

# five

## Worshipping with the Trinity

WHAT IS WORSHIP AND, more particularly, what is *Christian* worship? Let's start by looking very broadly and then narrow things down a little. The English word "worship" is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *weorth-scipe*, which has to do with worthiness, or honor. To worship someone is to pay respect to that person by recognizing their worth. The word used to have a broad application so that one could speak of offering "worship" to fellow human beings without suggesting that the "worshipper" was attributing divine value to the person "worshipped." Of course, the worship that was offered to *God* was the recognition of his infinite value, and clearly only God is worthy of *that* kind of worship. To attribute ultimate value to any creature or aspect of creation is idolatry and strictly forbidden in Scripture.

Armed with this broad understanding of "worship" it seems clear to me that we must see worship as originating *within Godself*. Within the Trinity there is eternal love and a joyous, mutual recognition of ultimate value. Let me speculate a little here. The Father looks at his Son and recognizes him as being God from God, light from light, true God from true God. The Father recognizes the true and unsurpassable worth of his beloved Son. As his thoughts rest upon his Spirit he again rejoices: "Spirit of God, how worthy of honor you are! How lovely! How pure! How holy!" This love and recognition is reciprocated by the Son and the Spirit, who embrace the Father as their eternal source, the fount of the divinity within the Godhead. "He is holy! He is good! He is love!" The Son is eternally being generated by the Father through and for the Spirit and the Spirit is forever proceeding from the Father through and to the Son. They are both forever gifted to the other by the Father, and together they gift themselves back to the Giver.

As they contemplate each other and give themselves to each other there is a spontaneous and willing mutual eruption of praise and love as they hold each other in an everlasting embrace. God is a worshipper because the persons of God love each other and acknowledge the worth-ship of one another.

The human worship of God is not exactly like the worship within God. When the Spirit worships the Father he acknowledges him in all his difference and yet as an equal, but when a human worships the Father she or he acknowledges him as the unique Lord, the creator of all, who alone is worthy of all honor and all praise. God is most certainly *not* our equal, and his worth exceeds ours as the infinite exceeds the finite. However, in the story of salvation it is worship within the life of the Trinity that provides the foundation for our own worship. This chapter will explain what I mean by that.

Let me begin by saying that our own worship is based on a different aspect of the worship within the Trinity than what we have spoken of so far. We do not take our cue from the worship offered by the Father or by the Spirit. Indeed, it is not, strictly speaking, even the worship offered by the divine Word (as divine Word) that enables us to worship acceptably. It is the worship of *Jesus*, the *Word-made-flesh*. Jesus, the perfect human, offers perfect human praise to the Father—and it is *that* worship that we need to appreciate if we are to have a Christian understanding of what it is that is happening when we worship.<sup>1</sup>

The place to begin is with the ancient Christian doxology “Glory be to the Father, *through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit.” The roots of this doxology are found in the deep structures of New Testament thought that bubble up in Ephesians 2:18: “*Through* him [the Son] we both have access *to* the Father *by* one Spirit.” There it is in black and white. As Christians, we come first and foremost *to* the Father, the first person of the Trinity. We come to him *through* the work of the Son, *enabled by* the Holy Spirit. This insight is the key to a Christian understanding of worship. In the next chapter we shall explore the idea of the Father as the object of Christian worship and the implications of this truth for worship today. In this chapter we will consider what it means to worship, “*through* the Son, *in* the Holy Spirit.” What I

1. However, I would want to add that as humans are created in the image of the divine Son, human worship of the Father is a dim echo of the divine worship eternally offered to the Father by the Son. Human worship is, in other words, like the worship of the Father by the Son but “contracted to a span.” In Jesus, the worship of the Father by humanity and by the divine Word are united into a single offering.

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want to say can be summed up in the words of a Matt Redman song, “Gifted Response”:

This is a gifted response;  
Father we cannot come to You by our own merit;  
We will come in the name of Your Son  
As He glorifies You,  
And in the power of Your Spirit.

