

The Neglected Trinity – a Challenge for Preachers.

Abstract: Much contemporary evangelical preaching seems to give little attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. This omission seriously impacts preaching within the church's worship and mission. This paper analyses this problem, examines the Trinity in Scripture, briefly traces the history of its doctrine and identifies some key terms. Using a *Trinitarian Model of Worship*, devised by James B. Torrance (*Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, Downers Grove:IVP, 1996), it will highlight several issues that concern both the practice and content of preaching today.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, returning from missionary service in India, observed that when the average Christian in Britain hears the name of God, he or she does not think of the Trinity and much worship in the West is in practice, if not in theory, unitarian (Torrance, 1996, 20). This is likely true of the USA too.

Within that large part of the evangelical church that is non-liturgical, (meaning that it does not use historic patterns of worship), and non-creedal (nor regularly reciting creeds), mention of the Trinity appears increasingly rare. Spared even having to mark Trinity Sunday, much worship operates with Jesus-only language, seldom making reference to the Father and the Holy Spirit as part of the triune God-head. Christology has been sundered from the doctrine of the Trinity. Such impoverished language and thinking has led to a serious lack of trinitarian practice in worship. Jesus is not depended upon as the Mediator and Intercessor with the Father by the Spirit, and the Holy Spirit has become the "missing Person" of the Trinity. "I fear the subtle replacement of the mystery of the Trinity with the pastor's personality in initiating worship...almost as if the priest invites us into his living room instead of God welcoming us in his presence" (Dawn, 1995, p.78).

William Hendricks interviewing people who had left the church found two common themes emerged. First, when people leave the church, they are not trying to leave God. Second, they spoke of their deep disappointment because "people in church weren't religious enough and they couldn't find a sense of true communion" (1993, p.250). Pointedly, people did not encounter God in church. Worship, including the preaching, was all too human in its content and direction. A Barna poll asked regular church attenders how often church worship services brought them into God's presence: 27% said "always," 12% "usually," 34% "never" and 27% "rarely" (Morgenthaler, 1995, p.24).

Many reasons may be cited for disappointing worship, particularly in today's complicated relationships between church and culture (see Plantinga 2003, Troeger 2003, Fitch 2005). However, preachers because of their teaching/leadership role are inevitably implicated when worship becomes too humanly oriented, and I believe that their neglect of the Trinity is a major factor seriously impairing worship. Yet, ironically, while many

evangelical preachers (unwittingly) minimize the Trinity, its doctrine has undergone dramatic renaissance through the twentieth century. Theological giants like Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jurgen Moltmann set about reinvigorating the classic doctrine with a ferment of writing that continues until the present. Roger Olson and Christopher Hall claim that three of the finest contributions were published during 1985-1991 by Leonardo Boff, Catherine Mowry LaCugna and John Zizioulas. To this fresh thinking many evangelicals have responded thoughtfully and enthusiastically. The brief bibliography includes several applications of trinitarian theology focused on worship (Tod E. Bolsinger, James B. Torrance, Marva Dawn, Kevin Navarro and Jonathan R. Wilson). Kurt Anderson (Phillips, p.185) further claims that the doctrine of the Trinity is the prime evangelical doctrine that will enable a genuine convergence of Reformed, Free, Catholic and Orthodox believers.

Factors contributing to the Trinity's neglect

Several factors contribute to the Trinity's neglect among evangelical preachers. First, and obvious for expository biblical preachers, is the apparent paucity of specific Scripture references to the doctrine. How can so few direct passages sustain what is meant to be a mainstream issue? Even lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday give few direct Scriptures.

Second, the doctrine of the Trinity seems especially dry and obtuse. Frankly, for many pastors it evokes memories of seminary learning about ancient church councils, combating various heresies, and using complex theological terms. How can such abstract theory be inspirational? Speaking of the Trinity seems doomed to a frustrated "So what?" from the congregation.

Third, much worship (including preaching) by its human orientation has inhibited trinitarian theology. Newbigin observed that western worship has become in practice unitarian. It fails to register participation in God's grace from the Father, through the Son by the Spirit, and returning by the Holy Spirit through the Son, to the Father. Such worship:

has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit....we sit in the pew watching the minister "doing his thing" exhorting us "to do our thing" until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week" (Torrance, 1996, p.20).

Much contemporary preaching appears to concentrate on individual needs, giving good advice instead of Good News, in the hopes that its relevancy will draw people into church. "Evangelical preaching is so obsessed with the need to apply everything that we are shifting into just another moral religion" (Navarro, 2005, p.144). Inevitably, such utilitarian preaching focuses more on benefits for believers than on disclosure and worship of our great Triune God – what Marva Dawn calls "a royal 'waste' of time" (1999). Too often style seems to triumph over substance and self-help messages over God-focused trinitarian worship.

To each of these factors preachers need to give careful attention, and the sections below raise some key issues.

1. The Trinity in Scripture

While the word “Trinity” is not found in Scripture and explicit references are few, preachers need to respond seriously to the weight of trinitarian doctrine that is implicitly woven throughout the texture of both Old and New Testaments. The Trinity is a vital common denominator, flowing through Scripture’s DNA and expressing the big picture of God.

