



**Parry, Robin.**

***Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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There's an apocryphal text called *The Acts of John* (ca. AD 150-200) in which Jesus is worshipped as God. This sounds rather innocuous until you read the text and notice that Jesus is worshipped as God simpliciter.<sup>1</sup> For John the references to God are simply references to Jesus. James Dunn has recently said that if "Christian worship is defined too simply as worship of Jesus... [then it] can deteriorate into what may be called Jesus-olatry."<sup>2</sup> Dunn doesn't fear the worship of Jesus so much as the worship of Jesus to the exclusion of God the Father, but if the *Acts of John* is any indication, it's a legitimate, even if exaggerated fear.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is however a passage in which John recounts a hymn that Jesus had the disciples sing to the Father (*Acts John* 94). The opening of the hymn has a seemingly Trinitarian flavor in saying: "Glory be to thee, Father... Glory be to thee, Word... Glory be to thee, Spirit..." (cf. *Acts John* 96), but as we continue we find that something closer to Modalism is at play. John says, "This cross of light is sometimes called the (or a) word by me for your sakes, sometimes mind, sometimes Jesus, sometimes Christ, sometimes door, sometimes a way, sometimes bread, sometimes seed, sometimes resurrection, sometimes Son, sometimes Father, sometimes Spirit, sometimes life, sometimes truth, sometimes faith, sometimes grace" (*Acts John* 98)

<sup>2</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?* (London: SPCK, 2010), 147.

<sup>3</sup> I should note that this fear seems to play a significant role in Dunn's apprehension over affirming a fully divine Christology.

Roughly 1800 years after the *Acts of John* Karl Barth, whom many credit with sparking the resurgence of interest in the Trinity, was accused of something called “Christomonism,” a term that is tough to pin down if one were to look for a definition on the internet, but one that Barth himself defined as meaning that “Christ alone is real and that all other men are only apparently real.”<sup>4</sup> Today the term is often used to mean that the whole of theology is boiled down to the person of Christ. The danger inherent in such a practice is obviously the collapse of real personal distinctions between Father, Son, and Spirit, which would result in the heresy of Modalism.

Well Christians certainly don’t want to worship Jesus to the exclusion of the Father, nor do they want to collapse the personal distinctions that exist within the Trinity (presuming they understand what means), and yet in much of contemporary worship, especially in Charismatic contexts, this is exactly what’s happening. Robin Parry, commissioning editor for Wipf & Stock Publishers, has written a brilliant little volume to address this very problem. *Worshipping Trinity* is about exactly what the title says: worshipping Trinity. Parry’s contention is that the Christian God is the Trinity and the Trinity is the Christian God. As such, worshipping God should involve worshipping Trinity, not one Person to the neglect of the others.

Parry recognizes that most folks don’t realize what to do with the Trinity or why it matters. He helpfully shows how good theology and good worship are inextricably linked and how each is done in the service of the other. And while Parry’s focus is worshipping the Trinity, he realizes that this can’t be done apart from knowing something about the Trinity, so he spends a few chapters showing the Trinity in the Biblical narrative from creation to consummation, as well as how the Trinity factors into the Christian life in everything from salvation to the way we read our Bibles or engage in missions.

When talk turns to worship Parry covers what you’d expect in discussing the songs we sing, which if contemporary Christian music is any indication are overwhelmingly unipersonal, and the prayers we pray, which should be deliberately trinitarian, but unexpectedly he discusses our worshipping *with* the Trinity. Parry contends (drawing on the etymology of the English word “worship”) that at heart worship has to do with recognizing *worth*. As such, the Persons of the Trinity recognize each other’s intrinsic worth, and we join into the worshipful recognition. I’ve never thought about this but I certainly will now! I have, however, thought about the Incarnate Son’s worship of the Father, which serves as the blueprint for our own, which Parry also recognizes and highlights.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, “A Theological Dialogue,” *Theology Today* 19/2 (1962), 172.

Not content to simply point out how the Trinity should affect the type of worship we're used to (e.g., singing, preaching, partaking in communion, exercising spiritual gifts, etc.), Parry suggests some ways to enjoy and appreciate the Trinity that he considers "outside the box" in discussing the use of dance, art, creative writing, and making music (past singing hymns) in our worship. If anything is clear from reading this slim volume it's that Parry has given much thought to the subject. He seemingly sees a way to work the Trinity into just about everything, and a way to use just about anything to worship the Trinity. May his tribe increase!

Parry's book is refreshing because it answers the question of what should be done with the Trinity after believing it. For a great number of Christians the Trinity is a complicated doctrine and little more. Parry does well to point out that the Trinity is so much more and that as the Christian God the Trinity deserves Christian worship. I've often said that I enjoy attending the Roman Catholic Mass because I get something in the trinitarian shape of the liturgy that I don't generally get in my Pentecostal worship services. I try to make my personal worship as deliberately trinitarian as possible, but in a group setting it would be much better for the entire congregation to be on one accord.

A number of years ago Emil Brunner suggested that the Trinity had never been "a central article of faith in the religious life of the Christian Church as a whole, at any period in its history."<sup>5</sup> He was wrong, of course, but in looking at contemporary evangelical worship it would seem he wasn't so far off. This is why I'd recommend Parry's volume to pastors and worship leaders the world over but especially those leading Charismatic congregations; he has a fix to this problem and it's something that can be easily implemented by anyone willing to exert a bit of effort.

Are there things to disagree with in Parry's volume? Sure. I've never been fond of using dance metaphors to discuss the Trinity but Parry isn't so squeamish (171) and he approvingly quotes Eugene Peterson's incorrect reference to perichoresis as having something to do with dancing (83-84), while at least noting problems with the analogy. He also seems to approve of Jürgen Moltmann's take on the Son's God-forsakenness and the Father's suffering (41-42), which to my mind are deeply flawed concepts, but these are relatively minor gripes in the grand scheme of things. The one thing this volume lacks is indices. Subject and Scripture indices would be extremely helpful but the book is manageable without them.

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<sup>5</sup> Emil Brunner, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. 1: The Christian Doctrine of God* (trans. Olive Wyon; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1949), 205.