

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN CORPORATE WORSHIP IN LIGHT OF THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. AND J. B. TORRANCE

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Abstract: *The Holy Spirit is not only absolutely integral to the triune life of God but is vital to Christian discipleship and corporate worship. Where worship has focused all too often on what Christians do in response to Christ's reconciling work, the Torrances remind us that worship does not hinge on us. Jesus' representative, substitutionary mediation for us in our place provides the foundation by which we may joyfully participate in Jesus' all-sufficient Response to and worship of the Father through union with him by the Spirit, discovering our true personhood in communion with God and with one another.*

Introduction

Amidst the lamentable fallout on multiple fronts from the current pandemic has been a decided downturn in in-person corporate worship services in churches across the country. Understandably, mandated lockdowns forced churches to develop creative ways of maintaining connections with and ministering to their people. Exclusively livestreamed Sunday worship services — affectionately referred to as “pajama church” by some — became the new normal. Over the course of time with the advent of effective vaccines and seemingly less virulent COVID strains, most churches have returned to in-person services with optional mask-wearing policies while many have also continued the livestream recordings. However, by

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and large in-person church attendance has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. The reasons for this can be varied. It could be understandably attributed to health concerns and an abundance of caution on the part of some who are feeling particularly vulnerable. It might signal a shift in habits that have downplayed the very need or desirability for a physical gathering of worshippers in the same space. Some might question the rationale of going to a church building when one can listen to the sermon and enjoy the music in the comfort of one's own home and be done with it within an hour's time, circumventing the commute. Has worship been reduced in the minds of a significant number of people to tuning in to an inspiring message and a few prayers in detachment from other worshippers? Is in-person corporate worship becoming an incidental, perhaps even dispensable, luxury, the loss of which would not feel all that detrimental to Christian discipleship? Such questions, while not equating worship simply to a series of predictable activities believers perform, do raise the issue of how believers perceive the dynamics involved in coming together as a community of faith for worship.

A flurry of Scriptures come to mind which underscore the value of in-person corporate worship. Psalm 73 presents a person striving to hang onto the opening theological affirmation that "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart"¹ while his life observation chafes against that notion. As he witnesses unscrupulous pagans thriving and reaping life's material "goodies" though they care nothing for the things of God while those striving to be faithful seem to get the short end of the stick, he wonders where the payoff is. As the psalm unfolds, we see that incongruity bringing him to a crisis of faith whereby he is tempted to abandon his faith "*until I entered the sanctuary of God*" (v. 17, emphasis mine). The crucial pivot point for him did not come through his own individual reflection in isolation from others; rather, something about entering into the corporate context with fellow worshippers enlarged his perspective to glimpse a grander vision of God's redemptive strategy.

The writer of Hebrews cites another reason for valuing in-person corporate worship. After laying out a masterful exposition of Jesus as the true High Priest of a new covenant, whose once-for-all self-offering through his life, death and

¹ Psalm 73:1 (New International Version).

resurrection is the unparalleled apex of God's redeeming purpose to rescue a fallen world, the writer senses that second-generation believers are in danger of becoming slovenly and not fully aware of the redemptive riches of the Gospel that had been bequeathed to them. He earnestly wants to jostle them awake and inject them with a newfound sense of urgency so that they might rediscover afresh the unrivaled treasure and hope they have in Christ: "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching."² The writer's undertone in such an exhortation is hardly blasé. He senses there is something vital about physically gathering together as a worshipping body that makes it more than merely an optional extra for those so inclined.

Finally, after expounding on the wonders of God destroying the hostility between Jews and Gentiles and reconciling them to himself through the Cross, thus creating one new humanity in Christ, in whom we all have access to the Father through the Spirit, the Apostle Paul makes this impassioned appeal to believers: "Be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus."³ Once again, he doesn't send them off as individuals to contemplate the marvels of atoning grace in isolation from others. Rather he reminds them of their *corporate* identity as fellow citizens with God's people, members of God's household, those who are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."⁴ As such they are to interact in real time with one another in ways that upbuild each other and glorify God.

