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In the argument of Hebrews, sanctuary, sacrifice, altar and priesthood all find their fulfillment in the saving work of Jesus Christ, not in some ongoing activity in the Christian congregation. When Christians throughout the ages have failed to grasp this teaching and its implications, clergy, buildings and objects within those buildings have been invested with a special sanctity. This has obscured the true focus of the New Testament, leading to a preoccupation with ritual and ceremony, wrong views about Christian ministry and a simplistic application of Old Testament texts to what goes on in church. More fundamentally, people are misled about the way we can relate to God and please him when Christianity is presented as an earthly cult.

DAVID PETERSON, "WORSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT" IN *WORSHIP: ADORATION AND ACTION*, D. A. CARSON, ED. (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 71.

In recent years, one question that has been asked with increasing frequency is, "What part do the people of God in general play in being channels of God's love, word and power when the church gathers for congregational worship?" In Protestantism it has been largely the preacher who is the channel of blessing. Today much more stress is laid on an "every member ministry" where everybody has something and nobody has everything and where the body-life of the local church, of which Paul speaks in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, is given larger recognition.

PETER LEWIS, "'FREE CHURCH' WORSHIP IN BRITAIN" IN *WORSHIP: ADORATION AND ACTION*, D. A. CARSON, ED. (GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN: BAKER, 1993), 154.

JESUS OUR WORSHIP LEADER: THE MEDIATING WORK OF THE SON IN WORSHIP

Ren. Man

For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human.

1 Timothy 2:5

We have a great priest over the house of God.

Hebrews 10:21

For believers it is often easier to conceptualize the present ministry of Christ in terms of his deity—which is understandable, given the fact of his glorified state, having "ascended far above all the heavens" (Ephesians 4:10). Yet it is just as true that there is a Man who is now seated at the Father's right hand, a fact which (as we will see) has profound implications for our worship.

Part of the paradox of the hypostatic union (the perfect fusion in Christ of undiminished deity and complete humanity) is that we have in one person both recipient and giver of worship. In his perfect condescension and by virtue of the plan forged in eternity past among the members of the Trinity, the Son (as well as the Holy Spirit) has willingly given over to the Father the right to be the primary focus and recipient of worship. In fact, all through the earthly ministry of Jesus we find him constantly in communion with the Father (whom he called *his* Father)¹ in worship and prayer. In that way he fulfilled the Law and modeled for us unsullied, untainted, full-orbed Manhood in relationship with the Creator.

Too often, however, we tend to unconsciously compartmentalize Christ and focus either on his deity or on his humanity—largely because it is so difficult for our finite minds to grasp this perfect admixture of God and man. Hence, in his birth and earthly ministry we usually focus on his (albeit perfect) humanity, though of course punctuated here and there with hints of divine omniscience and miracle-working power. In his resurrection, ascension, current session in heaven, and coming victorious reign, we see profound expressions of his deity and glory. To be sure, we often make reference to the fact that our Savior intercedes for us before the Father (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25). But is it not true that our concept is often that of a divine Savior who by grace has become our advocate before the throne? All of this is true enough, but it is also true that his intercession is not only one of divine sympathy toward human creatures, but one of empathy by “one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). We have a high priest who has not only made an offering of himself once for all for our redemption (Hebrews 7:27; 10:12,14), but who *continues* in his mediating high priestly ministry (“we *have* [not had] a high priest” [Hebrews 4:14,16; 8:1; 10:21], indeed “holds his priesthood *permanently*” [Hebrews 7:24; cf. 5:6; 6:20; 7:7,17,25,28]).