The Trinity is expressed more fully in the New Testament, arising out of its post-resurrection conviction that the one and only God of the Old Testament had encountered them in Jesus Christ. The historical Jesus is confessed as divine in the earliest confessions, as in John 20:28, “My Lord and my God,” where the Greek translation of the Hebrew “Yahweh” is applied to Jesus. Further, the apostles experienced the person of the Holy Spirit (“another Advocate” John 14:16), as the church burst into life at Pentecost (Acts 1:8, 2:1-4, 32, 33).

The gospels record an intimate connection between God’s three persons in the ministry of Jesus. See especially the annunciation (Luke 1:35) and baptism (Luke 3:21-22). Jesus spoke about his unique relationship with the Father (Luke 10:22, John 5:18-23) and with the Spirit (Matt 12:28). John’s gospel underlines the unity of Father and Son (10:29, 30; 14: 9, 10) and Jesus’ sending of Spirit (16:7-15). Matthew 28:19 offers the clearest Trinitarian statement with each name preceded by the article, emphasizing both singularity and plurality – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

New Testament writers directly applied Old Testament passages to Jesus, such as Philippians 2:9-11 (Isaiah 45:23) and Romans 10:11 (Isaiah 28:16). Within the epistles there are occasional explicit references, such as the benediction of 2. Cor.13:14. Father and Son are used with differentiation as in Col 1:19, 1 John 1:3. Importantly, there are longer passages about the work of Trinity especially in salvation. See Romans 8:3-4, 15-17; 1 Corinthians 1:4-7, 2:4-5; 6:11, 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 1: 21-22. Galatians 4:4-6; Eph 1:13-14, 3:16-19, 4:4-7; 1 Thessalonians 1:2-6, 2 Thessalonians 2:13. See also other epistles: I Peter 1:2 and Jude 20-21. Trinitarian implications are to be found everywhere.

Provocative pluralities are also found in the Old Testament, in spite of its rigorous monotheism (Exodus 20:2-7, Deut. 6:4). Particularly significant is Genesis 1:26, 27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’ So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God, he created them; male and female he created them.” Humanity’s creation as male and female somehow reflects God’s personal intercommunion, as unity within plurality. Plural language (Gen 3:22; 11:7) is intriguingly personalized, for example, in the role of the Spirit (Gen: 1:2), the angel of the Lord (Genesis 16:7-14; 22:11, Exodus 3:2-6; Judges 13:2-22), the three visitors (Gen. 18:1-9), and Wisdom (Proverbs 8).

Undeniably, the God of Scripture is triune and Christian faith is trinitarian. Preaching must therefore reflect God’s self-revelation as One God, Three Persons - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Interestingly, while some contemporary worship may “dumb down” doctrinal content in order to attract seekers, there is continuing evidence that unchurched

people actually want serious biblical treatment of doctrine. Barna and Gallup surveys show that seekers' first priority concerns a church's specific beliefs and doctrines (Morgenthaler, 1995, p.18).

Preaching the Trinity in Scripture has several aspects. First, preachers should preach conscientiously and vividly on the (few) specific Trinity texts, so that congregations are confronted by the reality of God's three-in-oneness. For preachers who follow the lectionary, Trinity Sunday provides a strategic annual occasion for emphasizing this doctrine. However, in non-lectionary worship traditions, preachers should also plan for an equivalent opportunity to ensure that the mystery and wonder of God's triunity is expressly taught and worshiped.

Second, biblical narratives that involve the Trinity (such as Luke 1:35, 3: 21-22) and doctrinal teaching that integrates aspects of God's triune action, (such as Romans 8), should be preached to emphasize God's triune nature whenever possible. Trinitarian structures to texts should be drawn out intentionally so that hearers recognize the importance of relationships between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Wilson comments, for example, how preaching on the well-known text John 3:16 properly requires that hearers understand that

the God of this verse is the "Father"... the "Son" is also God – incarnate. And the New Testament teaches us that belief in the Son is the work of the Spirit.....working for our salvation we have the Father, who sent the Son; the Son, who gives and is given for our forgiveness; and the Spirit who births us into the kingdom of forgiveness and life (Wilson, 2006, p.57).

The Trinity can be approached with contagious excitement. A sermon based on 2 Corinthians 1: 15-22 was titled: "God's 'Yes' and our 'Amen.'"

When Paul is accused of fickleness, of failing to make up his mind, he responds that he is not about a business that is yes/no, on/off, probably/not sure, could be/can't be. For Jesus Christ, is never yes/no, on/off, probably/not sure, could be/can't be, but always yes to every one of God's promises.

And when we talk of yes promises, these are not some pleasant spiritual thoughts that make us feel better in church. They are rock solid, life-changing realities of the new creation. They are rooted in the nature of who God is. "*God establishes us together in Christ*, (note this is a together event – not for individuals only), *and has anointed us by putting his seal on us and giving his Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.*" This is the work of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not yes/no, on/off, probably/not sure, could be/can't be. Here is the full weight of God's grace and guarantee. The rest of our lives together is saying and living out 'Amen' to the glory of God.

