

What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,[{1}](#) both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."[{2}](#)

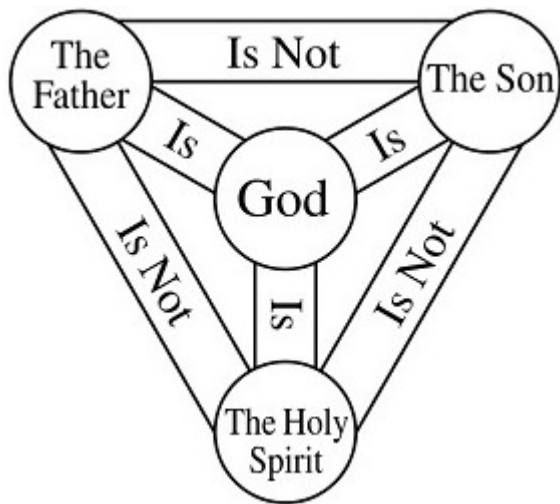
When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the “secret handshake” of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that’s a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”^{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, “It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is.”^{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, “God in three persons, Blessed Trinity.” Another handy definition is this, “Although not itself a biblical term, ‘the Trinity’ has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three ‘persons’ who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God.”^{5}



Even though it's short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let's settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move

out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?[\[6\]](#) As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this “god with a small g” has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And

are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, "When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level." [\[7\]](#)

The pantheist's commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn't, we wouldn't be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. "Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning." [\[8\]](#)

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, "Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God." [\[9\]](#)

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it's the only view that adequately describes God's work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of "God in one person" suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, "God is love," (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, "In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not 'big enough' to be God." [\[10\]](#)

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, "a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) and God the Father who is "just

and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, “[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God’s judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious.”[\[11\]](#)

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus’ words, “when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He “works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God’s absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe.”[\[12\]](#)

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

The Trinity and the “Everydayness” of Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though

it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

Entire sections of the modern church are functionally “non-Trinitarian.” I did not say “anti-Trinitarian,” for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship. [*{13}*](#)

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, “Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me” (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He writes, "Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?"^{14} Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name" (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you" (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney's words,

“Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”[\[15\]](#)—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).[\[16\]](#)

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let’s consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”[\[17\]](#) The foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order

in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father." [\[18\]](#)

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see [Worldviews](#) by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview* (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.

18. Ibid.

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Why A Moral Life Won't Get Us to Heaven

Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?' The answer is no, and Probe's Jimmy Williams spells out why, including how we CAN get to heaven.

Man: The Worshiping Animal

This essay is concerned with the often-asked question, "Won't a good, moral life get me to heaven?"

We begin first with the nature of man himself. One of the most remarkable things about humans is that from the dawn of history, and no matter where we find them on this planet, they are *worshipping* animals. In fact, humans are the *only* animals in the world who worship. *Homo Sapiens* is incurably religious. Why is man so inclined? What are the reasons, and how do they bear on our question about having good morals and getting to heaven?

Let's look briefly at some foundational elements that appear to be universals when it comes to human behavior. The first, as we stated above, is simply that humans *do* worship. Ethnic

groups of all kinds and in all places, whether remote or close to other peoples, have their own history, folklore, deities, rituals, particular moral system and life-customs. All of these enable each culture to cope with the great issues of life and its passages—from childhood to maturity to old age, and to the ultimate passage through that dark gate, Death. Christians tie this human inclination to worship directly to the fact that God says man, and only man, is created in His divine image (*imago dei*).

Secondly, what is also curious is *how* and *what* humans worship. The most prominent feature of human worship from earliest beginnings has been a *sacrifice* of some sort, whether the sheep, goats or bulls of the early Mediterranean world, or the human beings hurled into the mouths of volcanos by the Polynesians, or the child sacrifices of the Canaanites, or the ritual slaughter practiced by the Aztecs, the Incas, and virtually all of the New World Indians. In all cases, it appears some kind of blood must flow. We can also add to this (in many cultures) the prominence of *self-sacrifice* through flagellation, severe asceticism, or acts of personal penance.

The centrality of sacrifice in all human religious thinking points to an unmistakable reality: that humans instinctively know, or at least suspect, that there exists One to whom they are accountable for their behavior. They also assume, or know, that they have fallen short of what that higher being (or beings) requires of them. There is a universal sense that “God is not pleased with me.” So a third feature of worship is universal *guilt*. People worship because they feel guilty. They feel this guilt because they perceive they have fallen short of the standard that God, others, and they themselves require.