It is Thomas Torrance’s contention that, in reaction to Arianism (which affirmed the humanity but denied the deity of Christ), the early church began to emphasize the deity of Christ and to downplay, or virtually ignore, his humanity.² To that trend in the patristic and medieval church Torrance attributes the rise both of an overly centralized Eucharist (in some senses substituting in people’s focus and devotion for the living Christ himself); the rise of prayer to Mary and the saints (since in the practical denial of a truly human mediator in Christ, Christians were compelled to look to others, who in essence mediated between

the worshiper and *Christ!*); and the development of a full-blown human priesthood to lead in worship (to substitute for Christ in that role).³

We still tend to give little attention to the humanity of Christ and the role it plays in our worship. We lift our praise to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well we should. Our songs and litanies of worship are addressed primarily to the Father and to the Son, as the Spirit expects and enables in his self-effacing role. But do we really understand that Jesus Christ in his glorified state continues to be the perfect man, and thus still embodies all that man was created to be? Since it is obvious that God made man to be preeminently a *worshiper of the Creator* (Romans 1:21), since worshipers are what the Father seeks among mankind (John 4:23), it should be evident that in Jesus Christ as perfect man God has likewise found the true worshiper: the man who can truly approach God on his own merits, with a completely pure heart and conscience (Psalm 15:1-2), and offer up worthy praise.

It is not often recognized that Jesus Christ plays a crucial mediatorial role in our worship services—an active role, not just one as the subject and recipient of worship. As James Torrance has observed,⁴ we are well aware that, through the Holy Spirit, Christ mediates the truth of God’s revelation to us through the reading of the Word, preaching, and other forms of proclamation; the Son has a mediatorial role in the communication of truth from the Father. But James Torrance also points out how neglectful we are of the other half of the mediatorial equation in worship: that Christ, as *man*, as the *perfect worshiper*, is the conduit—*namely*, the *embodiment* of our worship in response to the truth of God. Christ’s perfect worship, his continual self-offering to the Father in adoration and communion, becomes the basis for our expressions of praise and worship;⁵ we are “accepted in the beloved” (Ephesians 1:6), and likewise in

the beloved's perfect offering of worship our offerings of worship are accepted as well.⁶

The Holy Spirit actuates our participation in Christ's perfect worship: "In the Spirit our prayer and worship participate in ways beyond our understanding in the prayer and worship of the glorified Christ."⁷ "The Holy Spirit enables us to enter through the veil of the flesh of Christ into the holiest, and connects us with Christ as he dwells in the immediate presence of God in unbroken communion."⁸ And, conversely, "the presence of his Spirit in us means that Christ's prayer and worship of the Father are made to echo in us and issue out of our life to the Father as our own prayer and worship."⁹

In light of these truths, it is a very serious error to follow a revivalist style of worship service, where the sermon is considered the *raison d'être* for the entire undertaking, and all other constituent parts of the service serve merely to prepare for or to transition out of that proclamatory event.¹⁰ In fact, the public proclamation and exposition of God's Word is a crucial part of public worship (though, as White has pointed out, it is no excuse for the virtual disappearance of the reading of Scripture in most free church services¹¹); preaching is a primary context in which Christ mediates the Father's revealed truth to man. But if we neglect or downplay the importance of corporate *response* (singing, praying, reading, meditating, etc.), we do not only rob the people of God of a necessary and appropriate means of giving back to God a grateful reflection of his glory which they have apprehended in his word—we *actually risk interfering with a critical aspect of the mediating work of Jesus Christ!* Not that we could ever in any way interrupt or hinder the Son's perfect communion with the Father; but we can indeed stand in the way of the complete expression of that communion in corporate worship. The wonderful fact is that when God's people join their hearts and voices

in common acclamations of praise and thanksgiving, they are indeed expressing their redeemed humanity in its most pristine sense—for it is then that we come closest to Christ-likeness, as we emulate his constant orientation toward the Father. But more than that, it is *in Christ* that our worship is dressed in his righteousness (sullied and imperfect in nature though we may be) and thus becomes an acceptable sacrifice to our Lord God (Romans 12:1).

We need to remember that in the New Testament's emphasis on worship being life-pervading and decentral-ized (Romans 12:1; John 4:21-24; 1 Corinthians 10:31), it is merely reflecting the reality of Christ's earthly walk and continued heavenly existence. He was (and is) the true worshiper for which the Father seeks (John 4:23). He did (and does) all to the glory of God.

