

The Necessity of Understanding and Recovering Trinitarian Worship

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Abstract

This paper considers biblical, historical, and theological thought on trinitarian worship, and the lack of trinitarian worship in the church today. When we fail to understand trinitarian worship, we fail to understand the roles of leaders, participants, and God in worship. We become consumers/performers rather than worshipers, and lose the richness of engaging with Almighty God in Christ by the power of the Spirit. It is necessary that we continue to teach, practice, and depend upon all three Persons of the Trinity in our worship.

Key Words: Trinitarian, understanding, worship, historical, biblical, Holy Spirit

1 What is the relationship between worship and understanding? There are three necessary keys to worship with understanding. Each of these keys is a gift from God. God Himself is the source of Christian worship, and by His provision, God makes it possible for us to worship Him.

1.1.1 The initial gift of God enabling worship is God's self-revelation in His Word. "To worship God we must know who God is, but we cannot know who God is unless God first chooses to reveal himself to us. God has done this in the Bible, which is why the Bible and the teachings of the Bible need to be central in our worship."¹ According to Martin Bucer, Reformer in Strausborg, God directs us above all to worship him by the proclamation of his Word, the giving of alms, the celebration of communion, and the ministry of prayer,² patterned after the church described in Acts 2. While the Bible does not provide us with liturgies to follow, there are some examples, some specific directions, and some principles to follow. Timothy Ward writes, "the supreme form in which God comes to encounter us in his covenant promise is through the words of the Bible as a whole. Therefore, to encounter the words of Scripture is to encounter God in action."³

1.1.2 It is in the Bible that we meet the second necessary Enabler of Christian worship, the Word made flesh-- Jesus Christ. The Sole Priesthood of Christ foreshadowed in the Old Testament and explained in the book of Hebrews opens the door for believers in Christ to participate in fellowship with God the Father by the power of the Spirit. Christ's sacrifice has paid the debt of sin once-for-all, conquering death and the grave. The holiness requirement has been met for us; we are free to enter the courts of the Lord.

1.1.3 The third gift of God enabling us to worship with understanding is the Spirit of God. There is remarkable continuity between the ministry of Christ and the continuing ministry of the Holy Spirit, as introduced by Christ in John's gospel. Sinclair Ferguson, in his book *The Holy Spirit*, points out the ministry of the Spirit in the earthly life of Christ from conception through the resurrection. Just as the Spirit was with Jesus on earth, the Spirit continues to dwell in the Body of Christ, the Church. Both Jesus and the Spirit were sent from the Father. Jesus claimed to be the Truth, and the Spirit would lead people into Truth. Just as Jesus taught the disciples, the Spirit would continue to teach them. Both are witness to the Father.⁴

1.2.1 In addition to worship understanding being a gift from God, we must realize that we can only begin to grasp the privilege of worship through the continuing work of God. God Who spoke in the Word continues to speak today. "The Word of God is living and active.

1. James Montgomery Boice, quoted in *Give Praise to God: a Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2003), vii.

2. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

3. Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2009), 48.

4. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 56.

Sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

1.2.2 Even as God reveals Himself through the Word, the Son intercedes on our behalf before the throne of God. We have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens (Heb 4:14). Christ lives to intercede for us; Christ perfects our worship before the Father. Abiding in Him as branches in a vine (John 15), we are members of His Body, the Church, offering our lives and voices in testimony and praise of his glorious grace. There is only one true Priest through whom and with whom we draw near to God our Father. There is only one Mediator between God and humanity. There is only one offering which is truly acceptable to God, and it is not ours. It is the offering by which he has sanctified for all time those who come to God by him (Heb 2:11; 10:10, 14).⁵

1.2.3 These two wonderful provisions for us would be for naught if the Holy Spirit did not grant understanding for worship. It is the Holy Spirit that works in us to glorify God through our worship and through our lives. The Spirit reveals Christ to us, helps us to understand the Word of God, prompts, prods, and guides us in our prayers. “Christian worship is inspired by the Spirit, empowered by the Spirit, directed by the Spirit, purified by the Spirit and bears the fruit of the Spirit. Christian worship is Spirit-filled.”⁶ Further, when we worship, having our minds enlightened by the Spirit, our lives cleansed by the Spirit, our wills moved by the Spirit, and our hearts warmed by the Spirit, our worship is transformed from being merely a human work into being a divine work.⁷ John Witvliet states,

The Holy Spirit is a main agent in what takes place in worship. Christian worship is not an act of self-achievement, an act in which we set out to impress a deity. Nor is worship an act of obeisance to placate a deity. Instead, worship is more like a personal covenantal encounter between the church and its Lord, all made possible through the work of the Spirit.⁸ Because the Spirit is so intertwined with Jesus, He is uniquely qualified to mold us into the image of Christ, transforming us with ever-increasing glory (II Cor 3:17-18). Thus, it is through God (the Son and the Spirit) that we are able to worship. It is through God that we understand and are moved to obedience, in order that God would be glorified.

