**CHRISTIAN WORSHIP - THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE**

Session 3

**The Theological Foundation of Christian Worship**

1. **Introduction**

* In the last two sessions, we have learned that
  + the ancient cult of the First Testament foreshadow the worship of Jesus Christ in the Second Testament; and
  + the *worship of Jesus Christ* fulfilled all the requirements of worship stipulated by God in the First Testament.

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| **Ancient Cult of the First Testament** | **Worship of the Second Testament** |
| Tabernacle / Temple | The “Body” of Christ |
| Sacrifice | Christ the Victim (Lamb of God) |
| Mediation of Priest | Christ, the Mediator (Sole High Priest) |

* Therefore, in Christian Worship, worshippers participate in the worship of Jesus by “re-enacting” the Gospel of life, death, and resurrection of Christ through the liturgy.

1. **The Shape of Christian Worship: 3 Models**

* There are many forms of worship from different traditions – Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Free, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox.
* How are we to evaluate these many forms? What makes worship Christian in whatever form it takes? What is the place of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in our worship and prayers to God our Father?
* In this session, we begin by identifying three different theological models on the relationship between God and man and their implications on worship. We conclude this session by considering the implications of our self-understanding that is based on the trinitarian being of God.
* Corresponding to these different views of worship, there are three different contemporary theological models: unitarian, unitarian in tendency and practice, and genuinely Trinitarian.

**Model 1: The Unitarian Model**

* The heart of religion is the soul’s *immediate* relationship to God. What God the Father was to FT Israel, he was to Jesus, he was to Paul, and he was to us today. There is no need of any mediator.
* This view is clearly unitarian and individualistic. The center of everything is our immediate relationship with God, our present-day experience. The Father-Son relationship is **generic** for us to *emulate*, not **unique**.
* Jesus is the teacher of ethical principles, and religious life is our attempt to follow the example of Christ, living by the “golden rule.”
* Worship is what we do before God: the only priesthood is our priesthood, the offering our offering, the only intercession our intercession.
* All the great dogmas of the church disappear: Trinity, salvation, grace, and the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ etc. because they are not needed. This model of worship is human-centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness.
* “Do-it-yourself-with-the-help-of–the-minister” worship is what our forefather would have called “legal worship” not “evangelical worship”; what the ancient church would have called Arian or Pelagian worship and not truly catholic.
* Much worship in the West is in practice, if not in theory, unitarian.

**Model 2: The Existential, Present-day Experience Model**

* God gives himself to us in grace in the present moment of encounter, and we respond in faith, in repentance and decision. The center is “*God and me*,” today.
* According to this model, we are accepted by God as forgiven, as his children today, because of the death of Jesus on the Cross 2000 years ago. The work of Jesus is *instrumental* in our present faith and experience of salvation. The event of the Cross, through the event of preaching (the *kerygma*) gives rise to the event of faith.
* Stressing the work of Christ *at the expense of his person* can reduce the gospel to “events” with no ontology (separating act and being) and make our religious experience of grace central. As Bonhoeffer saw, we are then more interested in the blessings (and works) of Christ than Jesus Christ himself. It is a failure not to recognize that salvation is not simply through the work of Christ (*per Christum*), but is primarily given to us in his person (*in Christo*)—that we are drawn near to God our Father in and through Christ, in the communion of the Spirit.
* In much Anglo-Saxon Christianity, both liberal and evangelical, in its preoccupation with individual religious experience, salvation is subjectively interpreted. It is an attempt to reconstruct theology from the starting point of “religious experience,” instead of following the biblical pattern of giving priority to the question of **who** over **what** and **how—**that we interpret the atonement and personal faith in terms of the Incarnation (the triune God of grace) and not the other way around. The pragmatic, problem-centered preoccupation with the question of “how” in our Western culture can so readily reduce the gospel to the category of means and ends. We see this often today in an over-concern for relevance. This cultural Protestantism sees religion as the means to realize the moral, political, and economic ends of its culture.
* Looking from a different angle, although this model stresses the *God-to-human movement* in Christ, the *human-to-God 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 *fails to see* the place of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ as the *leitourgos* [NIV: *minister*] (Heb 8:2). It is he who leads our worship, bears our sorrows on his heart and intercedes for us, presenting us to the Father in himself as God’s dear children, and uniting us with himself in his life in the Spirit. To reduce worship to this two-dimensional thing—*God and ourselves, today*—is to imply that God throws us back upon ourselves to make our response. It ignores the fact that *God has already provided for us that response which alone is acceptable to him—the offering made for the whole human race in the life, obedience and passion of Jesus Christ*. The gift of sharing in the intercessions of Christ is that when we do not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit makes intercession for us. Whatever else our faith is, it is *a response to a response already made for us* and continually being made for us in Christ, the Pioneer of our faith.
* This model reduces the Lord’s Supper to being merely a memorial of the death of Christ. Baptism then becomes an outward sign of my faith, my decision, my conversion, my dying and rising (my subjective sanctification). But it is not my faith or my decision and conversion, my dying and rising which washes away my sins. It is Christ’s vicarious baptism for us in blood on the Cross, his death in which we, by grace, participate through [the baptism of] water and the Spirit. Also, in this model, we simply become the gathering of true believers with a common experience and less than *a royal priesthood sharing in Christ’s priesthood*.
* If we take our eyes off Jesus Christ, do we not fall back on ourselves and our own religious efforts—a false “*confidence in the flesh*”? (Ro 10: 3)