And so Christ our *worship leader* (as James Torrance¹² refers to him) stands before us as we lift our praise to the Father; we actually are allowed through the Spirit to participate in Christ's ongoing communion with the Father. This is true not only because Jesus the perfect sacrifice bought our redemption with his blood, but also because he always lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25), and because as perfect man he represents us in continuing worship before the Father's throne. A sort of "Protestant transubstantiation" takes place as our feeble expressions of worship are taken up by Christ and transformed by him and subsumed into his perfect offering of praise to the Father. Christ is a perfect worshiper, and in him we reap the benefits and blessings of joining in perfect worship—because we are dressed in Christ and in his perfect worship.

This brings new meaning to the idea of "praying in Jesus' name" or "through Jesus Christ," when we understand that our worship and prayer are made part of his own. Praying in his name is merely a recognition of that fact, that "he is *the* offerer of all our worship to God."¹³

Our worship of God takes place . . . through Jesus himself as a worshipper of God, and worshipper in our place. Unless that is kept central, the liturgical language “through Jesus Christ our Lord” or even “through Jesus Christ our mediator and high priest” can easily degenerate into mere formulae to which we attach our own self-erected worship without the actual mediation of Christ in his vicarious humanity.¹⁴

It is in this light that we are surely to understand the Lord’s Prayer, *Our Father*, which he prayed as one of us and which he now puts into our mouth that we may pray with him to his Father and our Father, and to his God and our God.¹⁵

Really to worship God, therefore, is to worship with Christ who worships with us and for us, and to worship with him is to present his worship, the worship of his life which he offered in our place and on our behalf, and in which though with Christ in the one Spirit we are continually participant.¹⁶

IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORSHIP

There are at least three enormous implications which may be drawn from this fresh perspective on what actually goes on in our worship services:

The first implication has already been discussed: *We dare not shortchange or downplay those portions of the service where in fact Christ mediates our worshipful responses to the Father and makes them part of his own.* This is a crucial part of Christ’s continuing mediatorial work, and the Father is glorified no less by his Son’s living communion with him in expression of believers’ praise, than by the Son’s work of mediating his truth to man. It is by no means a matter of elevating man’s part above God’s, for it is only in Christ that man’s response becomes whole and holy and acceptable. “Christ mediates the word of God to man and the word of man to God, and ministers the immeasurable love

of God to man and the answering love of man to God.”¹⁷ But of course it all originates with the Father and is all perfectly mediated by Christ, so God is glorified in and through it all.

The second implication is that *our worship does not need to be perfect.*¹⁸ Ultimately there is nothing about the quality or excellence of our presentation which makes the worship any more acceptable to God. Of course, one’s heart attitude is of great importance to God—and a sincere heart of worship will indeed strive to offer to God one’s very best as a means of glorifying the God of beauty. But in the final analysis our worship becomes acceptable to God because Christ offers it up as a part of his own worship to the Father.

“Our worship of God takes place . . . through Jesus himself as a worshiper of God, and worshiper in our place.”¹⁹ That is why we can approach in confidence (Hebrews 10:19-22)—not because of the perfect choice of music or blend of styles or quality of performance; not because we presume to come completely devoid of impure motives or thoughts—but because we come *in Christ*: he stands in for us, as it were.

Through, with and in Christ we turn away in penitent self-denial from our own acts of worship and prayer in order to rest in the worship and prayer which our Savior has already offered and continues to offer to the Father on our behalf. . . . We come to God with empty hands, stretching them out to receive what he puts into them, and so draw near to worship the Father with no other oblation than that of Christ himself.²⁰

As the hymnist William How put it, “We give thee but thine own” All that we have to give to God in worship is what he has already given us in grace; and above all what he has given us, what is “his own” preeminently, is *Christ himself*.

The point is that the quality (whatever that may mean) of our worship commends us to God no more than the quality of our life does. We are not on a performance basis in one area any more than in the other—praise God! Rather it is Christ's righteousness and Christ's worship which are acceptable and perfect. "Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). How easy it is to slip into a sort of Pelagian approach to worship,²¹ and forget that God must be sovereignly involved if we are to present anything at all which will glorify him. And we must likewise beware of the idolatry of striving for excellence as an end in itself or for the sake of "good taste."²²

It is not the excellence of our worship, but the excellence of Christ which makes our sacrifices of praise worthy and acceptable offerings!

