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Theology and Worship Up a Tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G

IT WAS ONLY AN experiment, really. I was pondering just how Trinitarian contemporary charismatic worship really is. Being a charismatic (of the mild-mannered variety), I find that such things matter to me. I randomly selected one of my worship music CDs-a CD that, at the time, was one of the best-selling Christian CDs in the Western world-and took a look at the content of some of these popular worship songs.¹ It's a good CD with some great songs, but reading the lyrics was something of an eye-opener: there was no mention in any of the songs of either God the Father or the Holy Spirit. All the songs were addressed either to "Jesus" or to an anonymous "God" or "Lord." Yikes! thought I. This led me to wonder just how much of the biblical story got into the songs. I looked again. There was no mention of God's dealings with Israel, nor of the incarnation of Jesus, nor the ministry of Jesus, nor the resurrection, nor the ascension! Only one song mentions the cross.² There was a great balance on the CD of songs of intimacy and transcendence, but that seemed to be the only balance. Although I approved of most of the individual songs, the combination found on the album was seriously inadequate for Christian worship.

1. The CD was Michael W. Smith, Worship (Reunion Records, 2001).

2. Rosalind Brown, commenting on certain contemporary songs, writes that "these texts have made a transition from hymns that root us in the biblical story, out of which we respond to God, towards hymns which may assume but do not articulate that biblical foundation, focusing instead on the singer's personal need and response . . . These self-focused hymns lack formative power since their roots are not in the Christian story" (Brown, *How Hymns Shape Our Lives*, 10).

I found myself feeling somewhat disturbed. You need to understand that what originally made me look at the CD was that I had just got home from a Sunday morning meeting at my church at which neither the Father nor the Spirit had received even as much as a passing glance. The leader opened the meeting with a call to worship: "We've come together this morning to meet with Jesus." We then proceeded to sing numerous songs all directed to "Jesus" or "You, Lord." Clearly, in the context of the meeting, the "Lord" in "You, Lord" was also Jesus. There were numerous prayers all directed to Jesus. The sermon waxed eloquent about Jesus, but his Father and his Spirit didn't get a look in. Then there was a call to respond in faith to the gospel with a prayer that went something like this: "Dear Lord Jesus, I am sorry that I have sinned against you. Thank you for dying for me so that I could be forgiven. Please forgive me and come and live in my heart. Amen." I went home feeling rather uneasy-not simply because this had happened, but also because everyone else seemed utterly oblivious to it. It simply hadn't struck anyone else as odd.³ And why didn't it? I vividly recall a sermon illustration used some years ago in the church. The visiting preacher took a frog and placed it in a pan of cold water and slowly heated the water until it boiled. The point was that if you turn up the heat slowly, the frog doesn't notice and will hang around while getting boiled alive! I hasten to add that the illustration is in fact mythical, and the frog that the preacher boiled was not a real one. (Although, interestingly, this fact was not revealed until later, and yet we all sat smiling uncomfortably as the guy boiled what we took to be a real frog-fuel for psychology books there).⁴ I suspect that slowly but surely there has been a shift away from full Trinitarian worship towards worship that is often in practice "unitarian." This shift is not uniform, it is not the same in all evangelical churches, it sometimes waxes and wanes, and it has hardly reached boiling point, but I want to blow the whistle and say, "FROGS OF THE WORLD, UNITE! We're being boiled alive here! Let's leap out of the pan before the bubbles start rising!" One simply has to ask the painful question, at what point does worship cease to be *Christian* worship and become simply Christians worshipping?

^{3.} I ought to add that it is not usual for my former church's worship to be quite this un-Trinitarian.

^{4.} Although this is an apt illustration of the idea that gradual degradation is not perceivable, and the point that it illustrates is obviously true of human nature in all sorts of situations: a real frog will (apparently—I haven't tried it myself!) jump out when it gets too hot (cf. http://www.godandscience.org/doctrine/froglegs.html/).

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The basic idea behind this book is very simple: *worship is about God and God is the Trinity, therefore worship is about the Trinity*. Christian worship, in other words, is worship focused upon the God who has revealed himself through Christ to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This book is a journey of exploration into the implications of that simple thought.