—MATT REDMAN © 2004 THANKYOU MUSIC

### “WORSHIP THROUGH THE SON”

What does it mean to say that we offer our worship to God “through the Son”? To understand this aright we need to turn to the book of Hebrews and get our heads around the concept of Jesus as our High Priest. Although this concept played a significant role in the Christian thought of days gone by, modern Western Christians virtually ignore it. That is hardly surprising, since the notions of sacrifices, ancient rites, holy temples, and priests seem about as relevant as a cauldron of magic potion in a hospital. However, it is vital that we make the effort to reconnect with this alien past because amazingly contemporary benefits stand to be gained.

Let’s begin on a vast canvas by considering the place of the worship of God within creation. Worship of the true God is, in the words of the Westminster Catechism, “the chief end of man”—the key reason we were created. James B. Torrance expresses the role of human worship brilliantly:

God has made all creatures for his glory. Without knowing it, the lilies of the field in their beauty, glorify God with a glory greater than that of Solomon, the sparrow on the rooftop glorifies God, and the universe in its vastness and remoteness is the theatre of God’s glory. But God made men and women in his own image to be the priests of creation and to express on behalf of all creatures the praises of God, so that through human lips the heavens might declare the glory of God. When we, who know we are God’s creatures, worship God together, we gather up the worship of all creation. Our chief end is to glorify God, and creation realizes its own creaturely glory in glorifying God through human lips.<sup>2</sup>

2. J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 1.

However, there is a problem with worship, which Bishop Chris Cocksworth calls “the liturgical dilemma.” He writes,

God [created] the world in order to find a response to his love in time. Humanity, especially in its prayer of trust and song of praise, is to voice that response. However, we know the biblical story faces the fact that we are flawed, unable by ourselves to enter into the perfection of his presence and incapable in ourselves of worshipping with the pureness of life required by the purity of God. This is the liturgical dilemma that runs through the pages of the Old Testament. Created to glorify God we have been corrupted by sin.<sup>3</sup>

Sin corrupts our worship and makes it unacceptable to God. So how can humans fulfill their vocation of “voicing creation’s praise”? In the religion of ancient Israel, the priestly system dealt with this problem. The temple in Jerusalem symbolized the reality of God’s presence with his people. At the heart of the temple was a chamber called the “Most Holy Place” where the glory of God dwelt. The Israelites could not enter God’s presence directly lest they be consumed by his holiness, so various “perimeter fences” were set up around that chamber to keep people away. Only one man, the High Priest, was allowed into the central chamber where God’s glory resided, and this was just once a year on the great Day of Atonement. The “Holy Place” was the antechamber to the “Most Holy Place,” and every day priests appointed by Yhwh would come and offer sacrificial worship. These ordinary priests got closer to God’s presence than other Israelites did, but they were forbidden to enter the heart of the temple. Outside the “Holy Place” was the main court, where the covenant people could come and worship. Yhwh set up the sacrificial system administered by the priests to deal with the “liturgical problem”—this was a temporary solution that allowed sins to be atoned for so that Israel could offer praise and worship. Priests, then, were mediators representing the people before God and God before the people. They drew closer to Yhwh to offer worship, confession, make atonement, and to intercede on behalf of the people. They would also teach the people on behalf of Yhwh.

It is important for us to try to understand the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) a little if we are to grasp a Trinitarian approach to worship. The High Priest had to prepare himself before entering the divine presence by ritual washing before putting on his special garments (Lev 16:4). He had to slaughter a bull for his own sins and those of his household (Lev 16:6).

3. Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 151 (emphasis original).

