

# CELEBRATING ETERNITY: CHRISTIAN WORSHIP AS A FORETASTE OF PARTICIPATION IN THE TRIUNE GOD

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"The character of worship is always decided by the worshipper's conception of God and...relation to God: that is to say, whatever its ritual expression may be, it always has a theological basis."<sup>1</sup>—Evelyn Underhill<sup>1</sup>

"But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him." —John 4:23

"After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.'" —Revelation 7:9-12 (NRSV)

In the eyes of many contemporary theologians, the greatest contribution the twentieth century discussion has made to their discipline has been the renaissance of

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*Dr. Stanley J. Grenz, Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology at Carey Theological College and a frequent teacher at Regent College, died March 12, 2005. He was the author or co-author of twenty-five books and contributed articles to more than two dozen journals and magazines. The editorial board of the Asbury Theological Journal was deeply saddened by the news of Dr. Grenz's passing. His contribution to theological studies was note-worthy and will be missed. We offer our condolences to the family and friends of Dr. Grenz.*

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trinitarian theology. In the opinion of many contemporary practitioners, the greatest need of the church at the turn of the twenty-first century is for a thorough-going renewal of worship. Despite the continual clamor for, and even the halting steps toward renewal that have been evident over the last several years, Ralph Martin's judgment rings as true today as it did in 1982, when he declared, "Renewal of worship' is indeed a noble slogan, but the results that have accrued after two or three decades of serious study, suggestive adaptations, and revised liturgies have been meagre."<sup>2</sup>

Martin was not content to bemoan the situation, however. He also pinpointed a crucial cause of the malaise: "One reason for this scantiness lies in a failure to construct a systematic theology of worship."<sup>3</sup> He is surely correct in suggesting that worship renewal must be undergirded by, and flow out of, a solid worship theology. Yet his implied prescription requires augmentation. The systematic theology of worship that can serve as a foundation for renewal does not arise *sui generis*, but must be rooted in something deeper. More specifically, a truly helpful theology of worship requires a profound understanding and particular application of the Christian teaching regarding the trinity of God. Only then can the church's practice of worship be grounded in its proper theological basis.

Although trinitarian theology and a renewal of Christian worship may at first glance appear to be disparate, they are not only closely connected but also integrally related. In the patristic era, the teaching about God as triune to a large degree arose out of the practices of the community. Today's situation calls for a reversal of this direction. The recent renaissance of theological interest in the doctrine of the Trinity not only *can* but also *must* provide a needed resource for the renewal of contemporary church practice in general and for renewal in the worshiping life of the people of God in particular.

Taking a cue from what is increasingly emerging as a consensus among theologians, in what follows I offer a sketch of the manner in which I believe communal Christian worship arises out of, is intimately linked to, and therefore ought to reflect the trinitarian dynamic. To this end, I begin by reviewing the central themes of what has become in many Protestant circles the "classic" theology of worship. I then expand the classic view by drawing insights from the patristic concept of salvation as *theosis*. Finally, I offer a broad synopsis of the implications of our eschatological participation in the triune life for a trinitarian-theological understanding of worship.

#### EXTOLLING GOD: THE "CLASSIC" THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

Writing in 1936, Evelyn Underhill began her widely-read treatment of the topic by declaring, "Worship, in all its grades and kinds, is the response of the creature to the Eternal."<sup>4</sup> In saying this, she sounded a note that finds echo in many descriptions of the phenomenon. Thus, in her entry in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Susan Rattray defines worship as "the attitude and acts of reverence to a deity."<sup>5</sup> Wayne Grudem sounds a similar note, when he declares, "Worship is the activity of glorifying God in his presence with our voices and hearts."<sup>6</sup> In his essay on the topic in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R. G. Rayburn echoes these sentiments: "to worship God is to ascribe to him the worth of which he is worthy."<sup>7</sup> And in his paradigmatic definition of worship, Ralph Martin reflects the same idea, while adding a connection to the conduct of the worshipper: "Worship is the dramatic celebration of God in his supreme worth in

such a manner that his 'worthiness' becomes the norm and inspiration of human living."<sup>8</sup>

Descriptions of worship such as these are, of course, helpful. As many scholars have pointed out, "worship" basically means attributing worth or honor to one who is worthy.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as important as the focus on the divine worthiness is, left by itself it cannot take us to the heart of Christian worship. For this reason, most recent theologies of worship delve deeper into the topic, generally augmenting the basic definition with two additional themes.