THE TERRIFYING TRINITY

Now the doctrine of the Trinity is one of those Christian beliefs that we all affirm but which, in our more honest moments, we often think is rather perplexing and somewhat remote from ordinary life. Those in mainstream churches that follow the Christian year can almost hear the vicars, priests, and ministers groan inwardly when Trinity Sunday draws nigh—that dreaded week of the year when they are supposed to dispel the confusions surrounding the Godhead! Understandably, the prospect is sometimes anticipated with all the joyous expectation of a turkey waiting for Christmas dinner. Those preachers in churches that don't follow the Christian year thank the Lord for small mercies and avoid sermons on the Trinity like one avoids a dog with rabies.

It seems to me that there are a couple common problems with Trinitarian faith as one finds it among Christians. The first is that, as we've already hinted, many Christians do not understand Christian teaching on the Trinity. This is primarily because it is not properly integrated into our general church life and thought in worship, sermons, and lived faith. But it is also in part because the Trinity is almost never spoken of directly. The Trinity, most crucially, needs to saturate our praise, but it also needs to be explained from time to time. In twenty-eight years as a Christian I have never heard it taught in a church context—whether in a sermon, a house group, an Alpha course, a post-Alpha, or whatever.⁵ I gather from speaking to people around the UK in nonconformist and/or charismatic churches that my experience here is not untypical. The impression we give people is that the doctrine is a complex, abstract, philosophical concept unrelated to Christian life. When I speak to ordinary Christians about it, I am sadly unsurprised to find some who are well-intentioned "heretics" without even realizing it.

^{5.} With the exception of hearing myself speak on the Trinity in church contexts.

Let me tell you a story. I was once asked to speak to a small group in a church, and I decided to do something unusual: I decided to do an "Idiot's Guide to the Trinity." I was amazed that not one single person had ever been taught this very basic Christian doctrine before. But more amazing still were the comments made by a couple who had become Christians through the church ten years earlier. They had been along most weeks since then on Sundays and had also attended midweek house group meetings; they had done the Alpha course; they had done Alpha follow-up; they had completed beginners' courses on the Christian faith and attended numerous church camps. They explained to me that they had always thought that in Old Testament times only God the Father existed. Then, with Jesus's conception, God the Son was created, and finally, on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came into being! In ten years of an involved church life nothing had ever suggested to them otherwise! Although I kept my face deadpan, I had to peel the eyebrows of my inner man off the ceiling when they finished their tale. They were more than happy to give up the misunderstandings, but I was staggered at what their experience suggested about their church's worship. I realize that not many Christians have views as far off the beaten track as this couple's used to be, but I have come across a fair few who hold to heretical views without being aware of it. That, however, is just the first problem.

The second problem is that those who do "understand" the contours of Christian claims about the Trinity often don't see *why* the doctrine matters. Let me illustrate the problem. Many Christians will tell you that Jehovah's Witnesses are "unsound" because they reject the doctrine of the Trinity. They do indeed reject it. *So what?* Why is that a problem? Have a think about that. You may say, "Well, they're wrong." True, but we're all wrong about some things. Why is the Trinity so important? If you are struggling to answer that question, then you are not alone. For many of us, the Trinity is one of those things we believe in, but that seems unconnected to the rest of our life and faith. The general impression among Christians, therefore, is that the Trinity is an abstract doctrine that matters in theory but not in practice.

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner issued this challenge: suppose the doctrine of the Trinity turned out to be false, and we had to drop it as a belief—how much difference would it make to our Christian beliefs and practice? Tragically, says Rahner, often very little. In practice we are often no more than what he called "mere monotheists" rather than fully Trinitarian.⁶

^{6.} Rahner, The Trinity, 10-15.

Trinity should be related to our other beliefs like hydrogen is related to water. Take the "H" out of H_2O and you no longer have water. Take the Trinity out of Christian faith and practice and you no longer have Christian faith and practice. In this book I want to help explain why Christians have lived and died defending the idea that God is triune. *It matters*. Before we can directly consider worship and the Trinity, we need to get a clearer grasp on this God we are worshipping.