1.3 Finally, as we search the Word, guided by the Spirit of God, we can see that worship is directed to God. The Psalms encourage us to praise the Lord, for he is good, and his love endures forever (Ps 100:5). The first chapter of Ephesians is a litany of God’s work on our behalf with a recurring refrain: to the praise of his glorious grace, (Eph 1:3-14). I Peter 2:12 encourages us to live our lives in such a way that God will be glorified... by unbelievers! Jesus Himself encourages the same in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:16). In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson frames Paul’s words in contemporary terms:

1.3.1 So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday ordinary life-- your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking around life--and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out (Romans 12:1,2a).

1.3.2 Calvin expounds on the idea of a living sacrifice:

We are consecrated and dedicated to God, and therefore should not henceforth think, speak, design or act without a view to his glory. What he hath made sacred cannot, without signal insult to him, be applied to profane use. If we, then, are not our own (I Cor 6:19) but the Lord’s, it is clear what error we must flee, and whither we must direct all the acts of our life. We are not our own; let not our reason nor our will, therefore, sway our plans and deeds. We are not our own; let us therefore not set it as our goal to seek what is expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own; in so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours.

5. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 21.

6. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 5.

7. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 6.

8. John Witvliet, “The Cumulative Power of Transformation in Public Worship” in *Worship that Changes Lives*, ed. Alexis Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 42.

Conversely, we are God's; let us therefore live for him and die for him. We are God's; let his wisdom and will therefore rule all our actions. We are God's; let all the parts of our life accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal (Rom 14:8; I Cor 6:19). O, how much has that man profited who, having been taught that he is not his own, has taken away dominion and rule from his own reason that he may yield it to God! For, as consulting our self-interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads to our destruction, so the sole haven of salvation is to be wise in nothing through ourselves but to follow the leading of the Lord alone.⁹

1.3.3 What is the context for this call to a living sacrifice offered to God? Just before Paul gives these instructions in Romans chapter twelve, he breaks into a song of praise:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!

Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?

For from him and through him and to him are all things.

To him be the glory forever!

(Rom 11:33-36)

2 At the heart of our worship is a relationship, the relationship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Our engagement with God is rooted in the first relationship--that of the Trinity. "God is love and has his true being in communion, in the mutual indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit--*perichoresis*.¹⁰ This is the God who has created us male and female in his image to find our true humanity in perichoretic unity with him and one another."¹¹ Thus, we understand that "worship is at the center of our existence, at the heart of our reason for being. God created us to be in his image--an image that would reflect his glory."¹²

2.1.1 When God created mankind, it was very good (Gen 1:31) but when Adam was alone it was not good (Gen 2:18). Even as God exists in community, mankind, created in their image (Gen 1:26) was created for community with God and with one another. As Robert Letham states, "the goal of our salvation--our ultimate destiny--is union with Christ."¹³ Peter Toon observed, "The Christian understanding of personhood flows from the Christian doctrine of the Three Persons who are God."¹⁴ From the relationships of the Trinity we draw the importance of our relationships. It is our relationship with the Trinity that compels us to live in loving communion with one another, echoing and imitating the engagement of Father, Son, and Spirit.

2.1.2 When the garden fellowship was broken, God chose for Himself a people to be His own. But this was not the end relationship that God was seeking. It was through this People that God would ultimately draw His Chosen Ones, a community as diverse as the people groups of the earth, into the fellowship of the Trinity through Christ and the Spirit.

2.1.3 Irenaeus used the metaphor of 'the two hands of God' in his defense of the Trinity... the God who created this world has redeemed this world by the same Word and the same Spirit. It is by these two hands that God gives himself to us in love to bring us to intimate communion.¹⁵ Robert Webber picked up this metaphor in his book *Divine Embrace*. Webber's vision of the two hands of God are based on a prayer in *The Book of Common Prayer*: Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.¹⁶

9. Calvin, *Institutes*. 3.7.1.

10. The idea of *perichoresis* was used to describe the Trinity by John of Damascus in the eighth century. The honoring of each Member by the others, the willing submission, the harmony of motion and purpose begin to help us understand the "dance" of relationship between the three Persons of the One God.

11. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 39.

12. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

13. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2004), 464.

14. Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1996), 241 quoted in Letham.

15. Torrance, 66.

16. *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 101 quoted in *The Divine Embrace* by Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 22.