The Great Global Heresy: Religion

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys go to hell!” Probably most of us, at one time or another, have undergone the ordeal of having a parent or a teacher point a

finger at us (or a neighboring miscreant) and warn of the ultimate outcome of unacceptable behavior.

This “Santa Claus” mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.”

Everywhere we turn, we hear people speak of this religion: it is the most popular approach to God on the planet. We all know about the good little angel sitting on one shoulder and the bad little angel on the other. And we are very familiar with jokes about what happens to the person who dies and is immediately face to face with Saint Peter at the Golden Gates of Heaven. Peter stands there ready to evaluate and pass judgement on whether we’ve been good enough to be admitted and accepted inside. Saint Peter expects us to give moral account of ourselves before we can go inside.

The general, world-wide assumption is that, when we die, our good deeds and our bad deeds will be placed on the divine scales and weighed to determine if we go “up” or “down.” However, from Christianity’s viewpoint, this is a great, global heresy.

This is “religion,” but it is definitely not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is radically opposed to such an idea, teaching us that we are not to *do* something, but rather that something has already been *done* on our behalf. This global heresy, which we call “religion,” actually comes from Hinduism. It is the idea that God resides at the top of a great mountain, and it makes little difference which path a seeker chooses in his ascent up that mountain, since all paths lead to the God on top. And it is up to you to climb if you want to reach the summit—and God.

At the western end of the Forum in ancient Rome, there stood the *Millenarium Aureum*, the Golden Milestone, a gilded bronze column set up by Augustus Caesar to mark the junction and the

origin of the major Roman roads spreading out like the spokes of a great wheel in every direction to distant destinations throughout the Empire. On this column were inscribed the major towns and their distances from Rome. From this came the popular saying, "All roads lead to Rome."

This is what religionists believe about God. They say things like, "Well, it really doesn't matter what you believe. What's important is that you try to do your best and be sincere about it. After all, we're all trying to get to the same place; we all worship the same God."

But in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, we encounter something very different: in fact, we discover that there are *two* possible approaches to God, but only *one* is acceptable. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they immediately hid in the bushes, took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves.

God came and found them in the bushes—flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the clusters of fig leaves they had hastily sewn together, and He was not pleased. In fact, He scolded their efforts and their conduct. Adam and Eve not only had to admit their guilt and disobedience, they also had to acknowledge their inability to make things right *through their own efforts*. They could not cover, or atone, for what they had done. The account goes on to say that God had to take the initiative to adequately clothe them. He killed some animals and made garments from their skins for a covering.

All philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, and all other systems which seek to gain the approval of God through human self-effort are the "fig-leaf" approach. This method is at the heart of what we call "religion," man's best effort to reach up and find God. But the problem every worshipper encounters when climbing the mountain is an impenetrable barrier which denies all further advance: it is

the barrier of God's holiness and perfection. Each individual's personal sin and imperfection prevents him or her from coming any closer.

In his autobiography Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, speaks eloquently of his own struggle with this when he says: "Oh wretched man that I am. It is a constant source of torture to me that I am so far from the one I know to be my very life and being, and I know that it is my own sin and wretchedness that hides Him from me."

The Problem of Sin

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! We *do* a lot of it; we just don't like to *talk* about it! Many people do not know what sin or a sinner really is. What is sin? Sin is a violation of the law, the standard God requires of every human. A sinner is therefore someone who has broken that standard.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in people. There is a great deal of good. Humans are not as bad as they *could* be. The point is simply this: if our premise is that to get to heaven one has to be good, then how good is good enough?

The Scriptures are quite clear about this. God is not demanding "goodness." We saw above that Adam and Eve's best efforts to cover themselves (fig leaves) were not enough. The good which is in man, all his moral achievement, is not acceptable to God—because God is not demanding goodness, He demands *perfection!*

Many will say they try to live by the Ten Commandments or by some other rule of life, such as the Golden Rule. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers we have violated our own standards at some point. This is what Paul meant when he said,

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one mile deep. The world’s record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo is 29’ 4 1/2”. Yet the chances of a person jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than that of someone attempting to establish fellowship with God through his own efforts.

The standard man must meet is God’s perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that *no one* could ever reach it. To make matters worse, James tells us that “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). This means if someone breaks just one of the commandments, he is as guilty as if he had broken all ten!

