

Christian Worship and *Taxis* within the Trinity

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INTRODUCTION: TWIN PILLARS OF TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE

Trinitarian doctrine is built upon the twin pillars of the *oneness* of the divine essence and the *threeness* of the divine persons. Or, one might

say that these twin pillars are those of identity (essence) and distinction (persons), or of equality (essence) and difference (persons). Each pillar is necessary, and only together (and rightly understood) are they sufficient to uphold the doctrine of the Trinity.

The *oneness of God* expresses the truth that there is one and only one true and living God and hence, one and only one unified and undivided divine essence possessing intrinsically and eternally every perfection or quality

in infinite measure. The oneness of God, then, explains why Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cannot rightly be conceived as three gods, for each possesses eternally and fully this one and undivided divine essence.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equally God, for in essence they are identical. The equality of the divine persons, then, is the strongest kind of equality possible and is, in fact, *sui generis* (in a class of its own). Consider for a moment other kinds of equality in comparison to the supreme equality that exists among the three divine persons. The equality that exists, for example, among three evenly sliced pieces of pie is an *equality of proportionality*. Each piece of pie is equal to each other piece because each is the same proportion of the total pie, i.e., each is equally one-third of the pie. But the persons of the Trinity, though they possess an equality of proportionality—each possesses 100% of the divine nature—have attached to them an even stronger kind of equality than merely an equality of proportionality. Or again, the equality that exists among creatures is, at

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best, an *equality of kind*—e.g., two cats are equal to each other, or two humans are equal to each other, because each possesses the same kind of nature as the other. And although the persons of the Trinity are equal with an equality of kind—each indeed does possess a nature that is the same kind of nature as that which the other persons possess, since each possesses the same divine nature that the other persons possess—their equality is not merely an equality of same kind. Rather, the strongest equality that there is exists among the three persons of the Trinity, and it is stronger yet than either an equality of proportionality or an equality of kind considered separately. The equality here is in fact an equality that is uniquely true of the distinct persons of the Godhead. And what is this supreme divine equality? Each divine person, in essence, possesses an *equality of identity* with the other divine persons precisely because each divine person possesses the identically same nature as the nature that each of the other persons possesses. The Son is equal to the Father precisely because he possesses the identically same nature as the Father possesses—not merely a nature of the same proportion (100% of the divine nature) or merely of the same kind (each nature is a divine nature), but the very same and identical nature as the Father possesses. And the Spirit is equal to the Son and the Father precisely because he possesses the very same and identical nature as possessed by the Son and by the Father—not merely a nature of the same proportion or of the same kind, but the very same and identical nature. Because the Father, Son, and Spirit possess the identically same nature, each then must be understood as fully God—not three gods, but three personal expressions of the one and undivided divine nature that is commonly, fully, and eternally possessed by each of the three divine persons. If the oneness of God is a oneness of the divine nature, wherein lies the distinctive threeness of God?

The *threeness of God* expresses the truth that there are three distinct and distinguishable divine persons, each of whom possesses fully

and eternally the infinite divine essence, while each is his own distinctive personal expression of that one and undivided divine essence. For Trinitarian doctrine, distinction of personhood is as necessary to maintain as unity or equality of essence is also to maintain. While the Father possesses the identically same nature as the Son, the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. While the Son possesses the identically same nature as the Spirit, the Son is not the Spirit and the Spirit is not the Son. And when one examines biblical indicators on the distinctiveness of the Father from the Son and Spirit, the Son from the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit from the Father and the Son, it is clear that two categories seem to encompass the heart of their distinctiveness: *relationship* and *role*.¹ Each is distinct in *relationship* within the Godhead such that each is who he is in part defined by the distinctive relationship each has with the others. This is easiest to see with the Father and Son. These divine names of “Father” and “Son” are not *ad hoc*, nor are they true merely of the economic Trinity. Rather the Father is the eternal Father of the eternal Son, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. The very identity, then, of the first person of the Trinity is seen in and through his relationship as the Father of the Son. Likewise the very identity of the second person of the Trinity is seen precisely through and not apart from his being the Son of the Father. That the Spirit is subject to both Father and Son seems, then, to make it clear that his relationship is as one under the authority of the Father and the Son. Relationship, then, is a central category for understanding what distinguishes the three persons from each other.