The sermon developed the work of God in three persons in the text, and the service ended in the Lord's Supper.

Third, the book of Hebrews particularly needs preaching today. James Torrance emphasizes its significance to John Calvin in his "exposition of worship, the Eucharist,

and the doctrine of the church as a corporate royal priesthood participating by grace in the sole priesthood of Christ” (p.59). Preachers need to continue interpreting Hebrews and its doctrine of Jesus Christ’s priesthood.

2. *The Trinity in church history*

While to some preachers the doctrine of the Trinity may seem obtuse, failure to understand its origins, models and terms can lead to simplistic thinking and faulty worship. Of course, preachers are not to be entangled by theological speculation at the expense of telling out the good news of Jesus. Yet even as the Reformers criticized their inheritance of scholastic metaphysical speculations about God’s inner life, they claimed the importance of the Trinity as formulated by the church fathers. Indeed, Martin Luther asserted that salvation depends on the doctrine of the Trinity (Olson, 2002, p.69). Preachers need theological awareness of the doctrine of the Trinity. First, because it seeks to do justice to complex *biblical* truths about who God is, without which he cannot be adequately proclaimed (1 Cor. 8:5-6). Second, its two models – the *Immanent Trinity* and the *Economic Trinity* have potent contemporary significance for preaching. Third, it emerged out of conflict with false teachings which remain ever present.

Formulating the doctrine of the Trinity out of Scripture was a complex and arduous theological process, wrestling with opponents such as the Arians who refused to acknowledge the full deity of Christ. It culminated in two great councils - Nicea 325 AD and Constantinople AD 381. These emphasized how the eternal relationship between Father and Son is essential to revelation and salvation, formulating that God is one in his essential being (*ousia*), but subsists eternally in three persons (*hypostases*) - Father, Son and Spirit. While we must be careful about understanding this language (for example, “persons” has changed its meaning with modern convictions about the autonomy of selfhood), “any rejection of this basic trinitarian insight and affirmation (which ... informed the Nicene Creed) necessarily amounts to an affirmation of some other belief about God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit” (Olson, 2002, p.3). These Nicene terms remain fundamental to belief about the God of Scripture.

However, approaches generally differed between theologians of the West and East. On one hand, the Western church tended to accentuate God’s *oneness* – the unity or monism of the Godhead. Significant thinkers include Tertullian (160-225) who first used the word “trinity,” and Augustine (354-440), who famously likened the Trinity to three aspects of the human mind: memory, the understanding and the will. Always demanding humility, he called for holy conduct to accompany theology about this profound mystery of God.

On the other hand, the Eastern Orthodox Church began with God’s plurality, his *threeness*, initially maintaining the full co-presence of two persons – Father and Jesus - and then later adding the person of the Holy Spirit. The Cappadocian Fathers were seminal thinkers, comprising Basil the Great (c 330-379) Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389) and Gregory of Nyssa (c330-395).

Two models emerged from these emphases on monism and plurality – the “immanent Trinity” and the “economic Trinity.” Inevitably the following brief descriptions

oversimplify a very complex process of development and relationship. Indeed, Karl Rahner is famous for his “rule”: “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.” Olson comments that this means both are inextricably related, with the immanent Trinity providing the “background” to the economic Trinity, and the economic Trinity providing the outworking of the immanent Trinity (p.98).

Immanent Trinity

Sometimes called the “ontological”, “psychological” or “individual” model, this describes who God is in his oneness, as triune being beyond the world. It focuses on the Godhead’s essential nature – who he is in unity and plurality, in all eternity apart from creation. Augustine, stressed the relationship of love within the inner dynamic of the Godhead, with a remarkable insight that the Holy Spirit is the love shared between the Father and the Son (1 John 4: 8, 16). The proceeding Spirit therefore forms the bond that unites Father and Son – the Spirit is mutual love (Grenz, 2001, p.5).

This model has important implications for preachers because it underscores God’s freedom and the graciousness of his salvation. God had no need to relate to the world for he is triunity, in his inner being, in all eternity. However, out of sheer grace, God chose to save the world. Here is “the beauty of love... whom did he love before there was a world? Himself – within the fellowship of three mutually loving persons. The Trinity thus becomes a model of creaturely love and fellowship” (Olson, p.4). “As God has loved us and accepted us freely and unconditionally in Christ, so we must love and accept one another freely and unconditionally in him” (Torrance, p.38).

Far from being an abstract doctrine, this model therefore helps us understand our true humanity. Because God is a plurality-in-unity, the pattern for humankind is not of solitary persons, but persons in relationship whose life-in-relationship is grounded in an ethic of love. Humankind made in God’s trinitarian image (Genesis 1:26-28) is not complete unless it lives in relationships – an emphasis especially significant in the face of western society’s current obsession with individuality. La Cugna writes of the Trinity as attesting that the ultimate source of reality is not a “by-itself” or an “in-itself” but a “towards another” (1991, p.14-5). What powerful implications this has for emphasizing the mutuality of relationships.