Webber states that the God of Christianity offers something different than all other religions. This God desires deep relationship with His Chosen People. He doesn't just offer the key to the gate; instead he desires to claim us as His family, through the adoption described in Ephesians 1. "God, the Creator of the universe, has cut a path into our history and, having become one of us in Jesus, unites us with himself. Look in all the religions of the world and you will find no better story than this."¹⁷ Of all the descriptions given to the Spirit in the New Testament, the richest is probably 'Spirit of Sonship.' Although it is used only once, it is with some insight that John Calvin lists this as the first title of the Spirit, corresponding to what must be seen as the highest of the privileges of redemption, namely sonship.¹⁸

2.2.1 John Witvliet, assessing the trinitarian renaissance of the late twentieth century, says that "theologians have rediscovered the astonishing beauty of Jesus' high priestly prayer and the profound relationship that God's life not only models for us but also empowers in and through us."¹⁹ While theologians celebrate the wonder of the Trinity, the average worshiper may not understand trinitarian God, much less understand trinitarian worship! A part of this lack of perception can be explained by the loss of traditional elements and formulas in worship, such as God's greeting, a benediction, and use of historic creeds. Sadly, often worship in churches that claim belief in the Holy Trinity could accurately be described as practical Unitarianism. There is no sense of--or content pointing to--the activity of God in worship. Rather, God is the object and occasionally the subject of our worship.

2.2.2 In contrast with this Deism, Witvliet describes trinitarian worship as "worship that fits with a God whose own being is faithfully and aptly described in trinitarian terms."²⁰ He suggests that churches seeking to worship the Trinity should "celebrate and rest" in the divine embrace of Jesus and the Spirit, savor the privilege of relationship with Triune God, remember the acts of God in history, and recognize the unity of purpose displayed in the actions of God: Father, Son, and Spirit.²¹

2.2.3 In his chapter "The Trinity as the Fullness of History" Stanley Grenz quotes from Robert Jenson's 1991 essay "Does God Have Time?" In this essay, Jenson explains the tie between the biblical narrative and the identification of God as triune. Grenz summarizes: "Simply stated, 'the Bible tells a story about God' that 'presents us with three agents of its action.'"²² According to Jenson, God reveals himself in a narrative fashion which is rooted in the temporal but points toward the eschaton. In each of these three facets (narrative, temporal, and eschatological) Jenson sees all of the Persons of the Trinity active. Jenson uses the musical form of the fugue to describe the action and interaction of Father, Son, and Spirit as recorded in history. In Jenson's second volume, he continues the musical metaphor, as harmony and fugue become the language he uses to describe both the *perichoresis* of three trinitarian persons and the place they make for humans within the divine conversation.... The point of identity, infinitely approachable and infinitely to be approached "is perfect harmony between the conversation of the redeemed and the conversation that God is."²³

2.3 In addition to mining the Word of God for direction, the Reformers also searched for wisdom in the writing of the Church Fathers. "The Reformers learned from Athanasius about Christian Psalmody, from Ambrose about catechetical instruction, from John Chrysostom about preaching, and from Augustine about the sacraments."²⁴ Their motto "reformed and always reforming" suggests that worship should not become static but always be evaluated by scriptural directives and principles.

3.1 The challenge for evangelicals is to recover the content of worship, restore the ancient structure of worship, and integrate the evangelical style of worship.

17. Robert Webber, *The Divine Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 22-3.

18. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 182.

19. John D. Witvliet, "What to do with Our Renewed Trinitarian Enthusiasm" in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church*, eds. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 237.

20. Witvliet, "What to Do," 244.

21. Witvliet, "What to Do," 245.

22. Robert W. Jenson, "Does God Have Time" quoted in *Rediscovering the Triune God* by Stanley J. Grenz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 109.

23. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2:369 quoted in *Rediscovering the Triune God* by Stanley J. Grenz (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 116.

24. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 4.

A worship that will have staying power is a worship that is firmly grounded in the old, yet aware of and concerned for new ways to respond to the old, old story.²⁵ It does not imply constant change; it does imply constant thoughtful planning, preparation, and examination of our worship. It is appropriate that we learn from those who have gone before us, and follow their lead inasmuch as it is appropriate for conscious, active, participatory worship. “There are good reasons for having an established liturgy. Liturgical forms are a good means of teaching the essential of the Christian faith.”²⁶ When familiar worship elements are used over and over, worshipers are given opportunity to peel away layer after layer of significance. The Apostles’ Creed helps to teach truth to our children, but it also confirms and strengthens the faith of struggling parents, and serves as a testimony of unity to a church of diversity. Rather than losing value by repetition, beloved hymns grow dearer over time and allow young and old to sing with one voice. At the same time, a new song filled with eternal truth enlivens worshipers of all ages.

