participation in that past event, and also to see our destiny and future as bound up within it. (Torrance, 1996: 84-85). *“At the Lord’s Table we do not merely remember the passion of our Lord as an isolated date from nineteen hundred years ago. Rather, we remember it in such a way that we know by the grace of God we are the people for whom our Saviour died and rose again, we are the people whose sins Jesus confessed on the cross...we are the Israel of God to whom God has said ‘I will be your God and you will be my people’.”* (Torrance, 1996: 86)

The emphasis in Trinitarian worship is not on ourselves and our own action; it is on Christ and Christ's action on our behalf. Trinitarian worship is not about our response to God. Worship happens just fine without our involvement, because worship is at the centre of the Triune interrelationship. Christ is the great and perfect worshipper. To use an illustration, the perfect party is already going on, and we, though unworthy of

inclusion, have been declared worthy and have been invited to join in the celebration. We attend wearing someone else's name tag. It is not about us at all. (Thompson, online: 2002)

It may appear overly simplistic to suggest that we can draw such a sharp distinction between the unitarian and the Trinitarian models, and one may suggest that there is in fact a middle ground that in fact more accurately represents what the average church and church-goer practices. I would agree with this point, but I would also suggest that this middle position is merely a modification of the unitarian model, and still unitarian in practice even if not in theology. (Torrance, 1981: 129). So that leaves us with really only two types of worship. One has its focus on ourselves, the other has its focus on Jesus Christ. Worship, on the first model, has its origin in us. It begins in our hearts and it is our response, it is our praise that we offer to God. The second model has the origin of worship not in us, but in Jesus Christ, our high priest. The focus here is not 'me', but 'Christ in me'. Worship is something that Christ alone does, and He gives it to us as a gift to participate in it with Him. Anything other than this must by definition be unitarian. (Kruger, audio: 1999)

Further Development:

Despite coming into this understanding of our participation in what Christ has done and is doing, I still found myself thinking about worship as that which was done on Sunday morning. Though I no longer viewed worship as something that I did, something that originated in me, and I had made the distinction to viewing it as me participating in Christ, I was still limiting worship to Sunday morning. As the paper developed, so did my understanding of the question at hand.

Our theology of worship flows directly out of our understanding of the Gospel. It is therefore true to say that not only is our theology of worship at stake here, but our entire theology of life, as that too flows out of our understanding of the Gospel. It is not accurate to limit worship to Sunday morning, but worship in fact is something that we participate in seven days a week. Sunday morning worship is just one aspect or instance of Jesus' union with humanity; this union has implications for our whole lives. (Kruger, 1994: 1). What is true of worship is also true of life. Jesus Christ shares Himself with us. He shares with us His burdens, His passions, His delights, His loves. He does this not only on Sunday mornings at church, but all the time. (Kruger, 1994: 6).

So the question I began this paper with 'What is the place of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our worship of the Father?' has really evolved into 'What is the place of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our entire lives?'. Early in the history of Christian thought, St. Athanasius made the point that there is a two way movement in Jesus Christ. One the one hand, Jesus is God's saving action toward us. He is the act of God the Father almighty reaching down to deal with our sin and guilt and shame and emptiness. Jesus ministers the things of God to man. On the other hand, Jesus is man acting toward God. He is not only God coming to man. He is man going to God. He is not only God acting for man. He is man responding to God. He is man ministering the things of man to God. He is man, at last, answering the Father not with rebellion, not with indifference, not with coldness or apathy, but with zeal and passion and

obedience and sincere submission and true adoration. He is man living in true fellowship with God the Father almighty. (Kruger, 1994: 4-6). Jesus came to earth with a definite purpose. The incarnation is the coming of God as a man, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves, and to present us in Himself, through the Spirit, to the Father. *“Our response in faith and obedience is a response to the Response already made for us by Christ...”*. (Torrance, 1981: 141).

Jesus Christ shares all that He is with us; all that we experience is a participation in that shared life. It thus follows that playing with my children is as much an act of worship toward God as singing the latest Praise and Worship song is. In fact, if I am not filled with passion and delight over this latest piece of music, then I would suggest that playing with my children is a far greater act of worship. The joy I feel deep in my soul as I read stories to my children, is this not the joy of the Father, Son and Spirit being expressed through me? And as I am aware of this, and give myself fully over to participate in the Triune life, is that not one of the greatest acts of worship to our God of grace that I could ever be involved in?