The precise focus of this paper is to examine the role played by the Holy Spirit in the experience of corporate worship. It is axiomatic that corporate worship is a mainstay of Christian discipleship. And most, if not all, churches would accord some role to the Holy Spirit, although how and to what extent this is explicitly

² Hebrews 10:24-25 (NIV).

³ Ephesians 5:18-20 (NIV).

⁴ Ephesians 2:19-22 (NIV).

expressed in worship settings can vary widely, owing to denominational commitments and traditions. Rather than fixating on the “hows” of worship, what I first want to do here is to look at some of the key foundational underpinnings laced throughout the writings of T. F. Torrance and J. B. Torrance that address the all-important *Who* question of the God we worship, which can shed vital light on *What* this God has accomplished for us in Christ. As the person and work of Christ is so integral to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, it is incumbent on us first to examine the Torrance brothers’ christological foundation before engaging with the pneumatological ramifications for corporate worship. That will provide the contours by which to understand the Spirit’s involvement in actualizing the Gospel within us in a Christ-centered, Spirit-infused expression of authentic worship. Finally, I would like to suggest a possible tool the Spirit might utilize itself within a corporate worship setting, a tool of which I find little explicit mention within the Torrancean canon yet which strikes me as within the realm of possible fidelity to it.

At the outset of his foreword to Kevin Navarro’s illuminating study on Trinitarian doxology, Thomas Noble rightly offers this telling remark: “As James B. Torrance used to insist, dogmatics arises out of doxology.”⁵ Navarro follows this up with the following corollary: “Liturgy exposes theology. But it is also true that liturgy shapes and forms theology.”⁶ In a similar vein T. F. Torrance weighs in with this statement: “Belief and worship are inextricably intertwined.”⁷ Reverence, adoration and worship shape belief, while true belief reflexively informs worship. Such an observation bears itself out constantly throughout the Torrancean lore, as will become evident.

Worship Grounded in the Gospel of Grace

James Torrance contends that “how we worship God must reflect who God is — the triune God of grace — and what he has done and is doing for us in Christ and by

⁵ Thomas Noble, “Foreword” to Kevin Navarro, *Trinitarian Doxology. T. F. and J.B. Torrance’s Theology of Worship as Participation by the Spirit in the Son’s Communion with the Father* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), xi.

⁶ Navarro, *Trinitarian Doxology*, xvii.

⁷ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 134.

the Holy Spirit.”⁸ In J. B. Torrance’s apt words in the preface to *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* we hear the unmistakable trinitarian overtones for all that follows. Though God had so crafted the cosmos so as to resound with the grateful praise of all God’s creatures extolling the glory and magnificence of their Creator in a symphony of worship, something went awry. Human mutiny attested in Genesis 3 gave rise to an unrelenting cascade of alienation, dysfunction and bondage on a cosmic scale, prompting the Apostle Paul to liken creation to a woman groaning in labor, longing for its liberation. Rather than scrap his despoiled creation entirely, God went into search-and-rescue mode. One would be hard pressed to find a more succinct summary statement of the Gospel of grace as exemplified in the person and work of Jesus than here:

The good news is that God comes to us in Jesus to stand in for us and bring to fulfillment his purposes of worship and communion. Jesus comes to be the priest of creation to do for us, men and women, what we failed to do, to offer to the Father the worship and the praise we failed to offer, to glorify God by a life of perfect love and obedience, to be the one true servant of the Lord. In him and through him we are renewed by the Spirit in the image of God and in the worship of God in a life of shared communion. Jesus comes as our brother to be our great high priest, to carry on his loving heart the joys, the sorrows, the prayers, the conflict of all his creatures, to reconcile all things to God, and to intercede for all nations as our eternal mediator and advocate.⁹

The Gospel of grace is the Son of God entering the world that came into being through him clothed in the very fallen human flesh we share in order to sanctify it and bend our rebellious wills back to the Father,¹⁰ undoing the disastrous legacy of the first Adam’s disobedience. He did so by recreating human nature from within as he daily lived out an unbroken life of faithful obedience, in the process

⁸ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 10.

⁹ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 14.