**Model 3 The Incarnational Trinitarian Model**

* This articulates the Trinitarian view of worship. *Worship is a gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.* The doctrine of the Trinity is the *grammar* of this view of worship and prayer.
* At the *center* of the ST stands not our religious experience, not our faith or repentance or decision, however, important these are, but a unique relationship between Jesus and the Father (R1 in the diagram). Christ is presented to us as the Son living a life of union and communion with the Father in the Spirit, presenting himself in our humanity through the eternal Spirit to the Father on behalf of humankind. By his Spirit he draws men and women to participate both in his life of worship and communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world.

“*No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him*” (Mt 11: 27)

This unique relationship (R1) between the Father and the Son is mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual testifying, mutual glorifying. Indeed, there is a oneness of mind and will between the Father and the Son, revealed supremely in the Cross, to “*bring many sons to glory*” (Heb 2: 10); “*that we might receive the full rights of sons*” (Gal 4: 5 NIV)—that we might be drawn by the Spirit into the unique life of shared intimate communion between the Father and the Son.

* Likewise, this unique relationship between Jesus and the Father is interpreted in terms of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is conceived by the Spirit, baptized by the Spirit, led by the Spirit into the wilderness. Through the eternal Spirit he offers himself to the Father on the Cross and is raised from the dead by the Spirit. In other words, he receives the Spirit from the Father for us, vicariously, in his humanity, that out of this fullness he might baptize the church by the Spirit at Pentecost into a life of shared communion, mission, and service (R2 in the diagram).
* A twofold relationship is thus established between the triune God and humanity, through the Spirit. It is a relationship *between God and humanity* realized vicariously for us in Christ (R1), and at the same time a relationship *between Christ and the church* (R2), that we might participate by the Spirit in Jesus’ communion with the Father in a life of intimate communion. In both, there is a bond of mutual love and mutual self-giving—of mutual “indwelling” (*perichoresis—*the word of the ancient church), of “perichoretic unity.”

“*Truly our fellowship (koinonia) is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*.” (1Jn 1:13).

He who was the eternal Son of God by nature became the Son of Man, our brother, that we, “sons of men” might become “sons of God” by grace—in him (R1) and through union with him (R2). Thus, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, “*through Christ, we both have access by one Spirit to the Father”* (Eph 2:18)

* To participate by the Spirit in the incarnate Christ’s communion with the Father is to participate in the eternal Son’s communion—a relationship which is both internal to the Godhead and externally extended to us by grace, established between God and humanity in the incarnation. The prime purpose of the incarnation, in the love of God, is to lift us up into a life of communion, of participation in the very triune life of God.

With this understanding, we can discern a *double movement* of grace in Christian worship:

1. A God-to-human movement, from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, and
2. A *human-to-God movement* to the Father, through the Son in the Spirit.

This double movement of grace, which is the heart of the “dialogue” between God and humanity in worship, is grounded in the very perichoretic being of God.

* As we have seen, if the Father-Son relationship is not **unique** to Christ but **generic** (Model 1), then all great doctrines of our faith, the Trinity, incarnation, atonement, union with Christ, sacraments, etc. disappear. But conversely, if the Father-Son relationship given to us in Christ is **unique and absolute**, then the very opposite happens. The Trinity, the incarnation, once-for-all atonement, the one mediator, union with Christ, church as body of Christ, baptism and the Lord’s Supper all, as the Nicene Fathers saw it, must be interpreted in Trinitarian terms as Von Balthasar in his *Credo* (an exposition of the Apostles’ Creed) suggested.
  + The Trinitarian model is a more authentic way of understanding genuine evangelical experience—experience grounded *objectively* in Jesus Christ. (More important than our experience in Christ is the Christ of our experience.) In faith we look primarily away from ourselves to Jesus Christ, desiring to be found “in him,” clothed with his righteousness (Php 3:7-11)
  + Christian worship is Trinitarian in three main ways:

1. We pray to the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Our prayer is primarily directed to God as Father—as in the Lord’s Prayer.
2. We pray to each of the three persons. We pray to the Father and to the Son (*Marana tha* (“*even so come, Lord Jesus*”), as in 2Co 16: 22 and to the Holy Spirit (“*who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified*” (Nicene Creed). As each of the three persons has “*the being of God*” (*ousia* of God) is Creator, Judge, Redeemer, Object of worship. Hence the Nicene fathers coined the word *homoousia*, “*one in being*.” Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three in their distinctiveness, but “*one in being*.”
3. We glorify the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit as when we sing the doxology at the end of the Psalms.