Economic Trinity

In Eastern theology this model expresses how God in three persons is revealed in relationship to creation – in the act of creation itself, and through the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost. By stressing the relationality and participation of the three persons it lay foundations for a social model of divine love, developed particularly by Richard of St. Victor (d.1173), that has become highly influential today (Olson, p.57). Indeed, sometimes the “economic Trinity” is equated with the “social Trinity” model. It has striking implications for preachers, especially regarding worship. Wilson suggests it “leads us to think of worship as something that happens not merely before God but within God’s own life. Worship is not merely something we present to God; it is our participation in the life of God, in the fellowship of the threeness of God”

(Wilson, p.61). This model encourages ideas of participating “in Christ” and “in the Spirit.” As we shall see shortly, it enables us to see that worship is not humans “doing their own thing” but humans sharing in God’s work.

Two terms used by this model remain significant – *perichoresis* and *appropriations*. Concerned to preserve both the unity of the one God and the individuality of the three persons, the patristic doctrine of *perichoresis* (developed further by John of Damascus in the eighth century), held that the persons of the Trinity do not belong as distinct from each other, but that they dwell inside each other (John 10:38, 14:8-11), mutually inhering, drawing life from one another. They are therefore only to be experienced because of their relationship to each other. Because of their mutuality, no divine person acts apart from the others. For example, in creation, the Father is Creator, but Jesus is involved (John 1:3) as is the Spirit (Psalm 104:30). Or, in Ephesians 1:3-14, the Father elects (verses 4, 5, 11), the Son redeems (verses 3,7,8) and the Holy Spirit seals the outcome (v 13,14).

Startlingly, echoing the concept of *perichoresis*, Luther boldly claimed “there is in the divine Trinity a pulpit...God’s triune being is an eternal conversation, and since the Holy Spirit tells us what he hears we are taken into this conversation.” Interestingly, the word “perichoretic” is more commonly used in recent evangelical literature describing worship (see Bolsinger, Torrance).

While asserting that no divine person acts apart from the others, the early church fathers also identified certain roles of the Trinity as *appropriations*. Basil the Great defined these: “The Father is the origin (first cause) of every divine work, the Son (the efficient cause) carries it out, and the Spirit (the perfecting cause) brings it to completion.” It is possible to place preaching itself in this trinitarian context: the Father speaks forth his Word in creation and revelation, the Son is the eternally spoken Word, and the Spirit causes the word to be heard and preached. Inevitably, preaching has been viewed as an appropriation of the Holy Spirit - making known God in Christ by power (1 Thessalonians 1:5). As we shall see shortly, Torrance applies this Trinitarian model to worship in ways that powerfully affect preaching.

In the complex process of defining the Trinity, trying to hold a balance between God’s unity and plurality, problems arose whenever one or the other option was stressed. At one extreme, an emphasis on God’s unity at the expense of plurality led to “modalism.” Sometimes called Sabellianism, (after a third century thinker Sabellius), it treated Father, Son and Spirit as modes or successive appearances of a single God. At the other extreme “tritheism” understood trinity as three separate gods, each with different responsibilities. Arianism (after Arius A.D. 256-336), for example, taught that the Father is fully God, the Son has status of leading creature though less than fully God, and the Spirit is inferior to the Son. Extreme though these options are, preachers should continue to be wary of any casual or trite summations of the Trinity that can unsuspectingly repeat them. Analogies are especially prone to heresy. For example, simplistic illustrations such as “water, ice and steam” immediately falls into repeating modalism.

Theologians through the last century raised many other issues relating to the Trinity. Process theology has questioned the apparent static nature of God's being and persons as classically expressed. Others have criticized the exclusive use of male gender, preferring "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer." However, the traditional language should not be understood to denote that God is male or analogous to earthly fathers, but rather be seen to personalize the God of Scripture, through the particularity of Jesus the Son who enables us to become brothers and sisters. (This gender issue is helpfully discussed in Torrance, Chapter 4).

Preachers have theological responsibility (together with all who lead worship) to ensure that the doctrine of the Trinity shapes the worship, ministry and practices of the church. Bruce Ware lists ten reasons to focus on the wonder of the Trinity including: first, it "is one of the most important distinguishing doctrines of the Christian faith"; second, it is "both central and necessary for the Christian faith...remove the Trinity and the whole Christian faith disintegrates"; third, "worship of the true and living God consciously acknowledges the relationship and roles of Father, Son and Holy Spirit" (2005, p.15). God's dynamic triune nature shapes humanity's creation, and its recreation in the body of Christ by trinity life. God, three-in-one, enables us by Christ through the Holy Spirit to share his worship and mission. Trinitarian doctrine and Christological doctrine cannot be separated. Preachers need to think in trinitarian ways as they preach.

In his sermon collection *Theology Through Preaching*, Colin Gunton took a set of lectionary readings for Trinity Sunday: Leviticus 16:1-10, Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 10:13-16, and Eph. 2:18. He focused on the last (though referring to the other texts): "Through him (Christ) both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." Claiming that the doctrine of the Trinity has concrete and practical implications, he identifies two directions in which the Trinity speaks - *about* God and *from* God. About God it makes personal claims:

Personal access – access to people, in which we give and receive to and from one another – is the centre of what it is to be human in community. And the doctrine of the Trinity is not about abstract theological theory, but the primacy of the personal. That God is Father, Son and Spirit says that in his innermost being, from and to eternity, God is personal: he is what he is by virtue of what the persons are in their relations to one another...Access to God, the creator of all there is, is not by obeying some law, or by absolute submission to power, or by anything that makes us less than personal. Access to God is through the person of his Son, realized by his Spirit.