But these distinct relationships give expression, then, to particular *roles*² that each carries out. Although all three work together in harmonious unity, each contributes distinctively to the work of the “one God” that is done. The Father carries out different and differing roles and activities than does the Son and the Spirit,

and the same could be said for each of the other persons as well. To give some obvious examples, only the Father (not the Son or the Spirit) sends the Son into the world; only the Son (not the Father or the Spirit) becomes incarnate; and only the Spirit (not the Father or the Son) comes at Pentecost as sent from the Father and the Son. What distinguishes the three persons from each other within the Godhead? Their distinctive relationships and roles are the clearest expressions of just how each is distinct from the others, and what constitutes the uniqueness of each of the divine persons.

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is an accounting and expression of both (1) the one and undivided divine nature eternally and fully possessed by each of the three divine persons, and (2) each member's distinct personhood, most clearly seen as each has his own unique relationship with the other members, and each carries out distinctive roles that join together in the one unified work of the Triune God. John 1:1 helps us see the crucial importance of embracing these twin pillars of trinitarian doctrine—both the distinctiveness of the divine persons and the equality of identity in regard to the commonly possessed divine essence. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God [distinction and distinctiveness], and the Word was God [identity and equality].” The Christian faith, then, upholds this union of the One who is Three. It rejects both Unitarian Monotheism (one but not three) and Tri-theism (three but not one) in its insistence on Trinitarian Monotheism (three distinct persons each of whom possesses eternally and fully the one and undivided divine nature).

THE GROUND AND EXPRESSION OF WORSHIP

Having seen the basic contours of Trinitarian theology, how does this understanding inform our conception and practice of Christian worship? Christian worship is *grounded upon*, and is the proper *expression of*, both the essence or char-

acter of the one true and living God (the oneness of God) and the work of the one God who is also three, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (the threeness of God). That is, both the ground of worship and the proper expression of worship are tied necessarily to the oneness and threeness of God, both to God's character where God's oneness is central, and to God's work where oneness is manifest only through threeness of persons in distinctive relationships, roles, and activities. Consider further how both the grounding and expression of worship are tied to the oneness and threeness of God.

First: *grounding*. Worship finds its necessary grounding in God himself, in his character (or nature, or essence, or essential attributes) and his work (or his activities, or his appropriations, or his outward actions which reflect and express his inward character). God is worthy of all praise, honor, devotion, love, and obedience precisely because of the infinite worth of his character and the matchless magnificence of his work. But as soon as one acknowledges that both the character and work of God comprise the grounding of worship, one must acknowledge that both the oneness and threeness of God are necessarily and rightly enjoined. For the character of God is that unitary and undivided divine essence comprising the oneness of God, while the work of God (i.e., of the true God of the Bible, not some speculative conception of deity) is inconceivable apart from consideration of the distinctive relations, roles, and activities of the three divine persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To put it simply, Christian worship is grounded in the character of God who is one, and the work of God who is three.

Second: *expression*. Worship finds its only rightful expression, then, in response to the revelation of the one God who is three. Just as Christian worship is grounded in the character of God who is one and the work of God who is three, so too the expression of worship (i.e., the actual worship of God) is only rightly expressed when given in response both to the character of the one God and to the distinctive but unified work of the three

divine persons. To express worship only of and in response to the oneness of God fails to be fully Christian worship, since it fails to recognize that God is one only as he is also three. Generic monotheistic worship, then, is not necessarily Christian worship. At best, it is truncated or reductionistic worship; at worst, it is idolatrous. Likewise, to express worship only of and in response to the threeness of God may fail to recognize the underlying unity of character, purpose, and workings that the three persons exhibit. Christian worship, then, must understand and respond to God as one in character or essence, who alone is worthy of all praise and honor for the infinite splendor and worth of his very being, and it must understand and respond to God as three in persons, whose mighty works of creation, redemption, and recreation invoke necessarily the distinctiveness of the three persons carrying out roles and activities unique to each, and only together accomplishing the fullness of the divine plan for the created order. To put it simply, Christian worship is the proper expression of the character of God who is one, and the work of God who is three.

A broader theology of worship, then, would require spelling out at least these four fundamental components of worship we've just seen: (1) grounding worship in the oneness of God who is uniformly one in character or essence, (2) grounding of worship in the threeness of God who is distinctively three in persons and corresponding work, (3) expressing worship in response to the oneness of God who is uniformly one in character or essence, and (4) expressing worship in response to the threeness God who is distinctively three in persons and corresponding work.