But fundamental to all these ways is the recognition that *worship is the gift of grace*. The Father has given to us the Son and the Spirit to draw us into a life of shared communion with Him—that we might be drawn in love into the very Trinitarian life of God himself.

1. **Trinitarian Understanding and Humanity**

* The God reveals his true being in the NT as the Father of the Son, as the Son of the Father and as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. God is love and has his being in communion, in the *mutual indwelling* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—*perichoresis*. This is the God who has created us in his image to find our true humanity in perichoretic unity with him and one another, and who renews us in his image in Christ. Jesus said, “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, so ought you to love one another*” (Jn 15: 9-13).
* There is established for us in the gospel a three-fold relation of communion, mutual indwelling (perichoretic unity):
  + between Jesus and the Father in the Spirit, into which we are drawn to participate **(R1),**
  + between Christ and his body in the communion of the Spirit (as in the Eucharist) **(R2)** and
  + between the members of the body by life in the Spirit (as in marriage, Eph. 5: 25-33) **(R3)**

As God has loved us and accepted us freely and unconditionally in Christ, so we must love and accept one another freely and unconditionally in him. As in worship, so also in our personal relationships with one another, we are given the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father, in the Trinitarian life of God. Therefore, we are never more truly human than at the Lord’s Table, when Christ draws us into his life of communion with the Father and into communion with one another.

* In our modern world, we usually equate the concept of “the person” with “the individual”. But in Christian understanding, “person” is a relational term, such as father, son, etc. The human person is someone who finds his or her true being in relation, in love, and in communion. This is a matter of great urgency in our culture where we witness, for example, the breakup of so many marriages. We have too one-sidedly interpreted the individual as some with:
  + Right, and duties (Thomas Jefferson).
  + As the thinking self (Descartes).
  + As endowed with reason (Boethius).
  + As a self-legislating autonomous ego (Kant).
  + As motivated by a work ethic.
  + As someone with physical, economic, social, emotional, sexual, and cultural needs.
* Two such individuals can legally contract together in marriage, but soon find their marriage on the rocks as they claim individual rights to realize their own potential or see the other as simply there to meet their own needs. The relationship disintegrates because there is no real covenant love, no mutual self-giving-and-receiving, no perichoretic unity, no deep intimate communion.
* For the same reason, John Macmurray defined *society* as a collection of individuals indirectly related to one another by law, by employment, by contract, to meet needs (economic, financial, physical, etc.). *Community* (in our case, the Church or the Body of Christ), on the other hand, he defined as a group of persons directly related by love.
* It is significant that older individualism grew out of a belief in the objectivity of God—the Creator or natural and moral law, who created the individual, with rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (the American Constitution). But in a secular culture where belief in the objectivity of God and of moral law recedes, everything goes into flux, and we witness a *closing of the (American) mind*, with a resultant collapse into narcissism, a preoccupation with the self—my rights, my life, my liberty, my pursuit of happiness. Religion then becomes a means toward self-realization. All the interest is in self-esteem, self-fulfillment, self-identity, the human potential movement and possibility thinking, leading either to nihilism of post-modernism or the neo-Gnosticism of the New Age movement which identifies the self with God.
* The Christian answer is to return to the “the forgotten Trinity”—to an understanding of the Holy Spirit, who delivers us from a narcissistic preoccupation with the self to find our true being in loving communion with God and with one another—to hear God’s call to us, in our day, to participate through the Holy Spirit in Christ’s communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world—to create in our day a new humanity of persons who find true fulfillment in other-centered communion and service in the kingdom of God.
* We are formed by and through the Trinitarian Christian Worship.

Appendix 1

Father Father Father Father

R R = R = R

Jesus Paul Son Individual Soul

Model 1. Unitarian Model of Worship

Appendix 2

God (grace) Jesus

Spirit

Knowing God

R Encounter

Present moment

Crisis of decision

Work of Christ Kerygma We Personal

(Faith Salvation

Repentance

Conversion)

Event 1 Event 2 Event 3

Model 2. The Existential, Experiential Model

Appendix 3

Yahweh Father

**R1** Spirit

(New

Covenant)

Israel (Royal Priesthood) Jesus Mediator

**R2** Spirit (participation)

We

Church (Israel)

Body of Christ (**R3**) Royal Priesthood

All Nations

Model 3. The Trinitarian Model