The purpose of giving the Ten Commandments in the first place was not because God knew human beings would keep them perfectly. The Bible tells us that these revealed standards were intended to be to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the *condition* of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only reveal to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us or cover our sin.

The Pharisees looked at the Law and then at their own lives and said, “I’m pretty good, really good.” Jesus had wanted them to come to the opposite conclusion. He even called them hypocrites! He said they were wrong to claim they were righteous enough and that all was well between them and their Maker. That is why he said, “Those who are well do not need a physician” (Matthew 9:12). When you are well, you don’t seek a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick. Jesus was urging the Pharisees to be honest

about themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v.13).

When my wife Carol and I travel, and I discover I'm lost, I really hate for her to make her classic statement, "You're lost. Why don't you ask for directions?" In my case, the issue is always my male pride! With the Pharisees, it was *religious* pride, as it is for all who would seek heaven on the basis of their own merits.

A wise old Baptist preacher once said, "It isn't difficult to get people saved; it is difficult to get them lost!" This is man's dilemma: like the Pharisees, people cling to the old fig leaves of self-effort instead of submitting to the covering God Himself has provided for all (Christ's sacrificial death, the Cross). Each of us must choose one or the other (John 3:18, 36).

The Problem of Righteousness

While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very outset that no one, through his own efforts, possesses the ability to make himself presentable before God. It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said, "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver ... trying to clothe himself ... but the silkworm's activity spins it a shroud. So it is with man." Adam and Eve are classic examples.

Our problem is not only that we have fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23), by sinning; we also *lack* something. We not only need the removal of personal sin through blood sacrifice to satisfy divine *justice*; we need something *further* to make us fit for heaven and the divine presence of God. In other words, Christ's death in our place will keep us out of hell—but we still have the problem of getting into heaven. Isaiah spoke of this when he said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous deeds** are as **filthy rags**." (Isaiah 64:6). Not our *sins*, but our good *deeds*!

We need not only atonement for our sins, we also need righteousness to enter heaven! But it has to be a certain *kind* of righteousness.

The most righteous people of Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and, in their presence, admonished the crowds that "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment. "You mean the Pharisees aren't righteous enough to go to heaven? If *they* can't make it, who will?"

In the Garden of Eden we observe this conflict between two *kinds* of righteousness—*human righteousness*, which is clearly symbolized by the fig leaf garments Adam and Eve sewed together to make themselves presentable before God, and *divine righteousness*, which is symbolized by the adequate covering of the slain animals provided by God Himself. We find these two kinds of righteousness marching and clashing with each other all the way through both Testaments.

Paul referred to these same two righteousnesses when he said of his Jewish brethren, "I bear them witness, that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1).

In the former Soviet Union, rubles are printed and circulated. With those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill, and purchase things in the shops. But if you brought those rubles back to America and tried to do the same thing, the rubles would not be honored. It would be futile to try to

do business with rubles in America.

Let's think of these two righteousnesses in mathematical terms. Let's call God's righteousness "+R" and human righteousness "-R." The first righteousness is *absolute*, while the second is *relative*. Over a lifetime, a human being can accumulate a huge pile of -R, but added up, it still totals -R. To do business with God in heaven, we must deal with Him in the only "currency" honored and accepted by Him, and that is +R. It is futile to try to negotiate with God on the basis of relative, human goodness. We need +R.

Where do we get such "currency?" It is *given* to us as a gift if we will accept it—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The yardstick God uses to measure everyone is His Son. This +R righteousness is ours only in Christ: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

This gracious provision is a radical departure from all other religious ideas humans have ever conceived or set forth. It is so radical that human beings would never have thought of it.

The Uniqueness of Christian Grace

We have sought to arrive at a biblical answer to the question, "Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?" We have examined the bankruptcy of every attempt by people to reach that goal through any and every means of self-effort. We have discovered that the salvation offered by Christianity is uniquely opposed to all human efforts to secure it by working one's way into God's good graces. In fact, if God expected us to attain our salvation through good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake. He allowed His only-begotten Son to come to earth—robed in human flesh—and die a horrible death on a cross for our personal, eternal benefit. To choose a "good works" path to God is to negate the total significance of Christ's

death, making it meaningless and unnecessary.