First, in their descriptions of Christian worship, theologians often enrich the general conception by delineating exactly what about God is worthy of adoration. God is to be worshiped, they declare, because of who God is. Thus, the nineteenth century Baptist scholar, Alvah Hovey asserts, "By worship we mean the homage of the soul paid to God in view of his attributes and prerogatives."<sup>10</sup> More recently, Everett Harrison defined worship in a similar manner, as "the lifting up of the redeemed spirit toward God in contemplation of his holy perfection."<sup>11</sup> In addition to extolling God because of the divine perfections, theologians routinely suggest that worship is evoked by what God does. Like many of his colleagues, Dale Moody brings the two together. After asserting, "Worship is devotion to that which is of supreme worth,"<sup>12</sup> he adds, "the most basic thing in Christian worship seems to be gathering together to celebrate the acts of God in creation and redemption."<sup>13</sup>

Such declarations are in keeping with the spirit of scriptural texts that direct the focus of worship to the divine being, together with the divine action in creation and redemption. Repeatedly the biblical texts enjoin us to attribute worth to the God who is the Holy One. The Psalmist typifies the writers of scripture: "Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor" (Psa. 29:2 NRSV; see also 96:8; 1 Chron. 16:29). When we follow this admonition, we not only join the ancient Hebrew community and the church of all ages, but we also unite our voices with the angelic hosts, who continually proclaim, "Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come" (Rev. 4:8 NRSV; see also Isa. 6:3). The scripture texts also speak about worshiping God because of the divine action in creating the universe. Repeatedly the biblical writers declare that as Creator, God is worthy of awe and praise (e.g., Psa. 29:3-10). For example, in his vision of the heavenly court, John observed the twenty-four elders (who symbolize the whole people of God) declare, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev. 4:11 NRSV).

Above all, however, the biblical writers direct worship toward the God who acts savingly on behalf of creatures. The Old Testament prophets continually admonished Israel to worship the God who had graciously entered into covenant with them (1 Chron. 16:15) and as a result had done great wonders (v. 12), especially in rescuing them from their enemies. According to the New Testament, the focal point of God's saving work is Jesus. For this reason, as we gather to commemorate the foundational events of our redemption, we extol the One who in Christ delivered us from bondage to sin, the One who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16 NRSV).

In addition to delineating why God is worthy of worship, theological treatises often connect worship to a second theme, namely, God's intention for creatures. For example,

Hughes Oliphant Old begins his study of Reformed worship by declaring, "We worship God because God created us to worship him."<sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright echoes the point. "As creator and redeemer, God calls for worship on the part of humankind."<sup>15</sup> Grudem, in turn, takes the matter a step further, seeing worship as an aspect of our human vocation. In his estimation, worship is "a *direct* expression of our ultimate purpose for living," which, citing biblical texts such as Ephesians 1:12 (but also reminiscent of the Westminster Catechism), he describes as "to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever."<sup>16</sup> Rather than limiting the concept to humans, Underhill extends the worshiping vocation to encompass all creation: "There is a sense in which we may think of the whole life of the Universe, seen and unseen, conscious and unconscious, as an act of worship, glorifying its Origin, Sustainer, and End."<sup>17</sup>

This theme can also claim scriptural warrant. The biblical authors repeatedly announce that the fundamental purpose of all creation is to glorify God. Thus, the Psalmist indicates that extolling God's glory is the divinely-given task of nature: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psa. 19:1 NRSV). As God's special creation and the recipients of God's special concern, humans are especially called to praise their Creator, and this, according to the Psalmist, is not a drudgery: "How good it is to sing praises to our God; for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting" (Psa. 147:1 NRSV). Furthermore, Christians have been purchased by Christ so that they might exist for the sake of God's glory. Paul asserts that God predestined us to be adopted into the divine family and included us "in Christ," so that we might live "to the praise of [God's] glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6 NRSV; cf. 1:11-14). In fact, the apostle is convinced that the joyous task of praising God will not end with the passing of life as we now know it. Rather, throughout eternity we will continue to bring glory to God by being those through whom God is able to show the incomparable riches of the divine grace (Eph. 2:6-7).