Although much could be said about all four of these components of worship, one of the four is both more difficult to conceive while also having a special significance, in particular, for the public worship of the church. The two grounding components are more straightforward in that we understand even intuitively, and certainly we see biblically, that honor and worship is owing God

both for his character (focusing on the oneness of the one God who is three) and for the magnificent works that he does (focusing on the threeness of persons who do the work of the one God). As for the expression components, again it simply is more straightforward to think in terms of expressing worship to "God" as one, since one Subject of worship is easy to conceive and expressions of worship to that one Subject are both biblical and natural—e.g., "You shall fear only the LORD your God; and you shall worship Him and swear by His name" (Deut 6:13). The one component, though, that raises particular difficulties for Christian worship is the fourth. Just how should worship be expressed specifically to the Father, or Son, or Spirit, given that all three are equally God, yet each is involved in particular works that deserve recognition and that elicit honor? How do the relations that exist among the three persons, and how do their specific roles in the economy of salvation, lead us to understand appropriate parameters of the worship of the Triune God? Therefore, for present purposes, I have chosen to focus on this fourth aspect of worship, viz., the necessary dependence of the rightful expression of Christian worship upon the distinction of persons in their relations, roles, and activities.

INHERENT TAXIS AMONG THE TRINITARIAN PERSONS

While many things can be said about the distinction of the divine persons, one characteristic of Trinitarian life seems to be predominant as one looks carefully at the distinct relationships and roles exhibited of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit throughout the Bible. This predominant biblical characteristic is the presence of an order, or even a structure, among the Trinitarian persons that explains much about why each person carries out the particular roles that each one does. The early Fathers of the church sometimes used the word *taxis* (Latin for "ordering") to express this order in the Trinity, and they did so aware of the fact that this Trinitarian *taxis* does not admit alteration,

as if the “Father” could instead one day become the “Son” or the “Son” exchange his work for the work of the “Spirit.” No, the order they observed from the Scriptures indicates an inviolability and permanence that will not allow such proposed exchanges in “person” or “work.” The Father is the eternal Father of the Son, or we do not know who the Father is. If it were the case that the one we call “Father” could instead have been the “Son,” then just who is the Father and who is the Son? No, each person is who they are eternally, and the relationships that have been revealed as true of them are likewise eternal relations. The *taxis* of the Trinity, then, is quite stubborn. It is what it is eternally, and it does not accommodate reversibility or reciprocal exchanges of positions. In short, God is immutable not only in his infinitely perfect and unified divine character but also in the ordering of the Trinitarian persons each of whom possesses fully and eternally that one and undivided divine nature.

As one examines this inflexible ordering among the Trinitarian persons, again, one can see a number of characteristics. But among those things that mark this ordering or *taxis*, one characteristic is apparent over and over again. One cannot help but notice that the *taxis* among the Trinitarian persons is marked unequivocally and eternally by an inherent authority and submission relationship that defines, as much or more than any other biblical category does, what constitutes the distinctiveness of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Yet, because of strong resistance by some contemporary theologians to this notion of an eternal authority-submission structure of Trinitarian relations (e.g., Kevin Giles,³ Millard Erickson,⁴ Tom McCall,⁵ Keith Yandell⁶), I’ve been led to conclude that what we have here is nothing less than the proverbial elephant in the room. Without question, one of the most widely attested biblical themes, especially of the Son’s relation to the Father, is one in which the Father, *qua* (as; in the capacity of) Father, initiates, commands, governs, sends, and in every way directs the Son and

his activities, while the Son, *qua* Son, for his part knows nothing of self-initiative but rather seeks in all he does to do the will of his Father. The Spirit in all of this supports, upholds, and honors the Son in his mission and work, seeking to fulfill the will of the Son, who in turn seeks to carry out the will of the Father. Consider with me, then, a brief sketch of the distinctive roles of Father, Son, and Spirit, followed by some of the impact of these biblical teachings of the divine *taxis* for Christian worship.

TAXIS IN THE TRINITY AND DISTINCT ROLES OF TRINITARIAN PERSONS

The Father is Supreme in Position and Authority among the persons of the Trinity as the Grand Architect, the Wise Designer of Creation, Redemption, and Consummation.

Consider, as a small sampling, these texts that speak of the supreme position of the Father:

Psalm 2:7-9

I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, “You are My Son, Today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the very ends of the earth as Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.”

Matthew 6:9-10

Pray, then, in this way: “Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.”

Galatians 4:4-6

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

Ephesians 1:3-4

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, just as He chose us in Him ...