I have been guided in my thinking by several foundational convictions, the first being that the notion of God as Trinity is a central element in Christian life and faith. Berten Waggoner, National Director of the Association of Vineyard Churches USA, writes, "The God we worship is a trinitarian God. We know no other God than the one revealed in Jesus Christ—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit . . . The Triune God is the boast of the Christian faith."⁷ All the branches of the Christian church—Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant—affirm the doctrine, and it is at the core of all the ecumenical creeds of the early church. The doctrine is biblically rooted and, although its full unpacking and clarification took several hundred years, that process was merely a legitimate development of what is there in Scripture. In this book we will look at some of the fundamental aspects of this belief and why it matters so much.

GOOD THEOLOGY MATTERS FOR GOOD WORSHIP

My second foundational conviction is that Christian theology is not an interesting exercise in abstract speculation but is intimately connected to Christian living and worship. Good theology matters for good worship. Some Christians reject this view. I know a man who used to declare that he could write all the theology he knew on the back of a postage stamp . . . IN CAPITAL LETTERS! And he wasn't lamenting; he was boasting! He was saying that he hadn't been sidetracked by the irrelevant work of the theologians. Negative attitudes towards theology among Christians are not that uncommon. Let me make a confession. For a while, as a teenager, I was heavily influenced by what is known as the "Word of Faith" movement, better known to its opponents as the "Health and Wealth" movement. Within that movement I often encountered hostility to what "theology" taught. The preacher would set up "what the theologians say" and "what God says" in opposition and then challenge the congregation to reject theology and

7. Waggoner, "Leading Trinitarian Worship," 5.

trust God instead. Theology, we were told, is a sinful exercise designed to undermine faith. To suggest that theology had something to contribute to good worship would be like suggesting that shredded beef had something to contribute to a veggie burger! Of course, the preacher had never actually read anything by these "evil theologians" and seemed quite unaware that every time he opened his mouth to speak about God he was talking theology himself (and often rather dubious theology).

I can understand the worries of anti-theological Christians, and it is certainly the case that *some* of the things that *some* theologians have taught have been somewhat off the wall. However, the answer to "bad theology" is not "no theology" but "good theology." Christians want to speak about God, and if you want to do that there simply isn't a "no theology" option.

But even if we concede that all Christian have to do some theology, many feel that the ideal is to do as little as possible. The motto is: "All we need is 'the simple gospel." The worry is that "the theologians just make everything so unnecessarily complicated." The underlying conviction is that theology is not related to the ordinary lives of Christian believers. However, while it is true that one can be saved by faith in "the simple gospel" without having a very deep understanding of it, it simply doesn't follow that God doesn't want us to seek to grow in our understanding, to think about our faith, and to love him with our minds.

Although very few Christians are called to be academic theologians, all Christians are called to think theologically. My conviction is that theology is relevant to Christian living. Theology that does not have some cash value for a life of obedient worship is, at best, of secondary interest.⁸ Good theology, whether it is academic or not, is theology done for the blessing of the people of God. As we shall see, the Trinity is central to Christianity, and understanding it is necessary for healthy Christian worship, faith, and life.

I also used to think that sorting out your doctrine and sorting out your worship were two quite separate things. I thought that both were important, but the connection between the two never really struck me. Now I see that "right belief" about God is intimately connected to "right worship" because believing right things about God is an important component in honoring God appropriately. This is why Christians speak of right belief about God as *orthodoxy*, which literally means "right glory." If we are to give God the

^{8.} Maximus the Confessor (580–662)—a Christian monk, not the guy in the *Gladiator* movie—apparently wrote, "Theology without practice is the theology of demons" (I have not yet tracked down the source of this quote, hence "apparently").

glory he deserves, we need to think and speak rightly about God. Thinking right about God involves having a Trinitarian framework for thinking about God. The Trinity should be at the core of our worship because the God who is at the heart of worship is Trinity. Right belief about the Trinity is important *precisely because* it is so crucial to appropriate worship.