The commonly-voiced theme of extolling God is helpful in providing a theological context for understanding worship. Yet, even when enhanced by the themes suggested in the preceding paragraphs, this perspective does not encapsulate fully the foundational motif of Christian worship. Although it points in the right direction, the widely-articulated "classic" Protestant view cannot provide an adequate basis for a worship theology that is able to foster a truly effectual renewal of worship in Christ's church.

#### PARTICIPATING IN GOD: THE FOUNDATION OF A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF WORSHIP

Worship does involve extolling God, of course. Nevertheless, the classic conception of worship must be expanded. Christian worship, I would suggest, entails glorifying the God disclosed in the biblical narrative who, in accordance with the divine eternal intention, glorifies us in Christ by the indwelling presence of the Spirit who brings us to participate in the divine life. As the trinitarian structure of this description indicates, a truly helpful theology of worship must be trinitarian. Indeed, the ultimate theological basis for worship lies in the eternal trinitarian dynamic and, by extension, in God's intention that we participate in that dynamic, which constitutes the *telos* of our existence and the final goal of the divine work of salvation. Allow me to explicate this idea. The contemporary rediscovery of trinitarian theology has brought a renewed interest

in the concept of participation in the divine life. For example, Anglican theologian Peter Adam writes, "We should not regard the call to imitate Christ as being anything less than trinitarian: for the Son has been sent by the Father, and is empowered by the Spirit. The example of Christ is an insight into the Trinity, and the imitation of Christ is a participation in the life of the Trinity."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, James Torrance asserts, "By sharing in Jesus' life of communion with the Father in the Spirit, we are given to participate in the Son's eternal communion with the Father,"<sup>19</sup> and hence in the trinitarian life of God.<sup>20</sup>

This contemporary focus is surely correct. The doctrine of the Trinity was birthed in the patristic era out of an intense interest on the part of church leaders to maintain the biblical *kerygma*, the gospel of God's saving action in Christ. During the heated controversies of the day, Athanasius declared unequivocally that unless the Son and the Spirit are fully divine, we are not truly saved through their work. Hence, if Jesus is not fully God incarnate, he argued, we cannot receive divine life in him.<sup>21</sup> And if the Spirit who enters our hearts as believers is not fully divine, we do not become sharers of the divine nature through the Spirit's presence.<sup>22</sup> In both of these arguments, Athanasius appealed to a particular understanding of the nature and goal of God's saving activity. Like other Greek fathers, he viewed salvation as participation in the divine nature, life or glory. This perspective, which is often denoted "deification" (*theosis*), has been deemed by many theologians throughout church history to be simply the outworking of the general New Testament idea of the nature of salvation. Nevertheless, it finds its most direct biblical basis in Peter's declaration:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:3-4 NRSV).

*Theosis*, or the idea of participation in the divine life, found its classical articulation in the Greek fathers, for whom it provided the soteriological basis for an innovative anthropology. The patristic thinkers were not content with the philosophical principle that the human person is a microcosm of the universe. Rather, they claimed that the true greatness of humankind lies in being a "deified animal"<sup>23</sup> or a created existence "which has received the command to become a god,"<sup>24</sup> to cite the descriptions offered by Gregory of Nazianzus. The eighth century theologian, John of Damascus, reiterated this crucial idea, when he declared regarding the human person, "here, that is, in the present life, his life is ordered as an animal's, but elsewhere, that is, in the age to come, he is changed and to complete the mystery-becomes deified by merely inclining himself towards God; becoming deified, in the way of participating in the divine glory and not in that of a change into the divine being."<sup>25</sup>