It is also important is to speak *from* God.

There is a desperate need in our world for personal values...that doesn't come simply from talking about it. The key lies rather in shaping patterns of human community...that is to say, in developing what can be called Trinity-shaped communities. This is the church's calling. Our life in the church is shaped by this relationship as week by week we stand under the word and around the table of the Lord (2001, p.59).

Preachers have also found value in preaching through the “Apostles’ Creed,” (which takes a trinitarian structure). See, for example, *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed* (ed. Van Harn, 2004).

3. *The Trinity and worship*

This paper opened with a serious charge that much current worship is human in orientation partly because of its neglect of the Trinity. In his worship analysis, James B. Torrance sharply contrasts what he terms unitarian and trinitarian models of worship (adapted and simplified below). Of course, orthodox preachers outrightly reject the formal teaching of Unitarianism that views God as one person only, and denies the divinity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. However, they can unintentionally practice forms of worship and preaching that appear closed to the continuing work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

First, Torrance describes much evangelical experience by the “Existential, Experience Model.”

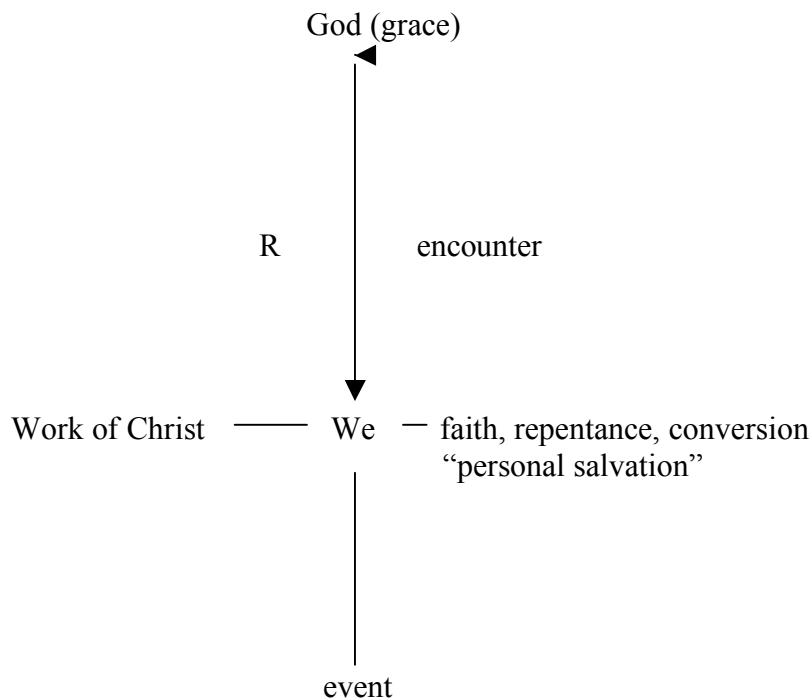


Figure 1. The Experience Model (evangelical experience) adapted from Torrance, (p.27). (Permission for copying is being sought).

Here God’s grace is understood as a transaction between “God and me.” God is encountered in a personal crisis of decision because of Jesus Christ’s work on the cross.

According to this model, we are accepted by God as forgiven, as his children today, because of the death of Jesus on the cross...the event of the cross, through the event of preaching (the kerygma) gives rise to the event of faith (p.27).

Yet, he warns that by stressing what Jesus did on the cross the focus can be so strong on his *work* that it minimizes his *person*, making us more interested in our experience of

blessing than in Jesus Christ himself. Human response is reduced to: “Thank you Lord for saving me.” Indeed, at worst, Jesus is regarded as the “way in” to a relationship with God rather than the person through whom we continue to draw near to God our Father in the communion of the Spirit. In this model the persons of the Trinity can recede in importance because Jesus’ role as mediator (Heb 2:10) is diminished. This model operates by single movement as God reaches down in Christ. A descending arrow describes the God-humanward movement in Christ focused upon his work on the cross, but “the human-Godward movement is still ours! It emphasizes *our* faith, *our* decision, and *our* response in an event theology which short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ” (p. 29). It also reduces the Holy Spirit’s role, as well as the significance of baptism and communion.

Not only is such a model likely to be highly individualistic but it flirts dangerously with the notion that faith is a “contract” with God. Once a person has responded to Christ’s work on the cross, the subsequent demands of Christian living are to be met solely by human discipline and energy - “practical unitarianism.”

In contrast his Trinitarian, Incarnational Model stresses a double-movement relationship.