Ephesians 1:9-10

[The Father made] known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Philippians 2:9-11

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

James 1:17

Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

As one considers these texts, one can see the higher position of the Father. He is the one who gives to his Son the nations as his inheritance (Ps 2:8). He sends the Son in the fullness of time, as he later sends the Spirit of the Son into the hearts of those who believe in him (Gal 4:4-6). The Father is the Giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17) so it stands to reason that we bring our requests to the Father, as Jesus commands we do (Matt 6:9-10). The Father is the one who has planned all things related to the final consummation in which His Son reigns over all (Eph 1:9-10), and within which he has granted us every blessing we will receive in this life and the life to come, only through his Son (Eph 1:3), among which is our election to be in Christ chosen and secured by the

Father before he created the world (Eph 1:4). In all of these and many other ways, the Father stands supreme in position and authority. Never do we read of the Son or Spirit putting the created reality under the feet of the Father; never do we see the Son or Spirit sending the Father; never do we see the Son or Spirit granting us good gifts through the work of the Father. No, the Father is the generous Giver, the wise Designer, the grand Architect, and he designs all things to be accomplished and brought about through his Son and Spirit. Without any exception or reversal, the Father holds this position of supremacy within the Trinity and over all creation.

THE SON SUBMITS TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE FATHER OUT OF HONOR AND LOVE FOR THE FATHER.

Notice these texts which speak of the Son's devotion and commitment to the Father, and to the completion of the Father's will, from his role as the eternal Son of the Father sent by the Father into the world (submission of the Son to the Father in eternity past), in his role as the incarnate Son (submission of the Son to the Father in his earthly mission), and in his role as the risen, exalted Son (submission of the Son to the Father in eternity future):

John 3:16-17

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

John 6:38

For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

John 8:42

Jesus said to them, "... I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me."

John 10:36

Do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”?

2 Timothy 1:9

[God the Father] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began [Submission in eternity past]

John 8:28-29

So Jesus said, “When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me. And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.”

John 14:31

I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.

John 15:9-10

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. [Submission in the Incarnation]

1 Corinthians 15:25-28

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For He has put all things in subjection under his feet. But when He says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Revelation 1:1

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John [Submission in eternity future]

One characteristic of the Son is uniform, whether considering the Son as the eternal Son (John 3:16-17), or the incarnate Son (Luke 1:35), or the risen and reigning Son (Rom 1:4), and it is this: the Son always seeks, in everything he does, to honor and love the Father as he does exactly and only what the Father has commanded and directed him to do. “Not my will but yours be done,” is the eternal expression of the Son, even as it comes to a peak in the Son’s obedience in Gethsemane.

A few of these statements of the Son are truly remarkable here. For example, when Jesus says, “I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me” (John 8:42), he indicates that his coming into the world was not ultimately his decision or plan, but it was the decision and plan of the Father—a plan which he embraced fully and to which he gave himself without reservation. Yet, his very coming was not of his own initiative, since his coming was only as the Father sent him to accomplish his (the Father’s) will. Or again, the language in John 10:36, that the Father “sanctified” him and sent him into the world, cannot have as its meaning that the Father removed some supposed sinful stain from the Son before sending him. No, this Son was perfect, sinless, and without blemish (e.g., Luke 1:35; Heb 4:15). So, the sanctifying of the Son was done as the Father chose (cf. 1 Pet 1:20) and set apart the Son to be the one who would come to accomplish this saving work of the Father’s design. And one final comment—notice the context of the love relationship between the Father and Son as depicted in John 14:31 and 15:10. The Son’s love for the Father is manifest as he does what the Father commands him to do, and the Father’s love for the Son is received only as the Son obeys the Father’s

commandments. So, far from eliminating a true and vibrant love relation, the authority-submission structure of the Father-Son relationship actually provides the framework and context for true love to be expressed and received.

Whether one looks as the Son in eternity past, or in his incarnate ministry, or in the victory of his exaltation, one sees a Son who loves his Father and seeks in all he says and does to please his Father. Jesus' submission to the Father is as inviolable and irreversible as is the Father's authority over his Son, while the love relationship of Father and Son was perfect in every way imaginable.

THE SPIRIT'S UNIFORM PURPOSE IS TO PUT FORWARD JESUS

As the Son always seeks to honor and please the Father in all he says and does, so the Spirit seeks always to honor and support the Son, to the greater glory of God the Father. Consider here another sampling of texts which give some indication of the Spirit's heart and mission to put forward Jesus, not himself, so that the Son is seen for the glorious prophet, priest, and king that he is:

2 Peter 1:20-21

But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Luke 24:44

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

John 16:12-15

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but

whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you.