As the final phrase in this statement indicates, the Greek fathers did not view deification as eradicating the distinction between the human and the divine. On the contrary, they introduced *theosis* as a safeguard against the soteriological dangers inherent in certain christological heresies of the day, such as Eutychianism (or Monophysitism), which, they believed, led to a conception of salvation that viewed it as absorption into God.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the quotation from John of Damascus indicates that according to the Greek fathers, Christ's saving work entails not merely rescuing fallen humankind from sin, but also effecting eschatological deification. Citing John's spiritual predecessor, Maximus the Confessor, contemporary Orthodox theologian Panayiotas Nellas writes,

The Lord redeemed man from slavery to sin, death and devil, but He also put into effect the work which had not been effected by Adam. He united him with God, granting him true 'being' in God and raising him to a new creation. Christ accomplishes the salvation of man not only in a negative way, liberating him from the consequences of original sin, but also in a positive way, completing his iconic, prelapsarian 'being.' His relationship with man is not only that of a healer. The salvation of man is something much wider than redemption; it coincides with deification.<sup>27</sup>

Above all, however, the quotation from John of Damascus suggests that in the estimation of the patristic thinkers, deification is closely connected to our being placed "in Christ." The link between deification and our status as those who are in Christ lends a trinitarian cast to the concept of *theosis*. It leads to an understanding of deification as involving a trinitarian dynamic.

The New Testament repeatedly suggests that participation in Christ means sharing in his filial relationship with the one he called "Father." This is evident, for example, in Jesus' invitation to his disciples to address God as "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9 NRSV). It is reiterated in the resurrected Christ's instruction to Mary Magdalene to tell his "brothers," "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17 NRSV). The idea surfaces as well in Paul's declaration, found twice in his epistles, that through Christ believers approach God as "Abba" (Gal. 4:6; cf. Rom. 8:15), thereby indicating that Jesus' followers have the privilege of sharing in the relationship with God that he himself enjoyed. For Paul, this great prerogative, which he equates with our status as those who are "in Christ," is connected to the role of the Spirit in believers' lives. The liberty of addressing God as "Abba" is the direct result of the presence of the indwelling Spirit, whom the apostle identifies as "the Spirit of [God's] Son." The Spirit, who leads those who are "in Christ" to address God as "Abba," constitutes them as "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17 NRSV).

By opening a window into the eternal basis for God's action in human salvation in what is often termed his "high priestly prayer," Jesus adds an important further aspect: "Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24 NRSV). Our Lord's petition indicates that the dynamic within the triune life involves the glorification endemic to a reciprocal sharing of love. The Father eternally lavishes unbounded love upon the Son and thereby glorifies the Son. The Son, in turn, reciprocates the love received from the Father and in this manner glorifies the Father eternally, just as Jesus brought glory to his heavenly Father through the completion of his earthly mission (John 17:4).

Taken together, these New Testament declarations indicate that by incorporating

believers into Christ, the Spirit gathers them into the dynamic of the divine life. Yet the Spirit does so in a particular manner. The Spirit places us specifically and solely “in the Son.” Through the Spirit, believers are “in Christ,” and as those who are in the Son, they share in the eternal relationship that the Son enjoys with the Father. Because participants in this new community are co-heirs with Christ, the Father bestows upon them what he eternally lavishes on the Son, namely, the glorious divine love who is the Holy Spirit. And as those who are in Christ, they participate in the Son’s eternal act of glorifying the Father.

The concept of salvation as *theosis-sharing* in the divine life by being “in Christ” by the Spirit – that arises out of the New Testament provides the basis for a fuller understanding of the nature of the church as a whole and the character of Christian worship in particular. More specifically, it leads to a worship theology that weaves together in the tapestry of the church’s mandate to be a worshiping people threads from the doctrine of the Trinity and from the biblical vision of the eschatological consummation, understood as the point at which God’s *telos* – i.e., our deification – is fully actualized.