The third implication is that there is *no one right style or form for worship*. Jesus Christ our worship leader has taken innumerable forms of worship across the centuries and across the world and made them his own; he has been pleased to call men and women "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9) his brethren (Hebrews 2:11), and hence to take up their expressions of praise into his own continuing and eternal communion with the Father. That communion, and Christ's mediatorial role in drawing true believers in to join him in that relationship with the Father, are the constants of worship—the true "regulative principle," if you will. "Worship and prayer are . . . primarily forms of Christ's vicarious worship and prayer offered on behalf of all mankind in all ages."²³ Because all true worship is in reality the worship of and by Christ who is "the same yesterday and today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8), *the essence of worship never changes*.

The forms, the music, the prayers may be long or short, complex or simple, traditional or contemporary or blended. As long as they are sincerely offered up, there is an

incredible latitude (short of overtly sinful forms or styles) as to what materials our worship leader can draw into his mediatorial act of worship. Like the loaves and fishes, our music and other offerings are basic elements which the Master can choose to multiply to serve his own purposes. He can transform all kinds of raw materials into a fragrant aroma pleasing to the Father.

And so the message in our culture, and on every mission field in every era, must never be an invitation to join a particular group, or to dress a certain way, or to sing a set collection of songs—but must always and ever be an invitation to *trust Jesus Christ and to worship the Father in spirit and truth through him*. There is much which is subjective and cultural about the practice of corporate worship in any age or place,²⁴ but the role of Christ as mediator and leader of our worship never changes.

When worship and prayer are objectively grounded in Christ in this way, we are free to use and adapt transient forms of language and culture in our worship of God. . . . Our worship and prayer are finally shaped and structured by the invariant pattern of Christ's mediatorial office.²⁵

That pattern consists of Christ's mediating of God's truth to the worshippers as well as his mediating of their response back to the Father.²⁶

The greatest compliment ever paid to me as a worship leader (alas, only once or twice) was that I seemed to disappear, and only Jesus could be seen. I wish that was always so! But in a sense that *is* always the reality. Jesus Christ is not only *present* in our worship; he *leads* our worship. This transforming truth should surely change the way we view our participation in worship, our leadership in worship, our preparation for worship, and our esteem for worship. Jesus Christ is our worship: our basis, our means, our

leader, our subject, our strength, our focus. "Worship and prayer are not ways in which we express ourselves but ways in which we hold up before the Father his beloved Son, take refuge in his atoning sacrifice, and make that our only plea."²⁷

Perhaps we can now see more of how the deep truths of Paul's familiar statement apply "both to our new life in Christ through Jesus, and to our new life of worship and prayer in Him":²⁸

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me²⁹ (Galatians 2:20).

"Through Him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God" (Hebrews 13:15).

Author

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Notes

1. Even after the resurrection he could speak in this way in a continued identification with his brethren (cf. Heb. 2:11): "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17).
2. "Arianism tended to force a heretical gloss upon the concept of the

mediatorship of Christ, to which the Church became so sensitive that there was a widespread reaction against it, with the result that the human priesthood and mediation of Christ were pushed further and further into the background of worship" (Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1975], 198-99). He draws on the work of Josef Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*.

3. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 142, 202-204.
4. James A. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1996), 88-89.
5. *Worship*, 15, 17, 20-21, 43-67.
6. The appellation of Christ in Hebrews 3:1 as "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession" may point to this two-way mediatorial ministry of Christ: God to man, and man to God, respectively (*Theology in Reconciliation*, 210). Hebrews 2:12 gives an even clearer picture of Christ's twofold mediating ministry in worship: "I will proclaim your name to my brethren [God to man]; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise" [man to God].
7. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 184.
8. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 140.
9. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 209.
10. Actually this tendency has arisen from at least two sources. One, as White points out, developed out of nineteenth-century revivalism in this country, from the formula used successfully in camp meetings and other evangelistic gatherings, where the speaker was indeed the main attraction and all that went before was consciously intended to "warm up" the audience. This approach was carried over (both consciously and unconsciously in different places, it would seem) more or less intact into the worship services in what White calls the "Frontier" tradition of American Protestantism—where it is still alive and well in many churches! (James F. White, "The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church," *Christian Worship in North America, A Retrospective: 1955-95* [Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997], 103-108).
The other strain comes from a quite different direction, namely the Reformed tradition. Here the exposition of the Scriptures has received due emphasis and honor, but sometimes to the extent that "we neglect the rest of the worship service (sometimes demeaningly called the preliminaries), and rest content, as the Reformers never were, with infrequent communion" (Stephen Farris, "Reformed Identity and Reformed Worship," *Reformed World* [March-June 1993], 43:1-2:71). Hageman points out that Zwingli banned all music whatsoever from worship, and that were it not for Calvin instituting Psalm-singing, Reformed churches might still have none! Hageman offers a reasonable rationale for its use: "What is the proper place of music in a service of Reformed worship? To provide a suitable opportunity for the congregation to respond to the Word of God" (Howard Hageman, "Can Church Music Be Reformed?" *The Reformed Review* [Dec. 1960], 14:2:19-20, 23-24).

11. White, "The Missing Jewel," 108-109; John D. Witvliet, "At Play in the House of the Lord," *Books & Culture* [November-December 1998], 25. "The sermon in no way replaces God's Word read for its own sake. . . . It is an amazing contrast to go from a Roman Catholic Sunday Mass with three full lessons from Scripture plus a psalm to a so-called 'evangelical' service with only a few verses read as a sermon text. . . . This 'when convenient' use of Scripture in most evangelical services is hardly different from similar use of Scripture in many liberal Protestant churches" (James F. White, "The Missing Jewel," 108).
12. Thus translating *leitourgias* in Hebrews 8:2 (James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 16, 63).
13. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 184.
14. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 211.
15. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 208.
16. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 209.
17. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 210.
18. How easy it is for professionally trained musicians to fall into this trap—especially those trained at secular institutions, where excellence of performance is usually the ultimate goal.
19. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 211.
20. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 212.
21. *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 20. (There he also refers to such worship as "Unitarian.") Elsewhere he states that our worship can be "far more Pelagian than anything in Rome, by its all too inclusive emphases on what we do" ("Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1970, 23:75).
22. By no means should this be taken as an argument against good music in worship, or careful and purposeful planning for worship. But these so easily take on a life of their own that we must always be vigilant. God-centered and-empowered worship remains our focus and goal. See this author's "Excellence in Worship: A Means Rather than an End" (www.firstevan.org/music_for_worship.htm)
23. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 213.
24. Calvin himself addressed this issue: "The Master . . . did not will in outward discipline and ceremonies to prescribe in detail what we ought to do (because he foresaw that this depended upon the state of the times, and he did not deem one form suitable for all ages). . . . Because he has taught nothing specifically, and because these things are not necessary to salvation, and for the upbuilding of the Church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age, it will be fitting (as the advantage of the church will require) to change and abrogate traditional practices and to establish new ones. Indeed, I admit that we ought not to charge into innovation rashly, suddenly, for insufficient cause. But love will best judge what may hurt or edify; and if we let love

- be our guide, all will be safe" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1960], 4:10:30), 1208.
25. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 213.
26. These two aspects of the dynamics of worship are sometimes referred to as *revelation* and *response*. See Gary Furr and Wilburn Price, *The Dialogue of Worship: Creating Space for Revelation and Response* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 1998).
27. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), 97-98.
28. *Theology in Reconciliation*, 141.
29. "Christ himself comes to dwell in us through his Spirit, associating himself with us as worshippers of God, while remaining our mediator, advocate, and high priest in the heavenly sanctuary, and associating us with himself in assimilating our prayer to his which has already ascended to the Father and continues to avail for us in his presence" *Theology in Reconciliation*, 182, drawing on the writings of the fifth-century Cyril of Alexandria [*Commentary on the Gospel of John*].