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Two young goats were taken from Israel's flocks. One was to be sacrificed as a purification offering, while the sins of the people were later "downloaded" onto the other goat and it was sent off into the desert to carry the sin away (Lev 16:5, 8–10, 20–22). When the High Priest entered the "Most Holy Place" he took incense to hide the mercy seat from his view, lest he see it and die (Lev 16:13–14). He sprinkled the mercy seat with the blood of the bull slain for his sins and the goat slain for the people's sins, thus purging the "Most Holy Place" from the impurity built up by the sin of the community—sin that would have threatened the ongoing dwelling of God with Israel if it was not dealt with (16:14–16). He then proceeded to cleanse the entire sanctuary (Lev 16:17–20) before various ritual decontamination procedures were followed to wind things down (Lev 16:23–28).

Now consider the following things about the role of the High Priest. First of all, he is the man who represents the entire nation when he enters the inner sanctum. Part of the special clothing he had to wear was a breastplate that had twelve stones on it, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel whom he had been chosen to represent. He stands before Yhwh not simply on behalf of himself, but also on behalf of all the people of God. Second, in order to function as the symbolic representative of the nation he also had to be an Israelite—one of those whom he "summed up" in his own role. He was thus a brother, a fellow Israelite who stood in solidarity with the nation. Third, he offers sacrifice for his own sins and those of the people in order to make atonement.<sup>4</sup> Fourth, he enters the very presence of God himself to present the sacrificial, cleansing blood and to intercede on behalf of Israel. The High Priest would worship Yhwh, make atonement, and pray to Yhwh on behalf of the people. He was the one who enabled the "liturgical problem" to be held in check.

However, the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament sees various inadequacies in this system. Firstly, the High Priest himself was a *sinner* who had to make atonement for his own sins, making him less than ideal for the job (Heb 5:3). He also suffered from being *mortal*—meaning that his representation before God was only ever temporary (Heb 7:23). Second, the sanctuary the High Priest entered was the earthly Jerusalem sanctuary that was only ever a pale copy of heaven itself (Heb 8:5). To really solve the liturgical problem he would need to enter into the heart of heaven,

4. For clarification, I should point out that in both the Old Testament and in Hebrews—and contrary to popular opinion—the sacrifice was not the ritual slaughter of the animal (or the Messiah) but the presentation of its blood (representing its life) before God. See Eberhart, *The Sacrifice of Jesus*; Moffitt, "Blood, Life, and Atonement."

and clearly he was in no position to do so. Third, the sacrifices offered did not deal *permanently* with the problem of sin, as is clear from the fact that they had to be offered year on year (Heb 10:1–4). These sacrifices did offer temporary, external cleansing but not permanent or deep cleansing (Heb 9:9–10). Yet God—who in the Old Testament had already spoken of the need for another High Priest who was different from the order of Levitical priests (Heb 7:11ff.; Ps 110:4; Gen 14:17–20)—deliberately built all of these inadequacies into the system. The inbuilt inadequacies of the old covenant priesthood were there so that when the Messiah came as the perfect High Priest we would be able to see how superior his perfect priesthood is.

Jesus, says the book of Hebrews, is our High Priest. However, unlike Levitical priests, Christ did not sin and so does not need to atone for himself (Heb 4:15; 7:26). And, because he has been raised to everlasting life, his intercession for the people before the Father is eternal (Heb 7:24). Christ has not entered the Jerusalem temple like a Levitical High Priest on the Day of Atonement; rather, he has entered the very presence of God in heaven itself (Heb 8:1–2; 9:11).<sup>5</sup> In addition, the sacrifice he offered was not a mere lamb or bull but his own life (Heb 7:27; 9:12, 26). The purifying lifeblood he offers to God is his own lifeblood (Heb 9:11ff.). The superiority of this sacrifice is shown by the fact that it only had to be offered *once* (Heb 9:25–28), as well as by the fact that it cleanses permanently and deep down to our conscience (Heb 9:14). Indeed Christ cleanses heaven itself (Heb 9:23) and brings “eternal salvation” to those who obey him (Heb 5:9). The Levitical High Priest’s work was never done because it was imperfect, and so he never sat down in the “Most Holy Place.” However, Jesus has *completed* his atoning work and so has “*sat down* at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 8:1; cf. 1:3; 10:11–12).