¹⁰ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 126.

reconfiguring human existence as the new Adam.¹¹ It is vital to understand that for both Torrance brothers it is not pristine human nature untainted by the effects of the Fall that is inhabited by Jesus in the incarnation. For if it were so, grace would hover somewhere over and above us, not reaching us in the depths of our darkness. Rather, “he assumes that very humanity which is in need of redemption... that our humanity might be turned back to God in him by his sinless life in the Spirit, and, through him, in us.”¹² Lest it be missed, it is worth stressing that such atoning transformation happens not only *through* Christ’s work but is wrought *in and through his very person*, echoing Calvin’s stress on atonement as *en Christo*, not merely *dia Christou*.¹³

The Gospel of grace is Jesus not only representing God to us as the fully divine Incarnate Son but also representing us to God as the fully human covenant partner of God offering the perfect response of love and obedience on our behalf, which our addiction to sin has rendered us incapable of rendering on our own. Far from merely providing a moral exemplar who came to earth to show us how to live rightly, the incarnation demands that we look at Jesus through both lenses of a pair of binoculars, so to speak — on the one hand, seeing in him both the *Creator God* through whom all things, including our human nature, were created and therefore who alone could *re-create* that nature because he is inherently bonded to it as its Creator; on the other hand, seeing him also as the human covenant partner of God responding to the Father on our behalf as our representative. The ever-recurring

¹¹ Romans 5:12-21.

¹² J. B. Torrance, “Christ In Our Place” in *A Passion for Christ. The Vision that Ignites Ministry* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 47. Cf. also T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 281; T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 136; T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 48-49: “[T]he Incarnation was the coming of God to save us in the heart of our fallen and depraved humanity, where humanity is at its wickedest in its enmity and violence against the reconciling love of God... the coming of God to take upon himself our fallen nature, our actual human existence laden with sin and guilt, our humanity diseased in mind and soul in its estrangement or alienation from the Creator... the whole man had to be assumed by Christ is the whole man was to be saved.”

¹³ J. B. Torrance (referring to John Calvin’s point in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.4), *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 50. Cf. also James B. Torrance, “Christ In Our Place” in *A Passion for Christ*, 43, 46.

expression “vicarious humanity of Christ”¹⁴ reflects this dual reality¹⁵ that Christ’s personhood both *includes* us as our Representative and acts *in our place* as our Substitute.¹⁶ Both concepts are vital to a proper understanding of who Jesus is and what his actions have accomplished for us. Unless they are held together, the Gospel of grace forged for us in our place and on our behalf in the person of our Redeemer Lord and actualized in us by the Holy Spirit will inevitably lead to a truncated view of worship that ends up replacing Christ’s all-sufficient response at the center with our own paltry rendition.

Jesus’ High-Priestly Mediation

Both Torrances place great stock on the mediation of Jesus through his High Priestly role.¹⁷ There is no question but that the Old Testament High Priest operated in a vicarious role on behalf of the people on the Day of Atonement.¹⁸ Just as he would act as the people’s representative before God in entering the Holy of Holies

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 136. Torrance sees in the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ a fleshing out of 2 Corinthians 9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (NIV). Torrance’s rendition strikes a similar note: “He the Son of God united himself with us in our actual human condition so intimately and profoundly that through his healing and sanctifying of our human nature in himself we may be made with him sons of God.”

¹⁵ J. B. Torrance, “Christ In Our Place” in *A Passion for Christ*, 43-44: “He is at once the God whom we worship and to whom we pray...and he is at the same time the One who himself for us lived a life in the power of prayer....God in love gives himself to the world in Christ as God to be the Object of our love and worship, and at the same time He comes as Man to provide for us that life of human love and obedience and worship for which we were made and so constitute himself our Saviour.”

¹⁶ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 47, 50-52, 56, 80, 78, 87-88, 92.

¹⁷ J. B. Torrance, “Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ” in *A Passion for Christ*, 64-65: “We do not only begin the Christian life by committing ourselves in faith to Jesus Christ, to receive the forgiveness of our sins. We are summoned all our life to look away in faith to Christ our High Priest, to let him lift us up daily by the Spirit into his prayer life. Faith means surrendering ourselves, abandoning ourselves daily to be led by the Spirit... We can only pray aright in the Spirit who is given to us as we abandon ourselves daily to Christ who ever lives to intercede for us and with us.” Notice the prominent role played by the Spirit in rendering the priestly mediation accessible to us.