1 Corinthians 12:3

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, "Jesus is accursed"; and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit.

Notice how the Spirit, even in his role as the one who moves writers of the Old Testament Scriptures prior to the incarnation and his coming at Pentecost (2 Pet 1:20-21), seeks to put forward Jesus as the prominent figure of the Father's revelation and work. The whole of the Hebrew Scriptures testify about Jesus (Luke 24:44) precisely because the Spirit, as the divine author of those Scriptures, ensured that Jesus be the central figure. The Spirit, then, is not interested in self-promotion, as it were; he does not write autobiographically. Rather, he puts Jesus in the spotlight and magnifies the greatness of his person and work.

Furthermore, this same reality we see in the Spirit's work prior to the incarnation through the inspiration of the Scriptures, he carries out also following the earthly ministry of Christ. When the Spirit comes, as Jesus makes clear, the Spirit will not speak of his own, but he will speak and reveal what the Son has for him to say (John 16:13). This parallels exactly what Jesus had said of himself in John 8:28, where Jesus had said, "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me." As Jesus spoke not from his own initiative but spoke what the Father directed him to speak, so the Spirit in his coming will not speak on his own initiative but speak as the Son directs him. The Spirit will glorify Christ! (John 16:14). As the overarching mission and goal of his life, the Spirit

will advance the message and mission of Christ. And following Pentecost as the Spirit indwells all who place their trust and hope in Christ, the Spirit will likewise work in them so that from the inward recesses of their lives they will long more and more, as they grow in Christlikeness, to live and proclaim that Jesus is Lord (1 Cor 12:3). As the Son brought honor to the Father in all he said and did, so the Spirit will bring honor to the Son in all he says and does. The Trinitarian *taxis*, then, is shown clearly in the relations among the persons of the Godhead, and their respective roles surely do give expression to the inviolability and eternal reality of this *taxis*.

Commenting on Galatians 4:4-6 (quoted above), Robert Letham asserts:

Here lies the basic premise of all God's actions—*from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit....* These words of Paul, and this order which is so evident in the Fathers, encapsulates the whole of redemptive history. Not only is our salvation a work of God, not only is it Trinitarian through and through, but it is initiated by the Father, accomplished by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit.⁷

Yes, this overarching formula, “From the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit,” does capture well the Scripture’s own depiction of these Trinitarian relations and roles. The Father is the initiator and architect of all that happens in creation and re-creation—redemption and its consummation (Eph 1:9-11). The Son, as the beauty and radiance of his Father’s glory (John 1:14; Heb 1:3), carries out precisely and fully what the Father has willed, all to the ultimate praise and honor of the Father (John 17:4). The Spirit assists the Son in this work, empowering him during his earthly ministry (Isa 11:2; 61:1-3; Luke 4:14-21; Acts 10:38) and advancing his message and mission through the application of the new covenant work of salvation and transformation that the Son has accom-

plished (Acts 1:8; 2 Cor 3:2-3).

The pattern and display of this *taxis* is uniform and everywhere present in the relations among the Trinitarian persons and in the work and activity they perform. And this pattern has been recognized through the history of the church. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, writes, “Every operation which extends from God to the creation ... has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.”⁸ John Calvin concurs, writing, that “it is not fitting to suppress the distinction that we observe to be expressed in Scripture”⁹ regarding the Trinitarian persons. As he continues:

To the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things, but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity. Indeed, although the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and the Spirit, since God could never exist apart from his wisdom and power, and we must not seek in eternity a *before* or an *after*, nevertheless the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit.¹⁰

To fail to see this is to miss just how the self-revelation of God depicts who God—as one and three—really is. Yet, to see this is to enter into something of the glory and wonder of God that affects our relationship with him and directs also our worship of this glorious Triune God.

We turn, then, to the question of what this uniform and eternal *taxis* among the Trinitarian persons tells us about worship of the Triune God. Just as our knowledge of God is enriched through this understanding, so also may our worship be broadened and deepened. Just how should the one God who is three be worshipped?

TAXIS IN THE TRINITY AND THE IMPACT FOR EXPRESSIONS OF WORSHIP

We consider here, then, the expression of the worship of the true God as we reflect on the specificity of the Trinitarian persons and worship. What is the role of the Father, Son, and Spirit, respectively in our personal and collective worship of the one God who is three? Or, what is the broad pattern of Christian worship in light of the *taxis* within the Trinity? And how should this instruct worship of the one God who is three that is truly biblical and Christian?