It is crucial to grasp the idea that Christ our High Priest is in the presence of the Father *as our representative*. Because he was our representative, it was essential that he stood in solidarity with humanity. He was of “the same family” as those he makes holy and calls them “brothers” (Heb 2:11). “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity” (Heb 2:14). It was essential that this sharing in our humanity included sharing in our temptations and sufferings so that, like the Aaronic High

5. In fact, as the Law of Moses makes clear, because Jesus was not a descendant from Levi he would not have been qualified to act as a priest in the *Jerusalem* temple. And there was *no need* for him to do so as that temple already had legitimate priests (Heb 8:3–4). But Jesus is a priest (in fact, the High Priest) *in the order of Melchizedek*—a heavenly order of priests that serve in the *heavenly* sanctuary.

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Priest, he could empathize with our weaknesses (Heb 5:2): “[Christ] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb 2:17–18). This is why Hebrews often speaks of the Son being made “perfect” or “complete” through sufferings (e.g., Heb 2:10). It is not that the Messiah had to be made morally complete, but that he had to share human suffering and temptation in order to be qualified to function as our High Priest. Jesus has walked where we walk and stands in solidarity with us as our representative.

“Therefore, since we have such a great High Priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb 4:14–16)

He is there right now “before the throne of God above.” He stands in the presence of the Father worshipping (Heb 2:12; 8:3) and interceding for us (Heb 7:25). This insight is the foundation of a Christian understanding of worship. James Torrance, the main source of my inspiration on this issue, says that “Christian worship is . . . our participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father, in his vicarious life of worship and intercession.”<sup>6</sup> The problem was that God has required worship from us but we, because of our sin, are unable to offer it. The solution is that God provides for us, in our High Priest Jesus, the very worship that we could not offer. *The response that God required from us has already been made by Christ, our representative.* Christ worships God on our behalf, making God not simply the one who is worshipped but also *the one who worships*.

The Christian life, as we have seen in chapters 2 and 3, is about being united with Christ and identifying with him. In baptism and by faith we are initiated into a relationship in which we are identified with Christ or, in Paul’s language, placed “in Christ.” In the ongoing journey of the Christian life, Christ is formed in us by the Spirit as our lives become gradually conformed to what we already are in the Messiah. When the Lord returns, the transformation will be completed in the twinkling of an eye and we

6. J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 3.



shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. But every aspect of Christian living is about being transformed into the image of God's Son. This is the case with worship as with everything else. Thus worship is not, first and foremost, something that *we* do. *Our worship is no more and no less than a participation in the Messiah's own perfect worship of God.* Our worship is joined to his and is made acceptable. We share in his own relationship of open communion with the Father, and thus it is that we even share in Jesus' own son-ship and are ourselves adopted as children of God. We are accepted by the Father "in Christ," the beloved, and "in Christ" we are "holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph 1:4). In this way we can draw near before heaven's throne of grace with confidence. We know that our worship will be acceptable *because Christ's worship is acceptable*, and it is his worship in which we are sharing. Christ is the chief worshipper and is our worship leader. He proclaims the praises of God in the midst of the Christian congregation (Heb 2:12).<sup>7</sup> As Calvin says, "Christ leads our songs, and is the chief composer of our hymns."<sup>8</sup> Chris Cocksworth summarizes very well: "Our worship is with Christ our brother, in Christ our priest but always through Christ our sacrifice, whose death for us is the means of our cleansing, renewing and perfecting."<sup>9</sup>

Exactly the same thing holds true for prayer. Christ is the one who prays to the Father, and our prayer is simply a participation in Christ's own prayer. He lives forever interceding for us (Heb 6:20; 7:25–28; 8:1–6) and our petition is simply, as Karl Barth puts it, a "repetition of his petition."<sup>10</sup> Thus we pray to the Father "in the name of Jesus" and not in our own names. We join our prayers with his prayer, and this is how we can have confidence that God hears us. Graham Buxton provides a helpful analogy of all that we have said about prayer and worship offered to the Father through the Son.