Worship Shapes Our Spirituality

My third foundational conviction is that our spirituality is usually shaped more by the experience of communal worship than it is by preaching and teaching. Please do not think that I am running preaching and teaching down—I believe in the importance of both. My point is simply that the way we think about God and relate to God is influenced enormously by our experience of God in communal worship. Let's put it this way: where do we learn how to pray and worship? Where is our school of spirituality? Where do we pick up good and bad habits for our individual relationships with God? In public worship, of course! That is where we learn the language of praise and the way to speak of and to God. We may not consciously be copying those around us; often we simply absorb the patterns of speech, the intonation, the words to use, the appropriate physical gestures and postures, and so on just by being immersed in an environment in which others are worshipping. The public worship we experience often sets the limits and possibilities of our worshipping worlds.

Songs, particularly in evangelicalism, are especially formative. "We are far more likely to find ourselves humming something we sang in church when we go home than we are to find ourselves meditating on a phrase in the sermon," observes Rosalind Brown. "Words set to music engage the emotions and lodge in the memory. The refrains of hymns and choruses are even more likely to stick in the mind, simply because they are sung more frequently."⁹ John Wesley wrote of hymns that "I would recommend [the hymnbook] to every truly pious reader: as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming the faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love to God and man."¹⁰

Let me introduce a notion that may prove helpful for understanding the role of worship in shaping our Christian faith. Michael Polanyi, a Christian

9. Brown, How Hymns Shape Our Lives, 21.

10. John Wesley, Preface to the 1780 handbook, paragraph 8; quoted in Brown, *How Hymns Shape Our Lives*, 6.

philosopher and scientist, spoke of knowledge that we simply absorb by a kind of "osmosis" without even realizing that we have done so. This is what he refers to as "tacit knowledge." Most Christians simply imbibe a theology through the way that they worship. The songs, Scripture readings, prayers, and rituals (and even the most nonliturgical, charismatic churches have rituals) form the bricks and mortar of the congregation's spirituality and faith. The knowledge we gain through worship is not merely information but a practical knowledge. Think about riding a bike. There are some things about riding a bike, such as how to balance on it, that can only be learned by riding it and not by reading the How to Cycle manual. When we learn to ride a bike we are not paying attention to all the different things we need to do-try that and you'd never learn. We internalize all that we need to know through participating in the practice of cycling and then intuitively we just know how to do it, even if we would have trouble explaining it. This kind of knowledge could be called participatory knowledge. Susan Wood argues that regularly taking part in Christian worship is essential for Christian spiritual formation. We may not pay conscious attention to all the individual elements of the faith that we sing or act out in worship, but we are immersed in the practice of communal devotion to God. We internalize the shape of the faith through the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feel of the whole experience. Liturgy, says Wood, creates an environment that, when we indwell it, shapes our vision, relationships, and knowledge of God in Christian ways. The knowledge of God we gain in worship is not the knowledge one can learn from a book but the participatory knowledge that comes from being involved in a relationship.¹¹ And how does all this relate to theology?

The truths are lived and practiced in worship before they are expressed dogmatically. For example, the church baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit and prayed to the Father through Christ in the power of the Spirit long before it developed a doctrine of the Trinitarian relationships in the fourth-century Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). The relationship between dogma and worship, however, is reciprocal. In addition to worship giving rise to doctrine, doctrine, on the other hand, ensures right worship.¹²

- 11. Wood, "The Liturgy," 110.
- 12. White, Whatever Happened to the Father?, 18–19.

So theology springs from right worship but theology also, in turn, guides and ensures right worship. There is a circular relationship between the two as healthy worship and theology support each other. In this book I want to focus on how theology can guide the kind of worship that in turn shapes people spiritually.

Worship that has a deep Trinitarian structure and syntax will form congregations who will think about God in Trinitarian ways and relate to God in Trinitarian ways even if they have never had the doctrine of the Trinity formally explained to them. Trinitarian worship teaches people the grammar of God so a preacher can say, "God is a Trinity . . . you know what I mean!" and people will immediately see that they do know (roughly) what the preacher means, even though they may never have articulated the concept to themselves fully.

