

Introduction

The Doxological Theology of T. F. and J. B. Torrance

“True theology is done in the presence of God in the midst
of the worshipping community.”

—J. B. TORRANCE¹

The Collect for Trinity by T. F. Torrance

Almighty and everlasting God, who hast revealed thyself as Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit, and dost ever live and reign in the perfect unity of love:

Grant that we may always hold firmly and joyfully to this faith, and,
living in the praise of thy divine majesty, may finally be one in thee; who
art three Persons in one God, world without end.²

A Case for a “Theological” Approach to Worship and Liturgy

ONE OF THE PRIMARY ways we know what Christians have believed is by looking at how Christians have worshiped. Liturgy exposes theology. But it is also true that liturgy shapes and forms theology. In the worshipping community, the Word of God is proclaimed, prayers are offered, and the desired outcome is the praise of God.³ The subject of congregational worship is consequently essential for the study of theology. To contribute to this discussion, Thomas F. Torrance and James B. Torrance offer an

1. J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, ix.

2. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 340.

3. Bromiley, “Theology as Service in Karl Barth” in Hart and Thimell, *Christ in Our Place*, 145.

important christological perspective, which is an important alternative to the more common “anthropocentric” approaches that abound within worship studies, theory, and praxis. Furthermore, they offer reflection going beyond the theologies that reference the Trinity but do not expound the priesthood of Christ or his vicarious humanity. This book will explore the way in which the Torrances’ scientific trinitarian theology can shape and form a more trinitarian approach to Christian liturgy.

The unique contribution of this work is to introduce this particular *theological* perspective from the doxological theology of T. F. and J. B. Torrance. These two theologians emphasize that Christian worship is not something *we* primarily do at all but rather it is something that has been done and is being done on our behalf and that whatever we are doing in worship, it is participation by the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father. T. F. and J. B. Torrance emphasize that Christian worship is something that happens vicariously through the worship of Jesus Christ, the High Priest of all creation. It is the intent of this work to offer a comprehensive exposition of this unique doxological theological perspective as well as a critical analysis.

This more theological approach to the subject of worship is exemplified through their writings such as the article by James Torrance, “The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship.”⁴ James Torrance, in that article, emphasizes that the person of Jesus Christ came to do for humanity what it could not do effectively for itself, namely, offer acceptable worship to the Living God. He states, “Here lies the mystery, the wonder, the glory of the Gospel, that He who is God, the Creator of all things, and worthy of the worship and praises of all creation, should become man and *as a man worship God*, and as a man lead us in our worship of God, that we might become the sons of God we are meant to be.”⁵

Other works by J. B. Torrance, such as *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, as well as the prolific writings of T. F. Torrance, point to an awareness of a theological orientation with an emphasis on the objective revelation of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ as well as a theological emphasis on the active obedience of Christ. This emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ has implications not only for soteriology but also for the theology of worship. T. F. Torrance writes, “Christian

4. J. B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship” in Anderson’s, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, 348–69.

5. J. B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship,” in Anderson’s, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, 351. cf. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 464–74.

worship is properly a form of the life of Jesus Christ ascending to the Father in the life of those who are so intimately related to him through the Spirit, that when they pray to the Father through Christ, it is Christ the Incarnate Son who honors, worships, and glorifies the Father in them.”⁶

The repeated refrain in the writings of the Torrances is that the worship of all humanity was purified and made perfect through the worship of Jesus Christ. The emphasis should not be on our prayers, sermons, and songs but on the faithful worship by Christ as he lived in perfect obedience to God the Father. It is only because of the faithfulness of Jesus Christ that human beings can approach God the Father, with their liturgies and their worship and do so with confidence that it will be embraced within the worship of Christ. J. B. Torrance states, “It can never be too strongly stressed that worship is our response to objective realities, to Jesus Christ and all that He has done for us.”⁷

In light of this emphasis on the faithfulness of Christ, a critical question that must be answered is, “Is all of humanity included in the worship of Christ?” In that the Torrances’ believed that Jesus Christ in his incarnation, both in his active and passive obedience, worshiped perfectly on behalf of humanity, is all of humankind included in the faithfulness of Christ? The correlated soteriological question is, “Will all of humanity be saved?” This issue must be addressed. The Torrances seem to reject both universalism and limited atonement. But does their emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ make these denials incoherent? In the conclusion, a summary will be made that articulates the charges against the Torrances, their rebuttal, and a judgment regarding this concern. Even though this book is focused on their theology of worship, one cannot help but address this charge of universal atonement as it relates to their theology of worship. This question will be addressed in this work.