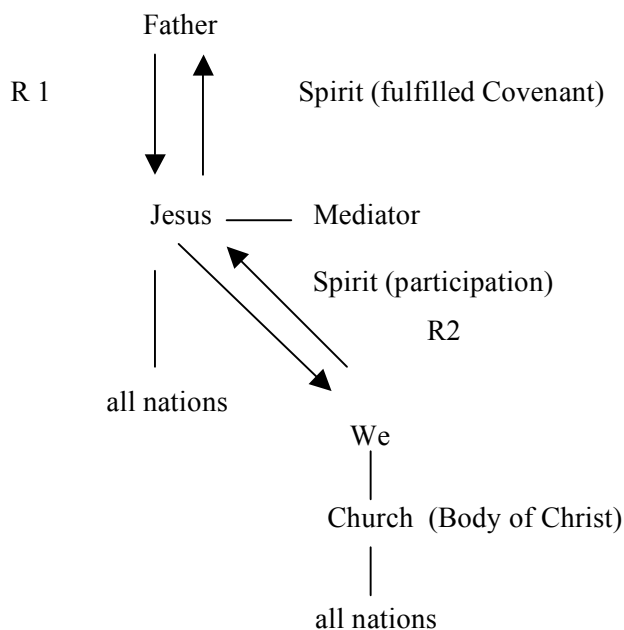


Figure 2 The Trinitarian, Incarnational Model, adapted from Torrance, (p.30). (Permission for copying is being sought).

The second model speaks of experiencing God as Trinity – the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father (Hebrew 10:10-14). At its center is not *our* faith or decision-making but the dynamic double movement:

- (a) a God-humanward movement, from (*ek*) the Father, through (*dia*) the Son, in (*en*) the Spirit and (b) a human-Godward movement to the Father through the Son in the Spirit (p.32).

Employing terms previously encountered, Torrance describes how this double movement of grace:

which is the heart of the ‘dialogue’ between God and humanity in worship is grounded in the very perichoretic being of God, and is fundamental for our understanding of the triune God’s relationship with the world in creation, incarnation and sanctification. What God is toward us in these relationships, he is in his innermost being (p.32).

This model has huge implications for preachers. Elsewhere I have argued that such trinitarian theology places the act of preaching within the double movement of God’s grace (see Quicke, 2003). Preachers are called and gifted to participate in fellowship with the empowering Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all involved in the act of preaching so that God’s word returns to him with fulfillment (Isaiah 55:11). As practical trinitarians, preachers therefore approach the text open to the Spirit, immersed into God’s revealed word, to preach under the Son’s authority and by the Holy Spirit’s power.

Important though these trinitarian dynamics are for preaching, the larger issue raised by the doctrine of the Trinity concerns the nature of *preaching as worship*. Whenever trinitarian theology is neglected, preaching and worship can be downgraded into separate activities. Indeed, a troubling gap seems to have opened up between preaching and worship in the Sunday worship of many larger evangelical churches. Partly, this separation is caused by practical reasons, as preachers and worship leaders perceive their different roles, but the more significant underlying reason is a theological one.

The division of labor between preachers and worship leaders has generated two sets of specialists, who may regard each other with attitudes ranging from warm cooperation to competitiveness and cold hostility. Negatively, preachers can view worship leaders as only responsible for preliminaries to the main event of the sermon, and worship leaders can consider preachers as overrated and far less effective for creating and sustaining overall congregational life. As preachers choose text and theme for their weekly sermons and then worship leaders plan the “worship,” their responsibilities appear to lie in different worlds. Sadly, much worship literature perpetuates this separation by making minimal reference to preaching as worship. For example, Gregory Dix’s classic *The Shape of the Liturgy* gives 2 out of 764 pages to the role of the sermon (Russell, p.28). As a result the sermon can be regarded as “a kind of homiletical ocean liner preceded by a few liturgical tugboats” (p.14). Or, I suspect from some worship leaders’ viewpoint, the sermon is seen as a kind of tugboat preceded by a fleet of liners!

Damaging though these divided roles can be, it is the lack of trinitarian understanding about God’s double-movement of grace in worship, centered upon Christ’s mediation and

the gift of participation by the Holy Spirit, that has prevented both from seeing that they are about the same task. Rather than worship leaders and preachers “doing their own thing,” (to quote Torrance), *both* belong vitally within the dynamic of God’s gracious enabling. Preaching is not different in kind from other parts of worship, as though it operates by different rules for different purposes. Preaching is an act of worship just as much as any other part. In worship’s divine-human dialogue, “grounded in the very perichoretic being of God,” preaching has a critical role. “For it is both an act of God in which the hearers are confronted with the Gospel and also an act of man in which the preacher offers his confession of faith to God” (Rust, 1982, p.107). With hymns, songs, prayers, offertory, and communion, preaching is worship offered back to God in fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop adequately the many implications of this fuller Trinitarian perspective but, at the very least, we should note five significant issues.

1) *Worship is gift*. Gift (see Welton Gaddy, 1992) is an appropriate analogy for worship’s double movement – God’s first giving to us in Jesus Christ and our self-offering in response. God is both the Subject of worship, for God revealed in Jesus Christ is everything to us as Creator, Provider, Sustainer and much more. But he is also Object of worship because worship means offerings and sacrifice. So, out of our experience of God, “the gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence” (Dawn, p.80). In preaching, God is Subject of the proclaimed word given to hearers, yet also Object as they make their responses - a returning *gift* to God.