There is a delightful story of a little girl who was learning to play the piano, and whose musical skills were still very limited. One day she was playing some notes on the keyboard whilst staying with her family in a hotel in Norway. There was little to appreciate in her playing, and several guests found her "plink . . . plonk . . . plink . . . plonk" intensely annoying. After a while, a man came

7. For a great discussion of the implications of this verse for worship see Ron Man, *Proclamation and Praise*.

8. Quoted in Cocksworth, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, 159.

9. *Ibid.*, 162 (emphasis original).

10. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, 277.



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and sat beside the girl, and started to play alongside her. The result was astounding—wonderful music from the two of them, the little girl playing as before, with the man supplying all the other notes. The man was the girl's father, the nineteenth-century Russian composer Alexander Borodin . . .

In the same way that the great composer welcomed the playing of his little girl, embracing it and transforming it into something beautiful, so Christ receives all that we offer to God, in thanksgiving, in worship, and in service, converts it in himself, and presents it as something perfect and wholly acceptable to his Father, who is our Father.<sup>11</sup>

### “WORSHIP IN THE SPIRIT”

We must not stop our reflection at this point, because Christ's worship of the Father avails us nothing without the work of the Spirit. All genuine Christian worship and prayer is enabled by the Holy Spirit (Phil 3:3). As Jesus said to the woman at the well, those who would worship the Father acceptably must do so “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24).

Worship is not an attempt to impress God, or to massage God's ego so we can get our own way, or to earn credit and get into God's good books. Worship is first and last a response to God's unconditional love for us and grace towards us. God's love does not follow on from our worship like a reward follows a good deed. On the contrary, his love precedes our worship. God is not gracious to us because we honor him; we honor him because he is gracious to us. Worship is the joyful response of God's people to the salvation freely given in the Messiah. It is something we do, but it is something we do in *response* to love and not something that we do to *gain* love. But even this is only half the story. Although worship is our response to God's love, it is actually better thought of as *the Spirit's gift to us of a response to God* or, in Matt Redman's words, “a gifted response.” We can only respond to God in praise because the Holy Spirit causes love for God to arise in our hearts (Rom 5:5), enabling us to cry “Abba, Father!” (Gal 4:6). Without the Spirit we could not even sincerely say, “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3). And, as we have seen, even that is not the full story because the response the Spirit enables us to make to the Father is actually simply a sharing in Christ's own response to the Father. The Spirit, in other words, is the one who baptizes us

11. Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark*, 117.

into Christ (1 Cor 12:13) and enables us to share with Christ in his worship of the Father.

The Spirit is the one who places us in Christ at conversion, but he is also the one who slowly transforms our lives so that they conform to what we already are in Christ. It's exactly like this in our actual lived prayer and worship. In Christ our worship and prayer are already perfect, but only the Spirit can transform our actual offerings and motives so that they gradually reflect Christ's own obedience, love, and thanksgiving. The Spirit can still rebuke us in our worship, as in our ethical lives, if we are falling short of who we already are "in Christ." God may point out that our worship is according to the flesh rather than according to the Spirit. So the teaching in this chapter does not mean that we do not need to examine our worship and reflect on how acceptable it is. What it does mean is that we need to ask how much our worship is prideful and self-satisfied rather than humble and God-dependent. The call is not to pull our own worshipping socks up but to surrender to the Spirit and allow him to conform our worship to Christ's.

Spirit-led worship is thus not the special reserve of Pentecostals and charismatics; rather, it is the heritage of all genuine Christian worshippers. "Spirit-led" worship is not a theological synonym for "loud" worship or "bouncy" worship or "worship-led-by-a-rock-band." Spirit-led worship can be very loud and energetic, but it can equally be meditative and candle-lit. Spirit-led worship may be found where incense rises and liturgy is sung just as much as it may be found where flags are waved and the singing is in tongues. And the converse is true—all that glitters is not gold, all that shouts and shakes or glows and rises before the Lord is not worship.