What God has to offer is free. It is a gift that is not deserved by any of us, nor could we ever repay what the gift is worth. God has dealt with humankind in grace and love. The only thing that God has asked us to do is to humbly admit that we have broken His laws, acknowledge that He has indeed made things right through His Son's sacrificial death on the cross, and accept His forgiveness by faith. We are invited to lay aside our own "fig-leaf" costumes and freely submit to the covering God has provided for us, the blood-stained garment of His Son, the very righteousness of Christ.

This is what Jesus sought to communicate in Matthew 22:1-14, the parable about the wedding feast that a king was preparing to give his son: "So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad*: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, 'Friend, how came you here not having on a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!'"

The text does not tell us whether this person was one of the "good" ones or the "bad" ones. Why? Because it is irrelevant to what Jesus wants us to understand. The important issue was proper *attire* for the occasion. God is telling us that the only acceptable attire for heaven is the righteousness of Christ.

As a gracious host, He stands holding out to humanity the most expensive, costly garment in the universe, and He eagerly desires to wrap us up in it—safe and warm and happy and secure:

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful

in my God: for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." (Isaiah 61:10).

So how does this apply to you and me? Simply this: Everything that *needed* to be done for your salvation and mine was *accomplished* the moment Christ died on the cross. The penalty has been paid and God's righteous demands satisfied. God is now free to extend eternal life as a free gift. He declares, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Gifts, of course, must be received. For that reason, Jesus said, "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "Believe" means "to trust or depend on." God is asking each person to come to Him as a sinner, recognize that His Son died on the cross of us, and trust His Son *alone* as our only hope of heaven.

This was the message, the good news which the first Christians took to the world: "Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

In reality, every human being is just a prayer away from receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and the promise of heaven. But it has to be the *right* prayer, based on the *right* facts: that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, not "Do-Gooders": "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). You can begin to trust Christ for your salvation today instead of your own, futile efforts of trying to be a fairly nice person all your life. Obviously, your heart attitude, your sincerity, is what really counts. God knows your heart. But if the following suggested prayer will help to bring a sense of closure and certainty to your decision to believe in, to trust Christ, then please feel free to use it as a simple guide:

“Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner, and nothing I can do will ever get me to heaven. But I believe Jesus Christ died for me and rose from the grave to prove the validity of His claim to be my Savior. He took my place and my punishment. So right now, I place my trust in Christ alone to make me presentable and acceptable to you. Come into my life. I accept the gift of your Son. Thank you that you are now within me, not based upon my feelings, but upon your promise that if I open the door of my life and invite you to come live within me and be my Savior, you would (Rev. 3:20, John 1:12). Make me the kind of person you want me to be. Begin to show me that you really have entered my life and heart, and now give me the guidance I need to live a new life in fellowship with you. Amen.”

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Worship

Definitions of Worship

During a 1954 interview A.W. Tozer, a great pastor and editor of the Alliance Witness, was asked what he thought would awaken the church from its complacency. This was his response: “In my opinion, the great single need of the moment is that light-hearted superficial religionists be struck down with a vision of God high and lifted up, with His train filling the temple. The holy art of worship seems to have passed away like the Shekinah glory from the tabernacle. As a result, we are left to our own devices and forced to make up the lack of spontaneous worship by bringing in countless cheap and tawdry activities to hold the attention of the church people.”(1) John MacArthur, a more contemporary preacher and writer, wrote

this indictment in 1993: "In the past half decade, some of America's largest evangelical churches have employed worldly gimmicks like slapstick, vaudeville, wrestling exhibitions, and even mock striptease to spice up the Sunday meetings. No brand of horseplay, it seems, is too outrageous to be brought into the sanctuary. Burlesque is fast becoming the liturgy of the pragmatic church."(2)

These stinging analyses, whether we agree with them or not, remind us that the biblically based Christian is challenged to consider worship, along with all facets of life, in light of the culture in which he or she lives. Worship should be included in the total worldview of each individual Christian. It is a significant part of a believer's life. With this in mind, we will reflect on the meaning and history of worship, hindrances to worship, and the content of worship. And we will offer our own analyses and suggestions.