3.2 “There is great value in maintaining the tradition... we human beings feel a need to keep in contact with our roots.”²⁷ The roots of reformed worship today are found in the Reformers of 500 years ago; the roots of the Reformers are found in the Church Fathers who lived a thousand years earlier. Both the Fathers and the Reformers based their teaching and ministry on the scriptures, pointing us back to God’s word and God’s way. Some of the most valuable traditions springing from the Reformation include: expository preaching and the use of *lectio continua*--preaching through a book of the Bible from verse to verse and week to week. Reformed worshipers also pray the Psalms in worship, and include praise, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, and intercession in their prayers. The prayers may take different forms: singing, read prayers, and extemporaneous prayer. The Reformers understood communion as a covenant meal, but also understood coming to participate at the Table as our Eucharist, our thanksgiving. The Lord’s Supper was covered in prayer, asking for a consecration of the body of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. Baptism was also understood as a sign of the covenant, signaling incorporation into the Body of Christ, always tied to the Great Commission directive: teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you (Matthew 28:20). When summarizing the traditional reformed worship values, Hughes Oliphant Old concludes

The greatest single contribution that the Reformed liturgical heritage can make to contemporary American Protestantism is its sense of the majesty and sovereignty of God, its sense of reverence and simple dignity, its conviction that worship must above all serve the praise of God.²⁸

3.3 While there is some appreciation for tradition and even traditional form in worship²⁹, the evangelical church as a whole suffers from what John Witvliet terms a “longstanding ambivalence about ritual, habit, and pattern.”³⁰ There is an avoidance of anything that might become a formal practice. “The very thought that something might become ritualistic is enough to quench emerging fires of enthusiasm for most patterned activity.”³¹ Ironically, this is true even in the case of spiritual disciplines. At the same time that ritual practices have been under fire within the Church, the very foundational values of the Church have come into question in the broader society... and eventually in the Church herself. Many Christian writers, especially church-growth gurus, advocate faith in progress, technology, pragmatism, consumerism, and many other distinctive traits of modernity while appropriating the label *postmodern*. There is often a fatalism about this: we are no longer in the era of stable, traditional culture with corresponding values. Everything is up in the air. It is crazy. Everything is on the move. Change is what life is all about: this is the rhetoric of a fairly crude modernity masquerading as postmodernism. Reading some church-growth experts, one comes away with a sense of this fatalism just mentioned: This is just the way things are today. No further discussion.

25. Robert Webber, *Worship Old and New* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 264.

26. Old, 165.

27. Old, 167.

28. Old, *Worship*. p. 176.

29. Robert Webber, in his early book *Worship is a Verb* reasoned that there was biblical reason for form in worship, as contrasted with a formless waiting on God to appear. See John Witvliet, “Embodying the Wisdom of Ancient Liturgical Practices” in *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future*, eds. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 191.

30. *Ibid*.

31. John Witvliet, “Embodying the Wisdom of Ancient Liturgical Practices” in *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future*, eds. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), 191.

The sociological “is” determines the theological “ought,” instead of being challenged by the latter. The question must be raised as to whether the contemporary churches are to exist passively in this evil age or draw a countercultural identity from the word of God.”³²

3.4 Webber describes the cultural phenomenon as “dislocation” from God’s story. In place of the Biblical story and the history of God’s work through the Church, we end up with antinomianism, an anti-intellectual spirituality, narcissism and a de-valuation of the past. Webber diagnoses the resulting conditions: worship based on personal immediate pleasure or response, a romantic relationship with God, and a consumerist attitude toward worship and spirituality.³³ Donald Miller also laments the loss of story, declaring that “truth is rooted in story, not rational systems.”³⁴ The Christian mission is not well served when we speak in terms of spiritual laws or rational formulas. Propositional truths, when extracted from a narrative context, lack meaning. “The chief role of a Christian,” says Miller, “is to tell a better story.”³⁵ In our loss of biblical focus and devaluation of the historical Church, several trends have characterized the Church of North America.

3.5 The church has become a business that sells Jesus--the culture of consumerism. Theology has become an analytical discipline that scientifically examines propositions--the culture of reason. Worship has become an entertaining program that presents Jesus in a winsome way--the culture of entertainment. Spirituality has become an experience of transcendence achieved through Christian technique--the New Age culture of generic Spirituality. The church’s life in the world is to do good so people can see that Jesus is all about being nice and helpful--the culture of humanism.³⁶

3.5.1 In Robert Webber’s final book, he focused on the relationship between the biblical narrative and competing world views. Webber explains the historical understanding of Church, an understanding that is based on the Word. God’s narrative is the one true story of the world. The church’s mission is to be a witness to God’s narrative of the world. Theology is the church’s corporate reflection on God’s narrative. Worship sings, proclaims, and enacts God’s narrative to the glory of God. Individual spirituality is the personal embodiment of God’s narrative in all of life. Collective spirituality is the church’s embodied life in the world.³⁷