#### ANTICIPATING ETERNITY: THE WORSHIPING CHURCH AS THE FORETASTE OF *THEOSIS*

Theologians routinely appeal to Jesus’ words to the Samaritan woman, which I quoted at the beginning of this essay, for a dominical basis for the worship mandate that we, as his church, have received. Moreover, many commentators see in the phrase “in spirit and truth” a reference to a particular quality of Christian worship. Writing in the monumental hallmark of turn of the twentieth century homiletical exegesis, the *Pulpit Commentary*, H. R. Reynolds articulated in the language of the day what remains a widely-held view: “The worship in spirit is worship contrasted with all mere carnal concomitants, all mere shadows of the good things to come, all mere ritual, all specialties of place, or time, or sacrament, or order ... *And in truth*; i.e. as dealing with reality, the adequate and veracious expression of genuine desires and veritable emotions.”<sup>28</sup>

Reading the phrase as connoting a contrast between genuine worship and the focus on place and ritual indicative of the Samaritan cult ought not to obscure the cryptic trinitarian overtones of the presence in this text of the designations Father, Spirit and Truth. This choice of words suggests that Christian worship of the Father must not only be spiritual, as opposed to ritualistic, not only truthful, in contrast to insincere. It must also occur in the one who truly is Spirit and the one who alone is Truth. Viewed in this light, Jesus’ statement not only suggests the *fact* that we are mandated to worship, it also suggests that worship is trinitarian in *character*. Worship that would genuinely be “in spirit and truth” (i.e., “spiritual and sincere”) must be “in Spirit and Truth.” Hence genuine worship is trinitarian worship.

In suggesting this perspective, Jesus’ statement opens the way for a trinitarian conception of worship, to an understanding of Christian worship that arises out of our awareness of, and commitment to, the biblical God, whom we have come to know as triune. The concept of *theosis* provides insight into how a theology of worship can be rooted in trinitarian soil. As the community of Christ, our worship arises ultimately out of our eschatological participation in the Son’s relationship to the Father by the Spirit. That is, it emerges from the consummation of the divine work of salvation understood as deification.

The doctrine of *theosis* declares that at the eschatological consummation the Spirit

will gather the participants in the new community (together with all creation) fully and completely into the Son, who as the *logos* is the one in whom all things “hold together” or find their interconnectedness (Col. 1.17). At the heart of our eschatological participation in the Son is our participation in his response to the Father, which provides the basis for perfect worship. In the eschatological consummation, we will be numbered among the countless multitudes of saints that John the seer saw standing before the throne and positioned at the head of the great chorus of praise that included the angelic hosts as well as the four living creatures, who, in the opinion of many commentators, represent all creation. This great gathering — or, perhaps better stated, “in-gathering” — is the work of the Spirit, who, in placing us in the Son, molds us, together with all creation, into one great chorus of praise to the Father after the pattern of the Son.<sup>29</sup> Thus, as those who are in Christ by the Spirit, we share in the Son’s eternal glorification of the Father. Insofar as the eschatological fulfillment entails a dynamic of glorification involving the three members of the Trinity and hence our participation in the intra-trinitarian life, we might say that “trinitarian worship” will mark all eternity. The new creation will be characterized by the unceasing worship directed toward the Father on the part of those who, by virtue of the incorporating work of the Spirit, are “in” the Son.

Yet Christian worship does not arise simply out of the worship that we will offer in all eternity as those who are in Christ. Rather, it derives from the reciprocal character of the divine dynamic into which we are placed by the Spirit. Indeed, our salvation is not a one-directional reality. In eternity, believers not only participate in the Son’s act of eternal response to the Father. They are also co-recipients with the Son of the eternal treasures that the Father lavishes on them as those who are “in Christ.” By being drawn into the dynamic of the triune life, believers participate in the eternal *reciprocal* glorification that characterizes the relationship between the Father and the Son. Consequently, being placed by the Spirit into the eschatological worshipping community in Christ comprises our glorification as well, for as the Spirit leads those who are “in Christ” to glorify the Father through the Son, the Father glorifies us in the Son.<sup>30</sup> In this way, our perfect worship of the Father as those who are in the Son by the Spirit constitutes the fulfillment of God’s eternal design for our existence. In this manner, it becomes our glorification as well.