As is true with many terms used among Christians, the word "worship" can become a cliché devoid of significant content if we don't stop to consider its meaning. "Our English word means worthship,' denoting the worthiness of an individual to receive special honor in accordance with that worth."(3) The Hebrew and Greek terms found in the Bible "emphasize the act of prostration, the doing of obeisance."(4) Warren Wiersbe offers a broad definition based upon these concepts. He writes, "Worship is the believer's response of all that he is—mind, emotions, will, and body—to all that God is and says and does. This response has its mystical side in subjective experience, and its practical side in objective obedience to God's revealed truth. It is a loving response that is balanced by the fear of the Lord, and it is a deepening response as the believer comes to know God better."(5) A more narrow definition may sound like this: "Worship is pure adoration, the lifting up of the redeemed spirit toward God in contemplation of His holy perfection."(6)

Do these definitions describe worship as you experience it

with your gathered church and in your daily life? If so, you are blessed. If not, perhaps you need to evaluate the place of worship in your life. Perhaps you need to consider honestly if you have allowed yourself to become accustomed to traditions that have confused true worship. Perhaps you have approached worship with the idea it applies only on Sunday mornings. Or maybe you have never stopped to consider the importance of worship.

The History of Worship

What comes to mind when you think of worship? Is it a formal occasion? Is it a joyous occasion? Does it contain certain rituals? Are you involved? Are you praising God? Are you learning? Are you hearing from God? Are you in contemplation? Are you singing? Are you praying? Are you alone, or with other people?

Perhaps you can answer some or all of these questions in the affirmative. And you probably can add other elements to what is contained in worship in your experience. But have you ever considered what worship may have looked like when the early church gathered? Were these elements included, or did it look very different? A very brief survey of the history of worship will help us begin to evaluate the purpose and content of worship today. Our ancestors had to wrestle with what worship entails long before our time. We can and should learn from them.

The worship patterns of the Jewish synagogue served as the model for the first Christians. As Robert Webber has written, "It must be remembered that the early Christians came into worship from a different perspective from modern Christians. We accept the Old because we have been informed by the New. But they accepted the New because they had been informed by the Old."⁽⁷⁾ The promises and prophecies of the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Jesus, the Messiah. Thus Jesus set the stage for the first acts of worship among the early believers

by giving new meaning to the ancient ritual of the Passover meal. Acts 2:46 tells us that the earliest form of Christian worship was a meal—"breaking bread in their homes." (8) Believers were remembering the Last Supper just as the Jews remembered the Passover. Eventually churches became too large to accommodate these shared meals, so a single table with the elements of bread and wine became the focus. Thus "the central act of Christian worship in the history of the church has always been the Communion." (9)

By the second century worship began to look more like what most of us include in our churches. Justin Martyr, an apologist and pastor, wrote of two major parts: the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. The liturgy of the Word consisted of lessons from the Old and New Testaments, a sermon, prayers, and hymns. The liturgy of the Eucharist included a kiss of peace; offering of bread, wine, and water; prayers and thanksgiving over the bread and wine; remembrance of Christ's death, including the narrative of the institution of the Last Supper, and a command to continue in it; an Amen, said by all the people; Communion; then the reserved portions were taken by the deacons to those who were absent. (10)

It is unfortunate that by the late medieval period this twofold form of worship was overcome by pomp and ceremony that crowded out its meaning. But even the Reformers of the sixteenth century insisted on maintaining both Word and Sacrament. Their intent was to restore both elements to their primitive simplicity, and in the process the Scriptures were to be given an authoritative place. (11) Most evangelicals attempt to sustain the traditions of the Reformers. But what is the purpose of all this for the gathered church, and the individual believer?

The Purpose of Worship

Why should we worship God? Quite simply, we should worship Him because of who He is—God. In Revelation 4 and 5 we see

descriptions that should provide impetus for our worship. He "is the only God, the highest, the Lord God, the heavenly King, the almighty God and Father, the Holy One." (12) To put it succinctly, "in worship we simply tell God the truth about Himself." (13) Each day of our lives we tell God the truth about Himself, if we are thinking and living through the grid of a Christian worldview.

I have a good friend who is a physicist. Years ago his job included the consistent use of a sophisticated electron microscope. This impressive device allowed him to take pictures of the microscopic things he was studying. From these pictures he developed a wonderful slide presentation that served to remind us of the order and complexity that exists beyond what we can see with the naked eye. When we viewed these remarkable images, we responded in worship. Why? Because our worldview prompted us to contemplate the One who created such awesome things. We were filled with wonder. In our response we were telling God the truth about Himself. We were worshipping.