This calls for “worshipful preaching.” In his book of that title, Gerard Sloyan claims that “our preaching is one of the several prayerful things we do in the context of worship....for our speech about God is God’s speech to us” (1984, p.12). Among the practical consequences, preachers are not to “upstage” Scripture, to work humbly, to ensure sermons belong within the totality of services, and to beware “the hazard of fluency” that makes preachers speak too long! (Sloyan, 1984, p.12-20). Preachers should come before the triune God in a posture of awe. “Before this mystery, all of our words fall short of God’s glory....all our thinking about God ends in worship of God – in doxology (Rom. 11:33-36), (Wilson, 2006, p.63). Thomas Long’s first characteristic of those vital congregations that he describes as having moved beyond worship wars, is that they make room “for the experience of mystery”(2003, p.20).

William Willimon warns that in a culture that admires media moguls, “pastors unconsciously take on the mannerisms and style of the television preacher, particularly in their leadership of public worship. The pastor as performer, as grinning personality, supersedes the roles of pastor as teacher, priest, and leader of the congregation” (2004, p.58). Former preachers sometimes spoke of the need for a “presidential style” of worship leading, when a leader’s dignity (arising out of humility) allowed others to worship with awe. Reverential gratitude remains appropriate for leading worship as God’s gift.

2) *Worship is participation.* The “social Trinity” model with its “community” of God’s one-in-three persons encourages participatory worship. “The sermon is not just the gift of the preacher, nor are choral gifts simply the contribution of the choir, but both involve the offering of themselves by all the members of the congregation.” (Dawn, p.82). Too often preaching is regarded as a solo act before listeners, but preaching as worship should involve everyone present, as God the Trinity enables preacher and listeners to be co-workers in hearing, speaking and living the Word. “The members of the congregation share in the act of preaching just as they share in the central act of the Eucharist. Both acts are acts of the body corporate (Coggan, p.20, 21).

This involves both the planning of worship as well as its faith-experience (see section 4). Planning requires intentional collaboration between all those who lead worship and the rest of the worshippers. Preachers are not only charged with choosing texts and themes but with engaging in planning worship around the word. Russell Mitman, for example, working in the lectionary context commends worship planning around Scripture. “Scripture has the innate capacity to shape, not only the sermon that is part of the worship event, but also the whole of the liturgical action itself” (p.ix). Believing that the “whole liturgical action itself becomes a proclamatory event,” that preaching cannot be separated from the rest of worship, he developed a structure for involving the community. As a parish pastor, he met weekly with a group of lay persons to study the texts to share in the interpretive task and then he planned a sequence of “acts throughout the whole worship event that aim, in their totality, at a *communal* enactment of the Word of God” (p.27). Several preachers have formalized working with small groups in the planning of their sermons (McClure 1995, Schlafer 1992), and Mitman calls for a process that shapes the whole worship event.

3) *Worship is structured.* Preaching and ritual have often been in tension: “it is noteworthy that the Churches which have exalted preaching have generally been indifferent to ritual; and that where ritual has been elaborated preaching has declined” (A.E. Garvie, 1920, p.5). However, preaching as worship belongs inextricably within worship structure, whether its “ritual” takes formal or informal patterns.

The classic worship sequence involves: gathering, the word, the meal and the dismissal (see, for example, Mitman, p.34). Removing any part inevitably sabotages the whole structure. Some argue for preaching’s primacy among these other parts. For example, John Killinger:

There is no substitute for preaching in worship. It provides the proclamatory thrust without the church is never formed and worship is never made possible. It complements the creedal, poetic nature of the liturgy and keeps before men the absolute contemporaneity of the Gospel, as of a Word made always present and personal to them under the pressure of their current life-situations....above all it provides better than anything else the necessary encounter between the lackadaisical worship and the intensity of Christ’s lordship (1969,p.51).

However, many preachers would be hesitant to make such a claim. For example, Halford Luccock, earlier in the twentieth century, “believed that preaching was under fire in the

modern world because too heavy a burden was placed upon it; it was never intended to do the whole work of making religion real...”

When it alone is used to build, the building sags. A sermon is like a brick: it fulfills its function only as it is placed in relationship, in a structure...It was never meant to do the whole work of making religion real. (Fant & Pinson, 1971, Vol 10. 8).

Unsurprisingly, a survey showed that a significant percentage of a worshiping community “perceived that other worship acts were just as helpful as the sermon, sometimes even more so” (Mitman, p.20). Preaching *does* have a vital role as worship, but it should be set within the richness of the total worship structure.

This is particularly evident in preaching’s relationship to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A trinitarian understanding of worship, as participating in God’s grace, heightens the connection. James Torrance argues

the triune God is in the business of creating community in such a way that we are never more truly human, never more truly persons, than when we find our true being-in-communion....Christ is the real agent in worship....our high priest, who by his vicarious atoning sacrifice for our sins, cleanses us and sanctifies us that he might lead us into the holy presence of the Father – this is how we must understand both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, through which we participate in what he has done for us, once and for all, and is continuing to do....(p.73,74).