“Deification,” therefore, is an eschatological reality, as is the perfect worship endemic to it. Nevertheless, as Jesus’ declaration to the Samaritan woman, “But the hour is coming, and is now here” (John 4.23 NRSV), indicates, the New Testament writers also view this participation as proleptically present — present in an anticipatory manner — in the here-and-now. Furthermore, they declare that the focus of this proleptic reality is the church, the community of those whom the Spirit calls together so that they might gather around the name of Jesus and belong to the family of God as children of Jesus’ — and their-heavenly Father. At the heart of the vocation or divine calling of this community is the mandate to be the foretaste in the present of the eschatological fullness that constitutes our eternal *telos* or destiny, a mandate that includes worship.

Its orientation toward the future as the perspective from which to engage in the practice of worship in the present sets Christian worship apart from the conception found in many other religious traditions. Most of the ancient religions posit a golden past, a mythic origin “in illo tempore,” to cite Mircea Eliade’s characterization, to which they return in worship.



In his classic study, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade explains that “these ceremonies...suspend the flow of profane time, of duration, and project the celebrant into a mythical time, *in illo tempore*.”<sup>51</sup> Among the Hebrews, however, a quite different perspective on time arose, namely, the awareness of history as the flow of time, climaxing in the end of time. Eliade notes that in contrast to that of other ancient religious traditions, the Hebrew perspective led to a focus on the future as the point that would regenerate time, that is, would restore its original purity and integrity. “Thus,” he writes, “*in illo tempore* is situated not only at the beginning of time but also at its end.” And the “victory over the forces of darkness and chaos no longer occurs regularly every year but is projected into a future and Messianic *illud tempus*.”<sup>52</sup>

The shift toward a historical and profoundly eschatological perspective regarding time, in turn, generated a corresponding shift in the understanding of worship. Christian worship retains a cyclical dimension, which is especially evident in the church calendar year. Yet at a deeper level it is always and by its very nature forward looking. In worship, Christians are not primarily hankering after a golden age in an ever-receding, primordial past. Nor are liturgical acts believed to be the means by which worshippers either participate in an idyllic realm at the beginning of time or regenerate time in accordance with a supposedly lost paradise. Rather, in worship Christians anticipate a glorious future that is already dawning on the horizon and that exercises a transforming effect on life in the present.

If worship characterizes eternity — if all creation is glorified by means of being caught up in an eternal act of worship — then worship is no mere temporal dimension of life. Worship is not enjoined on the Christian community as one of the many various tasks that we share in the here-and-now. Worship is not simply one aspect of the manifold duties that we are commanded to do, while we wait for the dawning of eternity. Instead, worship is integrally connected to our journeying into the future. This perspective repeatedly finds its way into treatises on the topic of Christian worship. To cite one example, in his study *Worship as Praise and Empowerment*, David Newman declares, “Worship celebrates the future God has in store for the world as present even before that future is fully actualized.”<sup>53</sup> John Burkhardt, in turn, concurs: “As Christians assemble they *rehearse* life lived within the unitive purposes of God. In coming together, being gathered and gathering, they not only acknowledge but also enact a vision of reality. They have been concerned, given the privilege and function, gift and task, to be pioneers in what God wills for the world.”<sup>54</sup> And Don Saliers appropriately entitled his important treatise, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*. Indeed, Saliers is surely correct when he connects Christian worship practices with the future: “Every song, every prayer, every act of washing, eating, and drinking together, is eschatological — that is, God intends it to point toward completion in the fullness of time.”<sup>55</sup>

Not only does worship *look* to the future, however, worship *participates* in the future. Worship, therefore, is an eternal act. To engage in worship in the here-and-now is to participate in an anticipatory and celebratory manner in the eternal future toward which true Christian worship casts our gaze. For this reason, the church gathered for worship is the ultimate prolepsis of our eschatological participation in the eternal dynamic of the triune God.