This point is of crucial importance. In what follows I am going to spend quite a bit of time explaining the doctrine of the Trinity and arguing that it is important. It is crucial that some people in the church have a good, clear grasp of such thinking-including leaders, songwriters, and those involved in leading worship. As we will see, those who lead worship need to think long and hard about how to make worship more Trinitarian. However, I do not want to argue that all Christians need to ponder the Trinity in quite the same way. If we can shape worship and preaching in Trinitarian ways, our congregations will pick up a tacit knowledge of the Trinity. They will instinctively relate to God as Father, Son, and Spirit. They will pick up habits of speaking correctly and worthily about the Lord. They will be lovers of the Trinitarian God even if they haven't ever worked out exactly how all the "*i*"s are dotted and the "*t*"s are crossed. Those who shape public worship do need to think clearly and plan carefully to facilitate a rich and rounded encounter with the Christian God week by week. Members of the congregation, however, don't have to be aware that this is what is happening. They can carry on as usual—turning up to worship God together.

If what I have said is true, then we need to consider the consequences of not having richly Trinitarian worship.

Christian worship is the primary place where people internalize the Christian system, where they learn the language of faith, where they are able to find their voices in song and prayer and proclamation and sacrament. When people are deprived of a rich and subtle language about God, it deprives them of their legitimate theological and spiritual inheritance.

Very diluted theology in worship songs and prayers leads to spiritually impoverished worshippers. We need to ask whether we are being fed a diet of wafer-thin mints when we need beef burgers. Some contemporary worship songs are the theological equivalents of wafer-thin mints, and although there is an important place in life for wafer-thin mints—they can be the great finishing touch to a meal—that place is not as a staple diet. If most of our songs are of the wafer-thin mint variety, then we will shape believers who are spiritually wafer-thin; spiritually anorexic.

What I have said so far should not be heard as an argument against formal teaching on the Trinity in churches. Far from it! Rather, if we get our Trinitarian worship in order then we will find that our congregations will absorb all the key elements of Trinitarian faith before we even get as far as explaining it. So that when we do formally explain the Trinity it will resonate with people, and we will simply be helping them clarify what they already believe. However, if our worship is disordered then the message from the pulpit that "the Trinity matters" is completely undermined by the weekly experience of worship in which it clearly matters very little. The occasional sermon on the Trinity cannot compensate for week after week of communal worship that has had all the Trinitarian life and color washed out of it.

It is important to emphasize that I am not arguing that the reason we should get the theology right in our worship is so that we can teach good theology to our churches! That is precisely the wrong way around. What I am suggesting is that we get the theology in our worship right so that we can worship God more appropriately. Right worship is the reason for doing right theology, not vice versa.

This view of communal worship calls attention to the crucial importance of the job of the person or people preparing and leading public worship. The songwriters and worship leaders of today play an enormous part in shaping the faith and life of the church of tomorrow. This is an awesome responsibility. Those who shape worship are the *de facto* theologians of the church, whether they want to be or not. If you are reading this book and you have any influence over the worship of a congregation, then you are a VIP—but with this privilege comes great responsibility. Your job as a worship facilitator is to provide the context in which the Spirit can draw people into a rich encounter with the blessed Three-in-One. You don't have to force the people to worship, but you do have to facilitate and guide the worship that the Spirit elicits from the people. The songs that you choose; the Scriptures that you read, the prayers that you pray, and the way you connect them all together make a vast difference.

Consider songs again. Pete Ward says that Christian worship songs, especially in evangelical worship, provide a kind of narrative for a journey of worship.¹³ The songs structure our desire for God through their use of symbolic language, which gives content to our desire. The words of the songs will provide the focus for our thoughts about God and thus influence the shape of our love for God at any particular moment in worship. Each song, and each collection of songs, has its own rendition of the Christian story. Ward's focus is more on songbook collections, but the same insight is valid for a collection of songs pulled together for a specific worship occasion. The songs significantly contribute towards the narrative that structures the shape of any particular encounter. So the encounter will differ depending on the songs chosen. In churches that use a formal liturgy, the combination of song and liturgy will structure the worship journey, and the liturgy sets constraints on how far songs can control the encounter. In churches that do not have a liturgy, however, the burden of guiding the encounter falls heavily upon the songs. In many charismatic churches, the songs play the dominant role in shaping the worship-encounter.

