

## God-centered Worship

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 4, 2023.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (Gal. 4:4–6).<sup>1</sup>

In explaining our familial relationship with God in Christ to the Galatians, Paul provides one of the most succinct yet elegant statements of the Trinity. Here we see clearly the distinct Persons of the Trinity: “God sent forth his Son ... And ... has sent the Spirit of his Son ...” God the Son was sent from God the Father for the purposes of redeeming his elect through the atoning work of God the Son, applied to us by God the Holy Spirit. In considering this in the context of redemptive history, John Calvin explains, to the Father “is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.”<sup>2</sup> What we refer to simply as our “salvation” is a glorious trinitarian testimony, which should lead us rightly to worship, as the Holy Spirit “with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, Christian worship is distinctly trinitarian. Puritan John Owen says,

The proper and peculiar object of divine worship and invocation is *the essence of God*, in its infinite excellency, dignity, majesty .... Now this is common to all three persons, and is proper to each of them; not formally as a person, but as God blessed for ever. All adoration respects that which is common to all; so that in each act of adoration and worship all are to be adored and worshipped.”<sup>4</sup>

In other words, we praise our one God by praising the Father who ordained our redemption and sent his Son. We praise our one God by praising the Son who lived, died, and arose from the dead to accomplish our redemption. And we praise our one God by praising the Holy Spirit for revealing Christ to us, bringing us to life, and indwelling us to live in conformity to him. As our worship is grounded in who God is and what he has done, our worship will include glorifying the

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<sup>1</sup> Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2019), 500.

<sup>3</sup> “The Nicene Creed,” *Trinity Hymnal, Revised Edition* (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 846.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2019), 498.

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Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are one God, “the same in substance, equal in power and glory.”<sup>5</sup>

So, let us then worshipfully consider our passage today, in light of each Person of the Trinity and their roles in our redemption. Let us adore and worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, from whom, through whom, and by whom we are redeemed.

### **From the Father**

As they say, timing is everything, which is certainly the case in redemptive history. As God is sovereign over time, in the “fullness of time” God the Father “sent forth his Son.” It was providentially the perfect time, ordained by God, not a second too early or too late. What unfolded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was orchestrated all in God’s good timing.

But he who ordains “whatsoever comes to pass”<sup>6</sup> is not only sovereign over time but all things, including the conditions of Christ’s coming, including his conception within the womb of the virgin Mary. I suppose the Father could have sent forth his Son into the world another way, but then he who is “very God of very God” would not have been “made man,”<sup>7</sup> “born of a woman.” According to the sovereign plan of the Father, through the means of Mary, the sinless Son of God entered a world under the curse of sin.

But God did not ordain that he merely be born a man but also a son of Israel, the people of the Mosaic Covenant, the people entrusted with the oracles of God, the people given God’s law to live in obedience to it. The law is “holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12), for it comes from him who is holy, righteous, and good. God’s law is a reflection of his character, and so he ordained that his Son be born under it, to do what no Jew (nor Gentile) could do, to obey it to perfection.

God’s purpose in all of this, Paul states clearly, was “to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” The Father’s sovereign orchestration of redemptive history was not to provide a salvation option to be chosen or denied but to sovereignly procure lawbreaking slaves to sin and turn them into legal sons and daughters. This was his plan, not ours, his act of grace, not our works of obedience, his everlasting love for those he chose before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). “In love,” Paul explains, “he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:5), which he has guaranteed by sending the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of his Son, that we might call God our Father.

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<sup>5</sup> “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 360.

<sup>6</sup> “The Confession of Faith” 3.1, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 12.

<sup>7</sup> “The Nicene Creed,” *Trinity Hymnal, Revised Edition* (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 846.

Have you ever considered what a privilege it is to call almighty God “Father”? Not everyone can, only his child. Which is why the Spirit-indwelled heart of his child cries, “Abba! Father!” The redundancy is descriptive. The word “Abba” does not mean, nor has it ever meant, “Daddy” but is the Aramaic word for “Father.” It is the word Jesus used to pray and refer to his Father, and his Father is our Father, which is why he taught us to pray, “Our Father in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). And so, we call him Father, as only his child can do.

### **Through the Son**

The Son of God was not created in Mary’s womb. He is, as the Nicene Creed describes him, “the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.”<sup>8</sup> He was then “sent forth” as the Son from the Father, from heaven to earth. Paul describes this to the Philippians as an act of divine humility: the Son “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). “Though he was rich,” Paul tells the Corinthians, “for your sake he became poor, so that [we] by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

Of course, the poverty he encountered was far worse than material poverty. He, who is holiness incarnate, entered a world in rebellion against a holy God. He was born among a people who had been chosen by God, called by God, spoken to by God, even given the holy, righteous, and good law, and yet their hearts were far from him, spiritually impoverished. The children of Israel were “born under the law” but would not, could not, keep it, only the Son of God could and did.