¹⁸ J. B. Torrance, “The Vicarious Humanity of Christ” in T. F. Torrance, ed., *The Incarnation* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press), 1981, 137-139. Cf. also T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 45-46.

with the sacrificial blood to plead for God's forgiveness and the cleansing of the covenant bond, he would emerge as God's representative to the people assuring them of the desired restoration. Just as "all Israel entered in"¹⁹ in the person of their priestly mediator, so Jesus' High Priestly role enables him to displace our paltry, woefully inadequate offerings of ourselves with the perfectly acceptable offering of himself, "the inclusive and representative humanity of Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant who represents God to humanity and humanity to God in his own Person as the One on behalf of the Many."²⁰

T. F. Torrance speaks of Jesus' "radical substitution" including both his death and his Incarnate person and life. "Substitution understood in this radical way means that Christ takes our place in all our human life and activity before God, even in our believing, praying and worshipping of God, for he has yoked himself to us in such a profound way that he stands in for us, and upholds us at every point in our human relations before God."²¹ It is "an atoning and reconciling exchange in which what is ours is displaced by Christ who substituted himself in our place yet is restored in a new way to us."²² Torrance sees in Galatians 2:20 ample justification for construing the concept of substitution to include Jesus' substitutionary *faith* which undergirds our own faith response. The Christian life not only is believing *in* Jesus as its object but rests on *Jesus' own faith* ("I live by the faith of the Son of God"), "his vicarious and substitutionary faith which embraces and undergirds us" that is "a gift of God" enabling us to "truly and properly believe... in which our faith is laid hold of, enveloped and upheld by his unswerving faithfulness."²³

¹⁹ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 49, alluding to Calvin's observation in his Commentary on Hebrews 6:19, CO55-81: "When the high priest entered into the holy presence of Yahweh in the sanctuary, that he might present all Israel in his person to God, we can say, as Calvin puts it in his commentary on Hebrews, all Israel entered in his person."

²⁰ J. B. Torrance, "Christ In Our Place" in *A Passion for Christ*, 44.

²¹ T. F. Torrance, "Preaching Jesus Christ" in *A Passion for Christ*, 24.

²² *Ibid.*, 26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25.

The Spirit who Reveals and Conceals

Having established some key christological parameters, I now want to give attention to the ways in which the Holy Spirit functions within the redemptive arc of God's triune relations, particularly with regard to worship. Perhaps the first thing to say is that the Spirit is inseparable from the Son as well as from the Father; the Spirit is indeed the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father. T. F. Torrance can speak of a sort of reciprocal mediation, the Spirit mediating the Son as the Son mediates the Spirit.²⁴ As the Spirit conceived the Incarnate Son in Mary's womb, descended upon him, empowered him for his ministry, and shone the spotlight upon him at every stage of his existence, so Jesus prior to his Ascension promised to send that same Spirit to continue his work on earth through his disciples. To be in the Spirit is to be in Christ, which is to be in God.²⁵

What makes the Spirit seem particularly elusive to us is the fact that the Spirit is not known directly, pointing away from itself, but at the same time making God known. "He is the invisible Light in whose shining we see the uncreated Light of God manifest in Jesus Christ but he is known himself only in that he lights up for us the Face of God in the Face of Jesus Christ."²⁶ Though only God knows God, the Spirit of God who knows the depths of God can impart such knowledge to us as he comes to indwell us, giving us access to what would otherwise be unknowable to us.²⁷ We have the interpreter of the things of God residing within us, translating for us what would be utter gibberish apart from this gracious impartation of God's own self-interpretation through the Spirit. "It is through the Communion of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son that we may know God in his Triune Reality." Through the Spirit "God really does impart himself to us and actually makes himself known to us within the conditions of our creaturely forms of thought and speech...."²⁸ Yet at the same time as the Spirit reveals, the Spirit also

²⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 237.

²⁵ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 63, 151.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16. Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.