“For what makes relationships, friendships and conversations so good; what makes work, teaching, doctoring and caring so noble; what makes baseball, gardening, fishing, and racing cars so enjoyable; what makes art, music and dancing so alive is that they are all, in their deepest sense, the dwelling places of the Triune life of Father, Son and Spirit.” (Kruger, 1997: 22)

Australians are a sports crazy people, and as a regular refrain in Christian circles, I hear how Australians have made a god out of sport, particularly Australian Rules Football. I need to point out here that I do not follow this rather confusing sport, in order to show you that I am not biased. Having said that, I went to a game of football once, and I was captivated by the passion, the joys and the delights of the spectators. The question is, are these people generating all these experiences, or is this the shared life of the Father, Son and Spirit being played out in our humanity? I do not wish to suggest that eighty thousand screaming football fans constitutes an act of worship toward God, as surely they are worshipping the players themselves and the sport itself. But just because we are blind to the reality of what confronts in Jesus Christ, and we pervert the gift of participation and worship, doesn't mean that it was never given to us in the first instance. For the man who goes into the football game knowing that he is a participant in the Triune life, and who gets caught up in the joy and delight and ecstasy of the moment, all the while praising and thanking the Triune God from deep within his soul for the gift of inclusion; surely this man is worshipping God in a most profound way. Does such a man exist? This is not mine to answer. It is just mine to remind us all, that just because someone has not understood their gift does not mean it was never given.

Worship is about life and life is about worship. Singing a song in church that I do not like, but I just sing it because it is the worship time, is not an act of worship at all. It is an act of religious performance, void of any life, performed in an attempt to either impress God or those in the pew alongside me. But singing a song that touches your soul, that you sing with so much passion that you can barely contain yourself, this is truly an act of worship.

“The Christian life and worship not only begins with Jesus Christ, it ends with Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the author and finisher of our faith, our High Priest and Minister in things pertaining to God. Our broken and twisted and frail and faltering and perverted expressions of His life and worship and adoration are taken up in the Spirit and translated in Jesus Christ before the Father. He ministers the things of God to us. He places His love and life into our hearts... We stand in Jesus. We are not on our own. We are not left to ourselves to muster up and perform the worship of God and offer it to Him purely. We are participants. We are wrapped up in Jesus Christ and in His worship and adoration of the Father.” (Kruger, 1994: 8-9)

Conclusion:

This paper has focussed on the two views of worship as presented by J.B. Torrance, unitarian and Trinitarian. The first view of worship forgets the vision of Jesus Christ both as the Father’s Son become man, and as the One who ever lives as our High Priest and Minister, who offers Himself in our name. It does not understand the significance of His real and complete humanity. There is no correlation between what is going in Jesus and what is going on in us. It views our worship in separation from Christ and His worship. Our activity is interpreted as being in complete isolation from His activity. The second view takes seriously the Incarnation, the sole priesthood of Jesus Christ, the mediatory office of Jesus Christ and of our life in union, through the Holy Spirit, with Jesus. This view is unifying and it releases joy and peace and assurance.

Whenever a doctrine of conditional grace is taught and the Trinity is marginalised, the emphasis in worship and preaching falls on what we must do; on our faith, our repentance, our need for obedience. It is then that the Gospel of the grace of God, the amazing news of what has become of us in Jesus Christ, is pushed to the background, and worship becomes an ordeal, a yoke grievous to be borne. (Torrance, 1970: 60).

As this paper began to take shape, my vision of worship began to expand from two hours on Sunday morning until it eventually took over my entire life. I had viewed worship as something that Jesus Christ alone did, and then shared with me, yet somehow I had still managed to confine that to two hours a week. I overlooked the glory of God in those things around me and failed to connect worship with life. This paper has helped me to re-join the dots that had somehow become dis-connected. As I walk out my front door, I am confronted with several large and beautiful rose bushes that my wife tends to. I love to stop for a minute and admire the sheer beauty of the petals, the magnificent scent that proceeds forth from the flower, and to silently praise the Creative Genius who spoke them into existence. It is liberating to understand that not only does my joy in roses not originate in me, rather it is the expression of the Father, Son and Spirit coming to fulfilment in me, but also that my participation in that Triune life is a profound expression of worship toward our Glorious and Gracious God.

Amen.

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