Anthropocentric Approaches to Worship and the Liturgy

In contrast to the emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ, in the theology of the Torrances, many approaches to the subject of worship are more “anthropocentric.” The focus of these approaches is on what human beings do. It may be asked, for example, how we can improve

6. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 139.

7. J. B. Torrance, “The Place of Jesus Christ in Worship” in Anderson’s, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, 368.

congregational prayer. What could we do better to make it more effective? Or, the focus may be on homiletics. How can the ministers improve their preaching? In the contemporary worship context, the focus is usually about how to improve “the flow” of the praise music (the praise band, a worship set, a worship choir, design of the worship service)? However, what is common to these approaches is they are “anthropocentric,” meaning that the focus is on what we do when we worship. David Peterson is correct when he states, “We have enough how-to-do-it books and not enough reflection on worship as a total biblical idea.”⁸

Contemporary worship studies became popular during the charismatic renewal movement of the late sixties and early seventies. Out of the Jesus Movement in Southern California, Maranatha Music, affiliated with Pastor Chuck Smith and Calvary Chapel, captured a new sound of worship music associated with those coming to faith in Christ out of the Hippie Counter-Cultural Movement in Southern California. Praise choruses captured the voice of a new generation of worshipers who were new converts to Christianity and who were writing their testimonies into the new worship choruses and writing folk music to Scripture verses as a way of expressing adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. With those praise and worship recordings, books and conferences followed.

A decade later, The Vineyard Movement, founded by John Wimber, created a whole new music worship culture that spread throughout the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Vineyard Music International (the music distribution for Vineyard Music) focused on the creation of praise choruses that promoted a sense of intimacy with God. Robb Redman writes,

In many Vineyard churches, songs rich in biblical and non-biblical anthropomorphic language predominate; many songs describe a relationship with God in physical terms (seeing, hearing, touching, holding, kissing). As biblical justification for this, Vineyard worship leaders emphasize a meaning of a New Testament Greek word for worship (*proskuneo*), “to turn toward to kiss,” which they take to mean intimacy or closeness to God.⁹

The lyrics of these songs could be summed up by “the Father loves us,” “Jesus loves us” and “I/we love the Father and Jesus.” Robin Parry states,

8. Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 21.

9. Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 35–36.

“If there is a problem with Christian worship songs, it is more a failure to bring out the Trinitarian dimensions of the God we worship than a problem of violating Trinitarian faith.”¹⁰ Along with reinforcing a new worship music culture, a distinctive Vineyard theology of worship and ministry was promoted (particularly the New Testament Theology of George Ladd: “The Kingdom is here but not yet”). This orientation was introduced to discuss worship as a way of experiencing the rule and reign of Jesus Christ.¹¹

Looking at the conversions and the church planting these movements brought about, it would be difficult for the Christian theologian to argue that this music was not used by God to promote renewal in many local churches and in many English-speaking countries. A whole new generation was praising God. Young people were giving thanks with a grateful heart. Robb Redman states, “Christians raised on Jesus music learned how to praise. Despite what its critics have said about it, early CWM (Contemporary Worship Music) was, for the most part, both God-centered and biblical in content. They also stressed a variety of worship themes (adoration, praise, confession, humility before God).”¹² Yet some, while appreciative of this new worship music were asking other liturgical questions. Hughes Oliphant Old states, “A worshipping assembly is very different from a theatre crowd or a lecture audience. A worshipping assembly interacts. We sing praises together, and of the very essence of that act of worship is the way the singing of others lifts us up to join in the song. We gather around the Lord’s Table one with another to share the loaf and the cup.”¹³ Robert E. Webber was another who was advocating a worship culture that honored the liturgical values of the ancient church.

Approaches that Attempted to Be Theological

Robert Webber began to look back into history at liturgical structures to point out that Christians have had some kind of liturgical *ordo* to their corporate worship practices, whether that was a four-fold worship pattern in a Sunday service (Gathering, Word, Table, Dismissal), or a Church Year Rhythm (Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Ordinary Time, Lent, Holy

10. Parry, *Worshipping Trinity*, 133.

11. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*; Wimber, *Power Evangelism*.