3.5.2 These statements have been fleshed out in the Ancient Future Call, a 2006 document that focuses on issues raised in a postmodern age, and particularly in the Emergent Church. The call was convened by Robert Webber and Philip Kenyon; theological editors include Hans Boersma, Howard Snyder, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and D. H. Williams. Input was gathered from over 200 theologians via the internet, and the Call has continue to gain support in the years since Webber’s death in 2007. In an article in “Christianity Today” David Neff observed that the Ancient Future Call addresses postmodernity in a very un-postmodern stance: “whereas postmoderns tend to fight against any ‘meta-narrative,’ any grand, overarching story that claims to explain the meaning of history and existence, this Call commends ‘God’s story’ as the single interpretive narrative by which the church must live.”³⁸

3.5.3 Marva Dawn responds to the post-modern rejection of meta-narrative with these words: We agree with the postmodern thinkers that no one can make inflated claims about knowing the truth clearly without being influenced by our position in time and space, but we do not thereby give up all assertions of absolute truth. We believe that the triune God has disclosed himself through the Revelation given to a faith community stretching all the way back to Sarah and Abraham, incarnated in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ who lived among us, and passed on through the centuries by the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit.³⁹

32. Michael S. Horton, “Challenges and Opportunities for Ministry Today” in *Give Praise to God: a Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2003), 439.

33. Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 90-96.

34. Patton Dodd, “A Better Storyteller” *Christianity Today* Vol. 51 (June 2007), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/june/10.28.html> (accessed March 2010).

35. Donald Miller, quoted in “A Better Storyteller” by Patton Dodd.

36. Robert Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World? Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 123-4.

37. Robert Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World? Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 124.

38. David Neff, “Together in the Jesus Story” in *Christianity Today* 50, No.9 (September 2006): 54-58.

39. Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 47.

Dawn suggests that we take our interaction with this sovereign and preeminent God seriously, and that he only gives us small glimpses of his splendor, so as not to overwhelm us. “As with Moses we really see only God’s ‘back’ or the *glory* of where he has been and how he has worked (Ex 33:17-23).”⁴⁰ She observes that taking God seriously is counter-cultural in an time and place “that want instead to turn the worship of God into a matter of personal taste and time, convenience and comfort.”⁴¹ In contrast, Dawn encourages churches to be biblically faithful in their worship, so that worship forms its participants to be biblically faithful.

3.5.4 Another voice with similar concern and conviction is that of Michael Horton, professor of theology at Westminster Seminary. Horton, in a video series entitled “Christless Christianity” based on his book by that same name, suggests that the problem is not that our beliefs and our behaviors are inconsistent. The problem is rather that we believe that we are the center of the universe, that God exists to make us happy, that God has merely given good advice in the Bible so that we can have our best life now. We focus on the felt needs of consumers rather than the real needs that God identifies in His Word. We look inside of ourselves and our inner experience rather than the Word to tell us what is good and right and important. In Horton’s words, God wants to get us out of ourselves! We are the problem!⁴² God is the solution for our sin and the source of our significance. Says Horton,

One of the reasons that there is so much craving for a new word from heaven, miraculous spectacles, and new forms of worship that offer dramatic entertainment is that we have lost a sense of the weightiness of God and the unfolding drama of redemption in our own conservative churches.... The whole service should be a covenant-renewal ceremony in which the people of God, summoned by God himself, gather at the foot of Mount Zion to be judged and justified, taking their place in the drama in progress.⁴³

3.5.5 Marva Dawn suggests several reasons that people leave churches rooted in tradition. Most notable for the purpose of this study is that people do not understand why we do what we do in worship. Additionally, people are searching for intimacy and think it can’t be found in liturgy. Further, people desire genuine community and churches deep in tradition are not known for hospitality. Worshipers today are also seeking an emotional high which they tie to a certain style of music, along with a freedom of self-expression. On the other hand, some worshipers would rather remain passive in worship, so they avoid a liturgy that requires thoughtful participation. Dawn responds,

If people leave our churches for worship that requires less of them, we have to realize that it is the whole passive culture we are opposing--but also if they leave for a place that looks like more fun, we have to ask ourselves if we are displaying adequately the Joy that it is to worship God with effort.⁴⁴

3.5.6 In close relationship to these observations, Dawn notes our culture’s idolatry of the new. Some people change churches in search of something more exciting; “this is because we live in an age that rejects authority, tradition, hierarchy, anything that seems too outdated to be relevant.”⁴⁵ Concluding Dawn’s list of reasons for leaving the traditional church are these three: people reject the sacred even as they reject their own limits; people are overwhelmed with information all week and do not want more information at worship; and people are suffering deeply and believe that services that provide emotional highs will help them to deal with their sufferings.⁴⁶

3.6 When we come to worship to get something out of it, we come with the wrong purpose in mind. D. A. Carson reminds us that “worship” is a transitive verb, requiring a direct object. “We do not meet to worship (i.e. to experience worship); we aim to worship God.”⁴⁷ Carson encourages worshipers to keep the main thing the main thing.

40. Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 8.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity* Video. August, 2008. <http://www.christlesschristianity.org/dvd.php> (accessed February, 2010).

43. Michael S. Horton, “Challenges and Opportunities for Ministry Today” in *Give Praise to God: a Vision for Reforming Worship*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2003), 445.

44. Dawn, 232-3.

45. *Ibid.*, 233.

46. *Ibid.*, 229-237.

47. D. A. Carson, *Worship: Adoration and Action* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 15.

One must not confuse what is central with byproducts. If you seek peace, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find peace. If you seek joy, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find joy. If you seek holiness, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find holiness. If you seek experiences of worship, you will not find them; if you worship the living God, you will experience something of what is reflected in the Psalms. Worship is a transitive verb, and the most important thing about it is the direct object.⁴⁸

3.6.1 A. W. Tozer suggests the practical roots of utilitarian worship: a self-centered assessment. We may as well face it: the whole level of spirituality among us is low. We have measured ourselves by ourselves until the incentive to seek higher plateaus in the things of the Spirit is all but gone.... We have imitated the world, sought popular favor, manufactured delights to substitute for the joy of the Lord and produced a cheap and synthetic power to substitute for the power of the Holy Ghost.⁴⁹

3.6.2 The constant desire for novelty in worship focuses our attention on the practices, the means of engagement rather than on the relationship. The form of worship becomes the goal, rather than a vehicle for the content of worship. Addressing this improper focus, C.S. Lewis expressed a need not necessarily for a set liturgy, but for uniformity in worship. He makes this request on the grounds that novelty distracts us from God, drawing our attention to itself or its performer.

As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not yet dancing but only learning to dance. A good shoe is a shoe you don't notice. Good reading becomes possible when you need not consciously think about eyes or light or print, or spelling. The perfect church service would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God.⁵⁰

3.6.3 James Montgomery Boice agrees that the primary focus of worship must be on the God we worship rather than the means of worship. For any congregation, one type of service will presumably be more valuable than another. (None better or worse unless there is wrong doctrine.) But the decision regarding what that type of service will be ought to be arrived at--not by asking whether one likes emotional or nonemotional hymns, extemporaneous or read prayers, congregational responses or silence--but by asking how effective the service is in turning the attention of the worshiper away from the service itself to God.⁵¹

3.6.4 Understanding worship as engagement with God the Father as we abide in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit gives us a relational perspective on worship, in contrast to a utilitarian view of worship. "Worship ought not to be construed in a utilitarian way. Its purpose is not to gain numbers nor for our churches to be seen as successful. Rather, the entire reason for our worship is that God deserves it."⁵² As we spend time engaged with God in the worship relationship, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to see God as He is... and ourselves as we are. We remember that God made worship possible for us in Christ, and we celebrate and rest in such love. Our hearts are filled with gratitude, and we listen to hear the Word, which directs us in offering our lives in thanksgiving for all that God has done on our behalf. We look around us and see the members of the Body of Christ, forgiven sinners like us. We are not alone; God and His people are with us. The Spirit of Christ will be with us always, to the very end of the age (Matt 28:20). We do not worship so that we get something; we worship because God is worthy.⁵³ Ligon Duncan goes so far as to state, If one has any other goal in gathered worship than engaging with God, coming into the presence of God to glorify and enjoy Him--any other aim than to ascribe His worth, commune with Him, and receive His favor--then one has yet to understand worship. For in biblical worship, we focus on God Himself and acknowledge His inherent and unique worthiness.⁵⁴

48. *Ibid.*

49. A. W. Tozer, quoted in *Forgotten God* by Francis Chan (Colorado Springs: David. C. Cook, 2009), 27.

50. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), 4.

51. James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 297.

52. Dawn, *Royal Waste of Time*, 1.

53. We do not worship so that we get something; yet, the benefits of worship are innumerable. When worship focuses on God and His story, we find our place in His story which defines our identity and purpose. By the grace of God and the working of the Spirit we are empowered to live out our faith, embracing with enthusiasm "the good works which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). We find peace in His sovereignty, hope in His victory over sin, and perspective in His coming reign. As we worship together, we find company for the journey.

54. Ligon Duncan, "Traditional Evangelical Worship" in *Perspectives on Christian Worship* ed. Matthew Pinson (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2009), 103.