THE FATHER AND WORSHIP—THE ULTIMATE RECIPIENT OF ALL PRAISE AND GLORY

The Father has so willed that his Son, not himself, should be the direct object and central focus of Christian worship. But this does not mean that the Father is invisible or absent in the church's worship. It does mean, though, that the Father wills that the focused worship of his Son be the means by which he, most normally and centrally, be given then ultimate honor and glory. Put differently, the Father wills that his Son be granted the focused attention of the church's worship which necessarily redounds to the ultimate praise and glory of the Father himself. Consider some texts which help us see the Father in the place of ultimate praise—at times directly and with focused attention, but normally and most centrally as his Son, not himself, is the centerpiece of the worship offered by the people of God.

Ephesians 1:3-4

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, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world

Ephesians 5:20

Giving thanks always and for everything to God

the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

Philippians 2:9-11

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Hebrews 1:6

And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "And let all the angels of God worship Him."

Revelation 4:11

Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and because of Your will they existed, and were created.

Revelation 5:13-14

And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" And the four living creatures said, "Amen!" and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Clearly there are times when Scripture depicts direct praise, or thanks, or worship as given to the Father. We give thanks to the Father, and bless the Father for his bountiful gifts, and worship the Father as Creator. It is right to worship the Father directly, since the Father is the Giver of every good and perfect gift (Jas 1:17) and because he has designed all of the blessing we receive in this life and the life to come (Eph 1:3). But while this is clear, it also is clear that the normal and central object of the church's worship is to be the Son such that the Father receives ultimate praise. Philippians 2:11 is perhaps the single best expression of

this reality. The crucified and risen Christ is now exalted and given a name above all names so that at the name of Jesus, every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus is Lord. But notice that there is not a period after this. Rather, all declare that Jesus is Lord, “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:11). Direct worship of Christ redounds ultimately, even if indirectly, to the honor and glory of the Father.

Now, why should this be? The answer is clear when we consider the *taxis* expressed in the Father-Son relationship we observed earlier. As Jesus himself declared, he did not come of his own will and initiative but because of the will and initiative of the Father (John 6:38; 8:42). Jesus sought in all that he did to accomplish the work of his father (John 4:34). Even at the very end, when longing in his humanity to avoid the pain and agony of the cross, he yields not to his own will but to the will of his Father (Matt 26:39). The picture we see, then, is this: All that Jesus did and said, all of the work that he accomplished, all of that for which he is honored and thanked and praised—all of this is owing to the plan and design and will and purpose of the Father. Literally *all* that Jesus did fulfilled what the Father had designed and what the Father sent him to do. In light of this, doesn't it stand to reason that as Jesus is honored for giving his life, for bearing our sin, for taking the punishment we deserve, that since in all these ways and more he fulfilled exactly and fully what the Father sent him to do—doesn't it stand to reason, then, that through the honor given to the Son the Father would rightly, then, receive the final and ultimate praise? The connection here is so strong that we might say it this way: all worship of Christ must necessarily also be worship of the Father. Just as when you admire a painting you necessarily admire the artist who conceived and crafted the very work for which you now show appreciation, so also all honor of the Son necessarily bestows honor upon the Father who designed and accomplished all of the work he did in and through the work of his Son. Yes, the

worship of the Father is at times the direct focus of the worship of God's people. But more often, and most centrally, the Father's principal place in the worship of the church, then, is as the ultimate recipient of her worship through and not apart from the honor and worship of his Son whom he sent to fulfill all that he said and did.

THE SON AND WORSHIP—THE DIRECT OBJECT OF THE CHURCH'S OBEDIENCE AND WORSHIP

John 9:38-39

He said, “Lord, I believe,” and he worshiped him. Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.”

John 20:28-29

Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Hebrews 1:6

And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, “Let all God's angels worship him.”

Philippians 3:3

For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

Revelation 5:9

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.”

What we saw above is only confirmed by other texts which show the central place of Christ in the worship of the church. John 20:28-29 is particularly instructive here. When Thomas now sees

Christ as the crucified and risen Messiah, he is led to worship him directly with his exclamation, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). In response to this direct expression of worship of the Son, Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for worshipping him, nor does he instruct Thomas that his worship would better be directed at the Father. Rather, Jesus not only accepts this worship as good and right but he also encourages Thomas in considering how good it will be when others likewise worship this Christ as Thomas has, though they will not be able to see before their own eyes what Thomas was given the privilege to see.