Think now about one of the purposes of worship being the offering of devotion and gratitude from the church to the triune God. If songs shape that offering event, then what kinds of songs will facilitate an encounter with the Trinity? If we are cast upon the mercy of our songs in worship, then which songs will show us mercy? What kinds of songs should our songwriters be producing? How should worship leaders go about selecting songs that will make the congregation aware of this Trinity? These are important questions, but sadly they are rarely asked, let alone answered. We will devote chapter 7 to thinking about these questions.

The same question could be asked about prayer. How can we pray the Trinity? How can the Father, the Son, and the Spirit so infuse our spiritual lives that when we speak to God we weave back and forth between the persons of the Trinity, fully aware that the one with whom we speak is not just some faceless "God" but is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit? In chapter 8 we'll think about that question.

Chapter 9 tackles another conspicuous absence in much Christian worship—lament. The Bible is full of brutally honest and painful laments that were used in both individual and communal worship. So why is it that no matter how the congregation are feeling our worship gatherings seem to

^{13.} Ward, Selling Worship, ch. 12.

be so unrelentingly happy? Something is not right with this picture. I suggest an approach to thinking about lament in Trinitarian ways—lamenting to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit—and I make a case for reincorporating lament into our public worship.

Are there other resources in Christian worship that can fund a fully Trinitarian spirituality? In chapter 10 we will look at how Bible reading, dance, sermons, the arts, and, most importantly, the Eucharist can serve to bring the people of God to a greater awareness of the Trinity. These are the questions that those working at the coalface of worship will want to address, and the temptation is to jump straight into these more practical issues. But chapters 2 through 6 carefully lay the foundations for the practical outworking that follows. My hope is that this book will model how good theology can contribute to good worship. Chapter 2 is a story. It briefly tells the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption from Genesis to Revelation. However, somewhat unusually, it tells the story as God's story-showing how the three persons relate to every act of God in the world. This approach reveals how Christian faith is integrally Trinitarian. Chapter 3 looks at the Christian life from conversion to our resurrection at the return of Christ, taking in issues like mission, church, and holy living to show how every aspect of Christian living is connected with Father, Son, and Spirit. Chapter 4 examines the basic shape of Christian faith in the Trinity and why it matters so much. Although none of this is directly connected with worship, these chapters are essential background and also provide the theological fuel for new songs and prayers. If you are a songwriter and wish to write more Trinitarian songs, chapters 2 through 4 will set you off on the right foot.

While chapters 5 and 6 are both theological, they also address worship and prayer. In chapter 5 we will see that in order to understand what we are doing when we worship and pray we must understand it in Trinitarian terms. Jesus is in heaven right now worshipping and praying to the Father. Christian worship is nothing more, nor less, than the Spirit enabling us to join in with Christ's worship of the Father. Christian prayer is nothing more, nor less, than the Spirit enabling us to join in with Christ's prayer to the Father. In this chapter we will explore the important implications of this revolutionary Christian understanding of worship. Chapter 6, finally, argues that Christians must offer worship to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. After considering the practical questions concerning how to make our worship more Trinitarian in chapters 7 through 10, the epilogue reflects on how we can avoid Trinitarian worship becoming a fad that—like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles—is ubiquitous and then, as suddenly as it appeared, is gone again. Worship of the Trinity must not fall victim to the changing fashions of Christian worship, so we need to anticipate the danger in advance and take steps to guard against it.

For those who are interested, I have added two appendices. The first is a set of daily Trinitarian prayers for each day of the week. I wrote these for my family to use and some readers may find them helpful. The second briefly addresses the thorny and contentious issue of the use of masculine language for God. Is the Trinity "two men and an it"?

Worshipping the Trinity is the centre of Christian devotion. My hope is that this book will be used by the Spirit to bring us closer to the heart of worship. "To the best of my powers I will persuade all people to worship Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the single Godhead and power, because to him belong all glory, honor, and might for ever and ever. Amen."¹⁴

14. Gregory of Nazianzus, On God in Christ, 31:33.