Because Israel could not keep the law, nor any son or daughter of Adam, we became slaves to sin. The perfect standard of the law did not liberate us but instead condemned us, leaving us in bondage, shackled to “the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind . . . by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). Our only hope was that God the Father would send a redeemer, one who would and could redeem us from our slavery to sin. I love the way our Shorter Catechism puts it, asking, “Who is the redeemer of God’s elect?” To which the answer is given, “The only redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ, who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, forever.”<sup>9</sup>

And through Christ’s humility, in his accomplishing our redemption, the only Son of God made us sons too, rightful and fellow heirs with him. Not only was his atoning sacrifice an act of selfless love but also our adoption to be his brothers and sisters forever. What he is by nature, we are by grace. Martin Luther said, “There is no slavery in Christ, but only sonship” (Luther 26:390). It was no slip of the tongue that after his resurrection, Jesus referred to his disciples as “brothers” (John 20:17). He who cried out, “Abba! Father!” and then taught us to do the same,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 21, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 368-69.

like an older brother teaching his newly adopted sibling: “That’s what *we* call him; he’s *our* Father!”

### **By the Spirit**

In the Nicene Creed we confess that the Holy Spirit is the “Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son.”<sup>10</sup> Because he is, as Calvin puts it, “assigned the power and efficacy of [God’s redeeming] activity,” he applies what the Father ordained and the Son accomplished.” Therefore, we see the Holy Spirit active throughout our redemption. When “God sent forth his Son, born of woman,” it was the Holy Spirit who came upon her, as the power of “the Most High” overshadowed her (Luke 1:35). The eternal Son of God “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary.”<sup>11</sup>

The law that the Son was “born under,” the law that he fulfilled, and the Word that he confirmed was given by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The redemption accomplished by the Son is applied to us by the Holy Spirit “by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ” (WSC 30), “whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God” (WSC 34). And the confirmation of this reality is the Holy Spirit himself whom the Father has sent into our hearts, enabling and empowering us to cry, “Abba! Father!” I love the way F.F. Bruce describes it: “Abba” is “the voice of the Spirit of Jesus (on the lips of his people)” (Bruce, 199). And so, it is the Holy Spirit who leads us in God-centered worship.

Theologian Robert Leatham says, “The nature of our response in worship is to be shaped by the reality of the one we worship.”<sup>12</sup> If this is the case, then our worship is and must always be according to the revelation of our Triune God. We worship God the Father, who chose us and ordained our redemption, who sent and gave his only Son for us, and who sent his Spirit that we might know we are his children, that we may call him “Father.” We worship God the Son, who became flesh, lived in obedience to the law, suffered and died for us and for our sin, who resurrected from the dead, ascended into heaven, and who intercedes for us even now. We worship God the Holy Spirit, who gives us life and faith, sanctifying us from within and empowering us to live unto Christ. And as we worship God for who he is and what he has done, to paraphrase Gregory of Nazianzus, “we worship with one act of adoration the one undivided Trinity.”<sup>13</sup>

As we have received from, through, and by God, we respond in worship by the Holy Spirit through the Son to the Father. This is how we worship God as Christians, and as such I’d like to draw your attention to it in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper today, in which we feed on Christ,

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<sup>10</sup> “The Nicene Creed,” Trinity Hymnal, Revised Edition (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 846.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Leatham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2019), 506.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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“not after a corporal and carnal manner,” but in faith”<sup>14</sup> by the Holy Spirit. We come to the Lord’s table as saved sinners, yet the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, showing and giving us Christ, the sinless lamb of God. In this communion, by the Spirit through the Son, we share in his access to the Father. As we come to the table together, we give thanksgiving to God the Father through God the Son, by God the Holy Spirit. It is a meal of thanksgiving (*eucharisteo*) to God the Father for the gift of redemption. It is a meal of communion with the crucified and living Christ, the Son of God, who is God’s gift to the world. It is a meal of joy and hope by the Holy Spirit who gives us new life and provides a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

This is God-centered worship.

Glory be to the Father  
and to the Son  
and to the Holy Ghost:  
As it was in the beginning,  
is now and ever shall be,  
world without end. Amen.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> “The Shorter Catechism” Q. 96, *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: PCA Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 400.

<sup>15</sup> “Gloria Patri,” *Trinity Hymnal*, Revised Edition (Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 734.