Furthermore, when we see the Father commanding the worship of the Son (Heb 1:6) and the Spirit empowering worship of the Son (Phil 3:3), we realize that Christ really is meant to be the central focus and direct object of the church’s worship as the other Trinitarian members would have it. After all, the church comprises the followers of Jesus, those whose new identities are as “in Christ” people, and those are saved and renewed through the work of the Lamb slain (Rev 5:9). The church’s central call in worship is to honor this Son. Of course, any honor of the Son must redound to the glory of the Father (as seen above), and any honor of the Son can only rightly take place through the power of the Spirit (see below). But that Christ is central to Christian worship is clear, even when this worship gives indirect acknowledgement to Father and Spirit also as with the Son, worthy of inclusion in this worship.

**THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WORSHIP—
THE EMPOWERING AGENT AND
JOINT OBJECT OF THE CHURCH’S
WORSHIP ALONG WITH THE FATHER
AND THE SON**

John 16:14

He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.

1 Corinthians 12:3

Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 3:3

For we are the real circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Worship as it relates to the Spirit should be understood in two primary ways. First, the Spirit has come to glorify the Son (John 16:14), and he does this, in part, by empowering the worship of the Son. When Paul writes in Philippians 3:3 that new covenant believers “worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus,” I do not think that he means that sometimes when the church gathers it worships in the Spirit, whereas on other occasions, instead, it glories in Christ Jesus. Rather, he puts forward these two phrases as two ways of describing the *one* worship of God’s people. To worship in the Spirit of God *is* to glory in Christ Jesus, and *vice versa*. Since the Spirit longs to see Christ put forward, his work admired, and his Lordship embraced, the Spirit will always work in the lives of individuals and communities of believers to elevate in their minds and hearts the glory of Christ. As Boris Bobrinskoy writes, “the proper function of the third person is to be the very ability of praise and adoration. It is the Holy Spirit who instills in us the desire for God, who tears us away from our earthly moorings, and turns us toward the Lord Jesus, and through Him, shows us the Father.”¹¹ Where the Spirit is present, “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor 12:3) will be the expression and exclamation of those in whom

he dwells. And when Jesus is worshiped, the Father will necessarily be the ultimate recipient of such praise and adoration.

Second, since the Spirit is fully God, he is infinitely worthy of worship along with the Father and the Son. The early church recognized this, so when the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) was expanded at Constantinople (A.D. 381), the third article of the Creed was written to include this affirmation, that the Spirit, “with the Father and the Son is worshiped together and glorified together.”¹² Interestingly, we do not find instances in Scripture of direct worship of the Spirit apart from the Father and the Son. That is, whereas we do see instances of the direct worship of the Father alone, or of the Son alone, no such examples of worship of the Spirit alone seem to be evident. And of course, this makes good sense since the Spirit’s primary role is to uphold the glory of the Son, to the ultimate honor of the Father. But, there are instances when we see the Spirit “with the Father and the Son” worshiped and honored. The baptismal formula given by Christ in Matthew 28:19 indicates that baptism should be conducted in the “name” (singular) of the true and living God. But who is this one God who has one name? He is none other than the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. The three-fold name of God indicates that the true God is God only as he is all three together. Hence, worship of this one God can rightly be worship together of the three persons of the Godhead. Another hint of the Spirit’s presence in the worship of the Father and the Son comes in Revelation 5:13-14 where the Son, the Lamb slain, is worshiped as he stands adjacent to the Father who sits on his throne. Father and Son together are worshiped here such that we see the *taxis* of Father and Son as indicated by the Father sitting on the throne and the Son next to him. But there is also reason to think of the Spirit is present also in this scene, since the Lamb was earlier described as having the “seven Spirits of God” (i.e., the perfect, holy Spirit) upon him (Rev 5:6). So, it appears that as the Lamb stands with his Father, he continues

to have the Spirit upon him as he did during his earthly life and ministry. It is, then, the Spirit-anointed Son and his Father who are worshiped together; hence, Father, Son, and Spirit together are the object of the exaltation and worship, here, of every created thing in heaven and earth.