4.1 How then are we to exercise liturgical discernment, so that our worship services enable engagement with God, focusing on his goodness and grace, rehearsing his story? This requires wisdom as well as knowledge and training. Worship planners and leaders have the privilege of “scripting” the conversation between God and His people; for this reason, they need to be people of the Word. They should also be people who love the Church, and understand God’s love for the Church: not a soft, sentimental love, but a love that lays down its life. Worship planners and leaders must be dependent upon the Holy Spirit for direction and inspiration.

4.1.1 In *Worship Seeking Understanding*, John Witvliet suggests three difficulties in understanding the Holy Spirit’s role in worship. We miss the mark when we dismiss or downplay the part that the Spirit plays in enabling worship. Second, we fall short when we limit the role of the Spirit to the spontaneous elements of worship. Indeed, the Spirit may well work through both the careful preparation of a preacher and a sentence the preacher had not planned on saying. The Spirit may work through both the diligent planning of a worship committee and the spontaneous prayer request or testimony of a worshiper.⁵⁵

A third danger is the presumption that by our planning or leading, we will control the Holy Spirit. “When we fall into one of these three temptations, we alternate between quenching the Spirit (I Thess 5:10) and grieving the Spirit (Eph 4:30). In contrast, we need to both welcome and honor the Spirit.”⁵⁶

5.1 In the 2009 book *Perspectives on Worship* edited by Matthew Pinson, we read statements on worship from five different worship leaders representing a broad spectrum of the Church. In his response to the article by Timothy Quill representing liturgical worship, Dan Kimball states There are five different approaches to worship in this book, and I believe that in them all the Spirit causes life change, and the historical orthodox doctrines of faith are being taught.... In all types of churches--Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God--the Spirit is radically changing people’s lives as these churches proclaim the gospel.⁵⁷

5.2 Of the five approaches to worship, three articulated or implied worship of God the Father through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Timothy Quill, regarding liturgical worship, observed: The Lord is present in Word and sacrament, and in them He gives out His gifts of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Where His Word is, there is His Spirit, creating and sustaining faith and moving faith to respond in prayer and thanksgiving.⁵⁸

5.3 Ligon Duncan, writing on behalf of traditional evangelical worship, lists God-centered, Spiritual, and Christ-based as three of the qualities of biblical worship. “Once we have said that worship is God-centered, Spiritual with a capital S, and Christ-based, we have said that worship is Trinitarian.”⁵⁹ He also notes that worship is corporate, the covenant community engaging with God, gathering with His people to seek the face of God, to glorify and enjoy Him, to hear His Word, to revel in the glory of union and communion with Him, to respond to His Word, to render praise back to Him, to give to Him the glory due His name.⁶⁰

5.4 The next spokesman in *Perspectives on Christian Worship* is Dan Wilt, speaking for contemporary worship. Wilt acknowledges that “worship is possible because the ultimate worshiper, Jesus Christ, lives within us and draws our hearts toward this ultimate act of allegiance (Col 1:27).”⁶¹ He also contends that “worship is about a people in relationship to a Person, not primarily about individual persons in relationship to a Person,”⁶² based on the communal consciousness of the scriptures as contrasted with the individualism of the West. Wilt encourages the Church to engage the culture, but in humility remain tethered to the historic church and the theological anchor of the Word.⁶³ Though there was no mention of the Holy Spirit in Wilt’s principles of worship, he does mention the Spirit as the One who redeems mankind, who renews us daily, and who calls others to join in the song.⁶⁴

55. John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 275.

56. John Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding*, 275.

57. Dan Kimball, “Response to Timothy C J. Quill” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 96.

58. Timothy C.J. Quill, “Liturgical Worship” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 19.

59. Ligon Duncan “Traditional Evangelical Worship” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 119.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Dan Wilt, “Contemporary Worship” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 149.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 160.

64. *Ibid.*, 161-163.

Wilt does not claim to be a theologian, but rather a practitioner and writer of contemporary worship. His guiding values begin with cultural relevance, and move from there to integrity, illustrated by “being true to who we are.”⁶⁵ His sources include fellow song writers, who share stories of experiences upon which they base their songs and ministry. My response to Wilt’s assessment echoes that of Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever, suggesting that Wilt expects music to do (and credits music with doing) what only God can do! It is our understanding that the church gathered around Christ, not His anthems; that it was the Holy Spirit that fanned into flame redemptive activity, not music; and that the immanence of God was an attribute of the Godhead rather than a function of melody and verse.⁶⁶

5.5 The next contribution to the perspectives was on blended worship, contributed by Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever. These writers support the regulative principle of worship, but suggest that there can and should be significant variety in the form or style of worship. They do mention both the Son (Truth) and the Spirit as necessary for worship, based on John 4.