After his death friends of the great French thinker, Blaise Pascal, "found stitched into the lining of his doublet a scrap of parchment with a rough drawing of a flaming cross. Around that cross was the following poem," (14) entitled "Fire":

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
Not of the philosophers and the learned.
Certitude. Joy. Certitude. Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world and of all outside of God.
The world hath not known Thee, but I have known Thee.
Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of joy.
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated from Thee for ever. (15)

In this unforgettable refrain we hear the heart of a man in worship. Pascal was responding to the very personal presence of God in his life by pouring out his heart. His contemplation

led to worship. Jonathan Edwards, the great American philosopher- theologian of the eighteenth century, shared one of his experiences of worship in his *Personal Narrative*, which was published after his death.

The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception . . . which continued near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud.(16)

The full account of this encounter indicates that Edwards experienced worship during a time of contemplation and prayer. He sought to focus on God, and God responded in a dramatic way, just as was true for Pascal.

Such experiences don't have to be descriptive only of a few. We can apply at least two things from them. First, as with my physicist friend, our lives should include a sense of wonder. And wonder should lead to worship. As Thomas Carlyle wrote, "The man who cannot wonder, who does not habitually wonder and worship, is but a pair of spectacles behind which there is no eye." (17) Second, as with Pascal and Edwards, we need times of contemplation and prayer. Thoughts about God, and prayer to God can lead to a personal encounter with the One we worship.

Some Contemporary Hindrances to Worship

As of July 3, 1997, I will have known my wife for 30 years. During that time my love for her has become enriched through many experiences. If you were to ask me why I love her, I might respond by telling you what I receive from her. Or I might give you analyses of marriage fit for an essay. I might even attempt to persuade you to believe in marriage as I do. None of these responses would be wrong, but they would be incomplete, and they wouldn't focus on the primary subject: my wife, the object of my love. The lover would have hindered

true praise of the loved one.

The same can be said frequently of us as we consider worship in our lives. If we aren't careful, we can hinder worship, both individually and corporately, by emphasizing things that may be good, but don't give us a complete picture of what worship entails. There are at least three words that can describe these hindrances: pragmatism, intellectualism, and evangelism.

Pragmatism as a hindrance to worship. First, pragmatism has led many to find ways of getting what they want, instead of what they need. This means the worship "customer" is sovereign. "The idea is a basic selling principle: you satisfy an existing desire rather than trying to persuade people to buy something they don't want." (18) Many churches are growing numerically through such strategies, but is worship taking place? It's my conviction that the answer is "No." People may be coming, but numbers are not the issue. Worship is done among regenerated Christians who are concentrating on who God is, not on what we want. Paradoxically, what we truly want, communion with God, takes place when we pursue what we truly need.

Intellectualism as a hindrance to worship. Second, intellectualism is not a substitute for worship. Coming from one who believes strongly in the importance of intellect in the Christian life, this may be surprising. But I have come to realize that worship is not a glorified Bible study. This does not mean that the preaching of Scripture is not a key ingredient of worship, but the one who is preaching is responsible to share in light of worship. As Warren Wiersbe has written, "There is much more to preaching than passing along religious information. It must reveal, not mere facts about God, but the Person of God Himself." (19) Wiersbe continues: "When preaching is an act of worship, the outline is to the text what a prism is to a shaft of sunlight: it breaks it up so that its beauty and wonder are clearly

seen.”(20) Such comments also apply to our private times of Bible study. Our minds are to be used in study, but what is studied includes worship of the One who has communicated with us.

Evangelism as a hindrance to worship. Third, evangelism is not the ultimate reason for worship. Non-believers who are in attendance at a time of worship certainly can be touched by the Spirit, but worship implies the believer’s response to God. A non-believer cannot worship the true and living God. Thus an “altar call” should not be the primary focus. Instead, the church should be called to focus on the One who has called them into His family. Then they take what they have heard, seen, and experienced into the surrounding world.

Let’s reconsider such hindrances as we seek to worship God, who will be glorified in the process.

The Content of Worship

“I know that Thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of Thine can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). “I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Thy wonders. I will be glad and exult in Thee; I will sing praise to Thy name, O Most High” (Ps. 9:1-2). “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands” (Ps. 19:1). “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3). “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns” (Rev. 19:6).

What do these Scriptures have in common? They are statements of worship; they are inspired statements from men to God. And

for the moment it's our hope that they serve to stimulate us to contemplate the content of worship.

One of the most pointed scriptural statements concerning worship is found in Jesus' well-known encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:23-24). Jesus told her:

But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.