CONCLUSION

Robert Letham writes well of these distinctive Trinitarian roles and implications for the church’s worship. He comments that Christian prayer and worship is “by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father,”¹³ and then continues saying:

It is the Holy Spirit who creates a desire to pray and worship God. It is he who brings us to faith and sustains us in a life of faithful obedience. In turn, our access to the Father is exclusively through his Son, Jesus Christ. No one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6). Now that he has offered the one perfect sacrifice for sins for all time, we have access to the holy place, the presence of God (Heb. 10:19-20), and so can approach with confidence the throne of grace, knowing that our great high priest is there to intercede for us, he who has experienced to the full the struggles of human life in a fallen world and so can sympathize with us in our weaknesses (Heb. 4:14ff).¹⁴

A bit later, Letham clarifies even further the relation of the *taxis* among the Trinitarian persons and the importance of this to Christian worship. He writes:

It is often said that the only distinction of the persons is the ineffable eternal generation and procession. This is not so. Only the Son became incarnate, not the Father or the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, not the Son or the Father. Only the Father, not the Holy Spirit, sent the Son. As we argued before, these economic activities point back to immanent relations.... The Bible indicates that the Father

determined that his kingdom would be established and advanced principally by the Son. In this sense, it is the Son who occupies center stage. This is entirely in accord with the purpose of the Father.... Again, the Holy Spirit works anonymously in the background, not speaking of himself or bringing glory to himself, but testifying of Christ, the Son. He hears the Son and witnesses of him.... Thus, there are good reasons (both economic and ontological) for worshiping in one act of adoration the three in their distinct persons and relations with one another. A living relationship with God requires that each of the persons be honored and adored in the context of their revealed relations with each other.¹⁵

Exactly! True Christian worship requires that each of the persons be honored and adored in the context of their revealed relations with each other. That is, *taxis* matters, and it matters to Christian worship. Ephesians 2:18, perhaps as well as any text, summarizes the Trinitarian *taxis* and its implications for worship: “For through him [Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.” The ultimacy of the Father in worship is required since all that occurs in creation, fall, and re-creation is the outworking of his plan and purposes. But the Son is central in worship, the rightful direct object of the church’s worship, as he comes to earth in obedience to the Father and fulfills in every word, thought, and action the full will and purpose of the Father. The Spirit functions in Christian worship primarily as the empowering presence of God, to focus attention on and inspire affection for the Son, to the ultimate glory of the Father (Phil 2:11). While there also is rightful Trinitarian worship in which all three are considered together as the three equal persons of the one undivided Godhead, yet the prominent note sounded in the worship of the church is *the honor of the Son, for the glory of his person and work, in the power of the Spirit, who comes most specifically to glorify this very Son, the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, to the ultimate*

praise and glory of the Father, the master architect and instigator of all God’s works of creation and redemption. And only when worship takes place cognizant of the richness of Trinitarian distinctiveness along with the uniformity of divine character that permeates fully each of the persons, do we worship God as he truly is. Thomas Torrance writes:

Worship is primarily the act of God upon us and arises in us as an echo of his own transcendent Nature which we offer back to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit, and takes place as in the Spirit we are given to share through Christ in the inter-personal Communion of love and self-giving in the Life of God.¹⁶

Other aspects of the expression of Christian worship are also crucial to a full understanding and practice of worship, as God intends it. But one of the most important aspects of the church’s worship is her recognition of the distinctiveness, as well as the unity, of the persons of the Godhead. Only as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do we know the one God, and only as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the work of the one God, from creation onward, accomplished. Therefore, to worship the one God rightly we must worship the one also as three. Praise and glory be to the one true and living God, the Father who designed our salvation in his Son, the Son who accomplished the full saving work of his Father, and the Spirit who mediates the presence and work of Jesus to our lives, by faith. To this one Triune God alone be all the glory forever.

ENDNOTES

¹This is why I requested that the subtitle of my book on the Trinity be what it is: Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

²By “role” I have in mind what theologians have sometimes referred to as the “appropriations” or “operations” of the Trinitarian persons. But the term “role” is simpler and gets to the heart of part of what distin-

guishes the three divine persons from each other.

³Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: the Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002); and *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

⁵Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁶On October 9, 2008 at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, Wayne Grudem and I debated Tom McCall and Keith Yandell on the question, "Do relations of authority and submission exist eternally among the persons of the Godhead?" Grudem and I argued for the affirmative, while McCall and Yandell argued for the negative. One may access the audio and/or video of the debate at: <http://www.henrycenter.org/media/view-all/>.

⁷Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 413.

⁸Gregory of Nyssa, *To Ablabius, on "Not Three Gods,"* in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, 5:334.

⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (ed. John T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 142; 1.13.18.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 142-43; 1.13;18 (italics in original).

¹¹Boris Bobrinskoy, *The Mystery of the Trinity* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 159.

¹²Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian church*, (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 25-26.

¹³Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 414.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 414-15.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 418-19.

¹⁶Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 135.