5.6 Dan Kimball wrote the final chapter on worship, describing engagement with God from the perspective of the Emerging Church. Kimball agrees that the Bible instructs us in the elements of worship, but “scripture does not direct the forms, variety of practices and expressions of worship. Rather, these originate from people reflecting their culture and theology.”⁶⁷ Kimball gives prominence to the role of the Holy Spirit in worship, but mentions Jesus Christ as the recipient of our worship rather than a participant in worship. He is primarily concerned with what the worshipers do, and how their lives are being changed by the Spirit as they worship. Kimball is rightly concerned that we worship with all of our lives, that we “be” the church wherever we are.

6.1.1 While six people speaking on behalf of five different worship forms cannot represent the Church as a whole, the authors in *Perspectives on Christian Worship* gave us a glimpse into some of the worship “trenches” today. The interaction between authors was as informative as the initial statements were. The fact that these six agreed on so many things was a good sign for the Church. The fact that two of the positions represented did not speak of Trinitarian worship is disturbing. In fact, even though three of these representatives spoke of Father, Son, and Spirit being active in worship, that does not insure that all members of their gatherings understand.

6.1.2 Walk into a worship service in any given congregation on any given Sunday morning, and you will encounter a world that even a lifetime of study cannot fully comprehend. Cultural anthropologists have methods to assess some of this complexity; the interplay of symbols, texts, gestures, rites, power relations, gender, ethnicity, tradition, and culture. Perceptive psychologists and social workers perceive other dimensions of the gathering: the interplay of anxiety, hope, ambition, fear, shame, and gratitude that powerfully shapes how both entire communities and individual participants will experience it. Artists of various kinds sense still other layers of significance: the way in which fabrics, melodies, rhythms, metaphors, and architecture reflect beauty, evoke emotion, and convey convictions. Theologians offer yet another perspective, drawing on biblical narratives and several centuries of theological reflection to hone language for describing the ways in which God’s Spirit works through all of this to comfort, challenge, disturb, or nourish the faith of those gathered. The complexity of it all resists complete understanding.⁶⁸

6.1.3 John Witvliet demonstrates this concern when he shares the story of a former student who confessed, “I’ve professed the Trinity before, but I now see that I’ve basically worshiped and lived as a Unitarian. The church failed to explain to me what the Trinity is, and why it matters.”⁶⁹ Witvliet goes on to share, based on conversations with colleagues in several traditions, it seems safe to conclude that this student speaks for hundreds if not thousands of students in congregations, college, and seminaries, who live, work and pray as functional deists within otherwise orthodox traditions and institutions.⁷⁰

65. *Ibid.*, 180.

66. Michael Lawrence and Mark Dever, “Response to Dan Wilt” in *Perspectives on Christian Worship*, 211.

67. Dan Kimball, “Emerging Worship” in *Perspectives*, 295.

68. John Witvliet, “Teaching Worship as Christian Practice” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 117.

69. Witvliet, “What to Do,” 239.

70. *Ibid.*

6.2.1 How then shall we teach for understanding in worship? Witvliet focuses on three goals: First, we need to teach as training for participation, giving more than cognitive knowledge. We also need to provide the skills and judgment to bring that knowledge to practice.⁷¹ Second, we must highlight the communal aspect of worship, encouraging hospitality toward all who gather.⁷² Finally, we must understand worship in relation to the rest of community life,⁷³ as “our communal settings of proclamation, sacraments, and confession frame our hopes for closing the gap between beliefs and practices.”⁷⁴ As God works in us, transforming us by the power of the Word and Spirit more and more into the image of Christ, each facet of our life becomes worship.

6.2.2 It is important that we worship with understanding, particularly when it comes to Trinitarian worship. If we do not understand that it is Christ who makes the way for us, we are hopeless in our attempts to engage God. Either we despair or we have an inflated view of ourselves; it is only in Christ that we can worship. If we do not understand that it is the Spirit who leads and empowers our worship, we flounder, driven by the winds of culture and the weakness of our sinful selves, exhausted from trying to make something happen. God, because of his great love for us, made a way to bridge the gap between holy God and sinful mankind. He redeemed us in Christ by the power of the Spirit, and continues to draw us to Himself, that we might join the Community that is eternal, One God, now and forever. This is the gospel. This is trinitarian worship.

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71. Witvliet, “Teaching Worship,” 119.

72. Witvliet, “Teaching Worship,” 121-3.

73. Witvliet, “Teaching Worship,” 123-5.

74. Amy Plantinga Pauw, “Attending to the Gaps between Beliefs and Practices,” in Volf and Bass, *Practicing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 48, quoted in Witvliet, “Teaching Worship,” 124.