Spirit-led worship is worship that is sincere and honest. It acknowledges our need of God's assistance and sees that only in Christ are any offerings we make acceptable. Acceptable worshippers come to God in weakness and humility and receive grace in a time of need. Spirit-led worship is not insecure worship, ever-anxious of rejection by God, but confident worship that delights that everything necessary has already been done. It is not arrogant self-promotion (thinly disguised as humility) but humble confidence in the one in whom we have been brought to trust. God requires worship and God has offered that worship on our behalf in Christ—and by the Spirit God enables us to offer ourselves to him through Christ. Our response to God is a participation (enabled by God) in God's own response

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to God. That phrase is a bit of a gobstopper! Try this one: worship is “a gifted response” for which we can claim no credit.

The Spirit’s guiding role in worship is one that Pentecostals and charismatics often recognize. The Spirit is the worship leader who enables us to be led by Christ in worship. In the charismatic traditions there is a very deep appreciation of the Spirit as the worship leader who orchestrates gatherings of the community. Spirit-led worship will exalt Jesus and the Father. It will have an intercessory edge, for we will be led to share in the Messiah’s prayers for the world. Several commentators have observed how often intercession is marginalized in charismatic worship. This does appear to be the case, and it should not be so—if the Spirit is uniting us with Christ’s High Priestly prayer, then how could intercession not be an essential ingredient of our meeting together? The Spirit will also create communities in which everyone is empowered to offer worship through Christ in the Spirit. This may be through liturgy which, contrary to the views of some in my own charismatic free church tradition, can (and should) be very uplifting, egalitarian, and participatory. And/or it may be through spontaneous prayers, readings, prophesy, pictures, testimonies, tongues and interpretation offered by different members of the anointed community. The Spirit generates fellowship, unity, and community between Christian and Christian as well as between Christians and Christ when we worship. He does not make us all the same but enables us to love and embrace each other in all our diversity (1 Corinthians 12). If our communal worship is not like this—if it excludes people from participating or simply draws people as individuals towards God but not towards each other—then we need to start asking hard questions about whether it is as Spirit-led as we may like to imagine. Spirit-led worship will also have an appropriate openness to the new and unplanned. The Spirit blows where he wills and gives gifts to whomever he wishes to (John 3:8; 1 Cor 12:11). Here is where liturgy can sometimes actually shut us down rather than open us up to the work of the Spirit.

And things are much the same with prayer. We are to “pray in the Spirit” (Eph 6:18). Such prayer includes obvious Spirit-inspired praying such as speaking in tongues, but it is far more than that. We are praying in the Spirit whenever we are enabled to pray according to God’s will with Christ. Paul writes that, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts

knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will" (Rom 8:26–28).

A concluding reflection: some people think that worship and prayer is something we offer to God in order to earn some merit with him and perhaps even to build up a surplus of credit to earn salvation. This is not a Christian view of worship and it is a terrible burden to bear—indeed, it is an impossible one. Other people think that although God has offered us salvation free of charge through grace, worship is still primarily our response. This DIY view of worship is common among Christians, but it is also rather hard work. "Although it stresses the God-humanward movement in Christ, the human-Godward movement is still ours! It emphasizes *our* faith, *our* decision, *our* response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ . . . [It implies] that God throws us back on ourselves to make our response."<sup>12</sup>

Week after week we have to stir ourselves up and offer God his due and, over a period of time, this can exhaust even the most enthusiastic worshipper. If we think, as I have done and as many charismatics still do, that the value of our worship depends on our feeling all warm and fuzzy as we sing and pray, then we have things back to front. The Trinitarian view of worship presented by the Bible and fleshed out in this chapter does not call people to whip themselves up into a worship frenzy but simply points people to the worship that Christ is currently offering and invites them to join him in it. And even our response to God's grace is a response that God has provided us with as a gift.

12. J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 17–18.