12. Redman, *The Great Worship Awakening*, 54.

13. Old, *Themes and Variations of a Christian Doxology*, 133–34.

Week, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Ordinary Time). Many of Robert E. Webber's books were focused on how to reintroduce liturgical rhythm in Evangelical worship practices.¹⁴

Another critical contribution from the work of Robert E. Webber was that he made a compelling case to reinstate the Jesus story back into the center of Christian worship. He stated, "One of the greatest discoveries of my Christian pilgrimage has come with the realization that the primary importance in worship is not what I do, but what God is doing."¹⁵ This was the reason that Robert Webber was so adamant that we need to re-introduce the Church Year into Christian worship.¹⁶ The Church Year, he argued, kept the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension at the center of the church's worship practices instead of mere aesthetic considerations. "Worship tells and acts out the Christ-event."¹⁷

Marva Dawn was another theologian who addressed the subject of worship from a theological perspective. However, Dawn was primarily concerned with how the church had been influenced by the surrounding culture. She examined the subject of worship from an ethical and anthropological perspective. One of her primary influences was Jacques Ellul and his critique of technology. Her suggested response, to what she saw as narcissism in corporate worship, was to structure the worship service so that it was God-centered yet promoting character development and biblical community. What made Marva Dawn an important voice in the worship discussion was that she offered a prophetic voice to the contemporary church.¹⁸

Others who made significant contributions to worship literature were biblical scholars such as Ralph Martin (*The Worship of God, Worship and the Early Church*), David Peterson (*Engaging with God*), Timothy Pierce (*Enthroned on Our Praise*), Larry Hurtado (*At the Origins of Christian Worship*), Gerard Borchert (*Worship in the New Testament: Divine Mystery and Human Response*), and Daniel I. Block (*For the Glory of God*:

14. See the following books by Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship; Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail; Ancient Future Time*.

15. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 66. Yet, it is worth noting that earlier in his book, he states, "Worship is a verb. It is not something done to us or for us, but by us." Webber, *Worship is a Verb*, 2. J. B. Torrance would describe this statement as unitarian.

16. See the argument that worship has become secular in his book, Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 6–7.

17. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb*, 45.

18. Dawn, *Reaching out without Dumbing Down; A Royal Waste of Time*.

Recovering a Biblical Theology of Worship).¹⁹ David Peterson's *Engaging with God* was an exceptional biblical theology of worship with a chapter on the book of Hebrews and the worship of Jesus and thus touching briefly on the subject of the priesthood of Christ.²⁰ Liturgical scholars such as James F. White (*Protestant Worship, Introduction to Christian Worship, A Brief History of Christian Worship*), Paul Bradshaw (*Early Christian Worship*), and Geoffrey Wainwright (*Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life*) also had influence on the academic community as to how they perceived the centrality of liturgy in the local church.²¹ Furthermore, there have been many recent books addressing the subject of worship theology such as Maeve Louise Heaney's *Music as Theology: What Music Says about the Word*, with its emphasis on aesthetics and its ethnomusicology considerations.²²

What must be said however is that, although all of these movements, scholars, and literature made important contributions to how the local church conceptualized worship, they did not go far enough. They did not adequately reflect on the priesthood of Jesus Christ or his vicarious humanity. The term "Christ-centered worship" meant that Christ was a reference point in the liturgy. However, Jesus is not only the *object* of our worship, he is the *subject* of our worship. The Torrances made the case that what makes worship trinitarian and thus evangelical is that Christ in his incarnation not only revealed the Father but in his humanity, offered the perfect worship to the Father on behalf of humanity.

In summary, this work will examine the theological basis and implications of the Torrances' view that Christian worship is participating by the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father. Throughout the book the case will be made, that whether one agrees with the Torrances or not, to appreciate the writings of T. F. and J. B. Torrance fully, one should consider reading their theology from a liturgical perspective with

19. Martin, *The Worship of God; Worship in the Early Church*; Peterson, *Engaging with God*; Pierce, *Enthroned on Our Praise*; Hurtado, *At The Origins of Christian Worship*; Borchert, *Worship in the New Testament*; Block, *For the Glory of God*.

20. David Peterson states, "Hebrews presents the most complete and fully integrated theology of worship in the New Testament. All the important categories of Old Testament thinking on this subject—sanctuary, sacrifice, altar, priesthood, and covenant—are taken up and related to the person and work of Jesus Christ." Peterson, *Engaging with God*, 228.

21. White, *Protestant Worship; Introduction to Christian Worship; A Brief History of Christian Worship*; Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship*; Wainwright, *Doxology*.

22. Heaney, *Music as Theology*.

an awareness of the doxological foundation of their theological agenda. Following a biographical chapter of the Torrances, the themes that will be addressed, as the theological basis for the Torrances' theology of worship, are: unitarian or trinitarian worship, the trinitarian faith and worship, the mediation of Christ, the place of Jesus Christ in liturgical prayer and worship, preaching, and the sacraments of incorporation and renewal.

SAMPLE