Some evangelical preachers are arguing for renewed commitment to the Lord’s Supper. Indeed, Navarro laments that the Eucharist is being neglected because

the gospel is being hijacked by good advice. Quite honestly, I see no reason to come to the table if our message is fix your life by pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. ..I see no reason to give thanks to Jesus Christ for his work if the real message is that my dedication could be improved (p.150).

While Navarro shares the common “memorial” stance with other evangelicals, in their (infrequent) celebrations of communion, he confesses: “I do believe that something supernatural happens in every worship service, especially worship services where the Eucharist is observed” (p.151). Such awareness of God’s working in worship safeguards against practical unitarianism.

4. *Worship is community forming.* Closely connected with the foregoing, preaching as worship is intimately involved with forming congregational spirituality. Don Saliers reconnects spirituality with the practices of Christian worship because worship both forms and expresses the faith-experience of the community... At its best Christian worship presents a vision of life created, sustained, redeemed and held in the mystery of God. What we do together in acknowledging God ‘schools’ us in ways of seeing the world and of being in it (2).

The central act of “remembering” that lies at the heart of worship, especially in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, powerfully schools people in corporate formation. While much evangelical practice majors on spiritual formation for individuals, worship should express and form the corporate reality of being the body of Christ.

Much current worship literature addresses this role of worship in forming community. Tod Bolsover, for example, stresses the perichoretic nature of community by a practical outworking of Trinitarian theology in the local church (2004). Plantinga and Rozeboom apply the doctrine of perichoresis to working through “worship wars.” Emphasizing the bond of peace, as Jesus prays for his disciples to be one as he and his Father are one (John 17:20-22), they describe how *perichoresis* can involve giving hospitality – making room for others. “Perhaps we could say that hospitality thrives within the triune life of God and then spreads wonderfully to the creatures of God. The one who spreads it is a mediator, a person who ‘works in the middle’” (p.107). Because worship leaders have responsibility for leading such communities of love, they must learn to “speak hospitably” and to “encourage the congregation to be aware of the invisible cloud of witnesses that gathers with us in worship” (p.120).

Preachers share this God-enabled responsibility for community forming. Saliers especially expects preachers and worship leaders to confront present weaknesses in practice that include: preaching about sacraments, prayers of intercession, observance of the Christian year, and lack of eschatology (1996).

Positively, preachers have major responsibility for helping congregations live out God’s story.

Here is the essence of Christian worship. As members of a people whose storyline includes creation, sin, and grace, we commune with our creator and savior – with God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. *Worship is narrative engagement with the triune God* (Plantinga & Rozeboom, p.126).

“Living out God’s story” has become a popular way of describing how worshipers meet with God and engage in his purpose. Plantinga and Rozeboom identify the story’s three lenses as: covenant renewal, Christ-centeredness, and the span of history from creation to re-creation, with eschatological vision. Undeniably, preachers have a significant role in presenting God’s story in Scripture which means, for example, “preaching about sin needs to be done faithfully – that is, inside the cradle of grace” (p.161). As Plantinga summarizes: “a Christian church at worship is gathering strength to obey God’s gracious directions for covenant life” (p.163).

5. *Worship is missional.* A major current debate in worship literature concerns worship’s relationship with evangelism. Marva Dawn is right to argue that trinitarian worship is never utilitarian. Its primary purpose is not to win others to faith but to center on God. Her book title expresses it well: *A Royal “Waste” of Time – The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. Her key question is: “What does it mean to be Church for the sake of the world when we worship and during the rest of the week?” (Dawn, 1999, p.59). Yet, inevitably, the vitality and faithfulness of personal and corporate Christian life, and effectiveness of our outreach to world, depend on character that is formed in us by worship. As Morgenthaler challenges:

Our worship of God either affirms or contradicts our message about God. Unbelievers... will draw lasting conclusions about the veracity and uniqueness of our God based on what they see or do not see happening in our weekly church services (1995, p.9).

Because worship is the church royally “wasting time” while learning to be God’s community for the world, it lies at the heart of God’s mission. For preachers, this stretches horizons for their task far beyond offering sermons to hearers. Strikingly, P.T. Forsyth wrote

The one great preacher in history... is the church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the church to preach...he is to preach to the church from the gospel so that with the church he may preach the gospel to the world. He is so to preach to the church that he shall also preach *from* the church (Lischer, 2002, p.412).

Preaching is about transforming the church to transform the world. Ultimately, the whole purpose of God’s returning word is to create a worshipping people, whose community life resembles, “images”, God’s community life in Trinity.

While refining and adding to these five issues requires a much larger project ahead, they represent key challenges for preachers. The current context of confusion and tension over worship only adds urgency. Too often so-called “worship wars” are focusing on style, seeming to take decisions on market-driven principles, as culture pulls the levers. The contemporary penchant for individualized practical sermons will continue to impoverish the church’s sense of community. Failure to preach in trinitarian ways falsifies pictures of God, weakens understanding of salvation, and seriously damages the highest calling of the church in its worship. But, whenever preachers are grasped by the reality of the Trinity, they preach more deeply. With awe and gratitude before our triune God, participating in God’s own gracious enabling of worship and growing into his community, they live out with their congregations his gospel story for the sake of the world.

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