This brings us back to the quotations with which these reflections began. Because

theological vision does determine the character of worship, as Underhill rightly noted, Christian worship is connected to a particular theological vision that goes beyond the focus explicated in what has become the classic Protestant understanding. Ultimately, we do not worship merely because God commands it or even because God deserves it. Rather, as Jesus indicated in the great trinitarian declaration lying at the heart of his conversation with the Samaritan woman, we worship the Father because the Spirit places us "in Christ" who is the Truth. Moreover, the vision of Revelation 7 reminds us that the Spirit's goal is nothing short of joining our voices with those of a great company consisting of redeemed humankind, the angelic hosts and even all creation. In this manner, the Spirit brings us to take our place within the drama of the ages as those who participate by grace in the eternal intra-trinitarian movement of the triune God. And this eschatological reality is ours to celebrate – even if only proleptic ally, imperfectly and partially – in the here-and-now. For as those, who even in the brokenness of the present, experience a joyous foretaste of our eschatological participation in the triune life in the great act of worship, we are even now through that act forthrightly bearing witness to what is ultimately real.

When Christian worship flows out of a keen sense of our eternal future within the divine life in the new creation, it becomes much more than merely our obedience to dominical command. Instead, it comes to entail a joyful celebration of, and even an anticipatory participation in, a worship dynamic that will continue throughout eternity. In short, it becomes a celebration of eternity. No wonder Karl Barth exclaimed, "Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life."<sup>36</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Evelyn Underhill, *Worship*, Harper Torchbook ed. (1936; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957), 60.
2. Ralph P. Martin, *The Worship of God: Some Theological, Pastoral, and Practical Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 1-2.
3. Martin, *Worship of God*, 2.
4. Underhill, *Worship*, 3.
5. Susan Rattray, "Worship," in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), 1222.
6. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 1003.
7. R. G. Rayburn, "Worship in the Church," in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 1300.
8. Martin, *Worship of God*, 4.
9. See, for example, Alan Richardson, "Worship," in the *Westminster Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 605. See also the typical dictionary definition of worship: "To pay divine honors to; to reverence with supreme respect and veneration; to perform religious service to; to adore; to idolize." *New Webster's Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Delair, 1971), 1148.
10. Alvah Hovey, *Manual of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (New York: Silver Burdett & Co., 1982), 332.
11. E. F. Harrison, "Worship," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1300.
12. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation*

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 473.

13. Moody, *Word of Truth*, 474.

14. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed according to Scripture*, revised ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1.

15. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Worship," in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford, 1993), 819.

16. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1004.

17. Underhill, *Worship*, 3.

18. Peter Adam, "The Trinity and Human Community," in *Grace and Truth in the Secular Age*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 61

19. James B. Torrance, "The Doctrine of the Trinity in Our Contemporary Situation," in *The Forgotten Trinity*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (London: BCC/CCBI Inter-Church House, 1989), 7

20. Torrance, "Doctrine of the Trinity," 15.

21. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 54, in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson, Oxford paperback edition (London: Oxford, 1969), 293; Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 2.70, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 293. See also, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 243.

22. Athanasius, *Epistle as Serapionem* 1.24, in *Early Church Fathers*, 296.

23. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 45 [The Second Oration on Easter]*, 7, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 7:425. See also *Oration 38 [On the Theophany, or Birthday of Christ]*, 11, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, 7:348.

24. For a citation of this quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funeral Oratio on Basil the Great*, see Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: Orthodox Perspectives on the Nature of the Human Person*, trans. Normal Russell (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 30.

25. John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2.12, in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, ed. Philip Schaff (1894; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 9:31.

26. Nellus, *Deification in Christ*, 39-40.

27. *Ibid.*, 39.

28. H. R. Reynolds, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2 vols., in the *Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, n.d.), 1:169.

29. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Constructive and Critical Functions of Christian Eschatology," *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984):135-36.

30. This idea is present even in certain conservative Calvinist theologians. Anthony A. Hoekema, for example, states in a matter-of-fact manner, "Since Christ and his people are one, his people will also share in his glorification." *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 92.

31. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask Harper Torchbook edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), 76. See also, 30-31, 58, 72, 83, 95.

32. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, 106.

33. David R. Newman, *Worship as Praise and Empowerment* (New York: Pilgrim, 1988), 6.

34. John E. Burkhardt, *Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 50.

35. Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 210-11.

36. As cited in J.J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice*, trans. Harold Knight and W. Fletcher Fleet (New York: Oxford, 1965), 13.