Earlier (vs. 21) Jesus had told the woman that the place of worship was unimportant. One doesn't worship just on a particular mountain, in Jerusalem, or any other place. We are free to worship God anywhere. So then He told her what is important.

First, the spirit of worship is important. We are to render "such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act." (21) Whether we are in a time of private praise and adoration, or gathered with the church in corporate proclamation, we are to respond to who God is from the spirit, from the whole of our innermost being. Second, we are to do "this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in his Word." (22) The concept of responding to God in spirit can give rise to confusing individual expressions if those expressions are not guided by Scripture. There must be balance between spirit and truth. One without the other is not complete. "As some see it, a humble, spiritual attitude means little. According to others, truth or doctrinal soundness is of no importance. Both are one-sided, unbalanced, and therefore wrong. Genuine worshipers worship in spirit and truth." (23)

These comments began with quotes from biblical writers who wrote their statements of worship. It's striking to note how those statements contain not only the truth of God, but the truth about God. Truth permeates their worship. But it's also

striking to note the spirit with which those expressions were shared. They are from the heart. They penetrate our lives; they are alive with true worship. As we read and hear such expressions they should encourage us to worship God in spirit and truth. And thus the content of our worship will be pleasing to Him.

Concluding Suggestions Concerning Corporate Worship Renewal

We have discussed several aspects of worship: its definition, history, purpose, hindrances, and content. To conclude we will focus on five suggestions that can be applied to corporate worship in the contemporary church.

First, consider how time is allotted when the church gathers for worship. As churches grow they tend to break into various times of worship. Thus the available time for worship is decreased. One group needs to be released from the worship center in time for another to enter. As a result, often there is a feeling of being rushed. And this feeling of being rushed is exacerbated because so much of the available time is spent with things that may be good, but are not conducive to worship. Announcements may concern good things, for example, but they take time from the true intent of the gathered church.

Second, consider how much attention is given to worship by the leadership of the church. The pastor, staff, and other leadership should demonstrate that worship has a very high priority. There should not be a question of how much energy has been given to preparation for worship on the part of the leadership.

Third, consider who is the leader of worship and why. It is my conviction that the pastor should be the one who calls the body to worship and leads it by example. Much is communicated to the congregation when the primary earthly leader implores

the people to give their undivided attention to the reason for their gathering. In addition, much is communicated when the pastor is involved in worship beyond just the delivery of a sermon, no matter how good it may be. Having served on a church staff for many years, I know some of the time implications of this suggestion. But I believe if the church makes worship the priority, the pastor should provide the leadership for it. Fourth, consider what has priority in worship. Quite simply, the question is whether or not God has priority. Or do other things tend to crowd the allotted time and distract from the true intention? For example, it may be good to let a visiting relative of a church member sing a solo, but has someone talked with this person in order to discuss the reason for any solos within the time of worship? Remember, worship is to be God- centered, not man-centered.

Fifth, consider the place of style versus substance in worship. It appears to me that the "style" of worship is not the issue as much as the substance. In other words, if the people are called to worship God with integrity and concentration on Him, the style is secondary. This applies regardless of whether the style is liturgical/traditional, contemporary, or something in between. But if the style overshadows substance, true worship may be thwarted. It is a wise church that brings both style and substance together in a manner that pleases God.

These five suggestions and the thoughts that have preceded them have been offered with the hope that you have been stimulated to consider the importance of worship in your life. The worshiping Christian in a worshiping church is a person who is continually empowered to impact the world for the glory of God. May you be among those empowered people!

Notes

1. A.W. Tozer, *Keys to the Deeper Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Zondervan, 1957), 87-88.

2. John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill.:Crossway, 1993), xvii-xviii.
3. Everett F. Harrison, "Worship," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker, 1960), 560.
4. Ibid.
5. Warren Wiersbe, *Real Worship* (Nashville, Tenn.: Oliver Nelson, 1986), 27.
6. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, 561.
7. Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978), 84.
8. Ibid., 83.
9. Ibid., 86.
10. Ibid., 80-81.
11. Ibid., 87-88.
12. Ibid., 85.
13. Ibid.
14. Peter Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993),
15. Blaise Pascal, *Fire*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13.
16. Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, quoted in Toon, *The Art of Meditating on Scripture*, 13-14.
17. Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts* (New York: Standard, 1936), 713.
18. MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 49.
19. Wiersbe, *Real Worship*, 123.
20. Ibid., 124.