²⁸ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 151.

conceals to some extent because “it is in making himself actually known to us through the Son and in the Spirit that God reveals himself as infinitely greater than we can conceive.”²⁹ The Spirit’s elusive nature serves to guard the transcendent Majesty of God, which restrains us by the Spirit’s sheer holiness from transgressing creaturely bounds and thinking presumptuously of God.³⁰ Echoing Ephesians 2:18 — “Through the Son we have access to the Father by the Spirit” — we can know God as God is *in himself* because it is *through himself* as Word and Spirit that God is revealed to us. That is to say, we can know truly (i.e., what God reveals to us) but never exhaustively.

An axiom of Torrancean theology is that we know God as God gives himself to be known in God’s reconciling acts in and through the Son, which the Spirit spotlights for us. There is no separating knowing and being. We can only know God in the manner in which God gives himself to be known. Any attempt to circumvent God’s self-revelation by sidestepping the centrality of the Incarnate Son in the interest of arriving at some other spiritual source of knowledge of God independent of the Son³¹ is pursuing an alien path. The Spirit has no private purview of knowledge of God hermetically sealed off from the Son and the Father. To reiterate, the Spirit’s job is not to call attention to himself apart from Christ but rather “to focus all attention on Christ, to glorify him, to bear witness to his deity, to testify to his mind and will, and in him and through him to lead us to the Father.”³² This underscores all the more the importance of stressing that in the Spirit we do not have a mere facsimile of God, a lesser underling, an approximation of God’s Being but rather God giving himself to us to be known, a knowledge grounded in God’s own self-revealing and self-imparting and actualized within us through the Spirit’s presence and activity.³³ That self-revelatory, self-imparting work of the Spirit does not hold us at a distance but rather draws near to us, God speaking personally into

²⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 214-215.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 147.

³² T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 253.

³³ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 147.

our hearts “to strike into the depths of our being and liberate us for communion with himself, making us capable of responding to him as Lord and Saviour.”³⁴

The Spirit who Unites

The unitive function of the Spirit has long been a part of the discussion of intratrinitarian relations within God’s Being. Augustine famously spoke of the Spirit as the bond of love between Lover (Father) and Beloved (Son).³⁵ Torrance refers to the Spirit as God also uniting himself to us,³⁶ and on other occasions speaking of Christ uniting us with himself through the Spirit.³⁷ The Spirit not only unites us to Christ but also unites us with one another, baptizing us into the one Lord and one faith.³⁸

The unifying nature of the Spirit figures prominently in the incarnational trinitarian model of worship articulated by James Torrance.³⁹ Tellingly, the Spirit-

³⁴ Ibid., 63.

³⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity* XV.17.24. Cf. Derek Vreeland, “Is the Holy Spirit the Love Between the Father and the Son?” *Missio Alliance* (June 3, 2015), <https://www.missioalliance.org/is-the-holy-spirit-the-love-between-the-father-and-the-son/>. Vreeland refers to Colin Gunton’s note of caution with regard to Augustine’s depiction of the Spirit primarily as the intratrinitarian bond of love between the Father and the Son lest it be interpreted as too insular and insufficiently eschatological. According to Vreeland, Gunton wanted to guard against understanding that bond of love as suggesting a “closed circle” of God’s triune life. Rather, the Spirit’s activity reflects an *outgoing* impulse (e.g., bringing creation into being, empowering Jesus’ missional work in the world, summoning and equipping the church to proclaim and live out the Gospel in the world). The Spirit is integral to the communion of triune persons *reaching out to the other*, a love that is opened toward that which is not itself. Cf. Colin Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 126-128. Vreeland’s concluding comments are trenchant: “When we as a church pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit we are asking God to enable us with a missional spirit, so that as a community we would be ever focused on the other, the broken, the forgotten, the overlooked, the marred, and the immoral. We remain open not out of duty but out of a love flowing from the heart of the Trinity. We remain open to receive those who would come so that they may be transformed by that love.”

³⁶ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 4.

³⁷ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 294. Also J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 17.

³⁸ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 292; also T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 2.

³⁹ Cf. J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 30, for a visual diagram depicting what Torrance refers to as the incarnational trinitarian model of worship.

bonded relationship unifying Jesus and the Father occupies center stage. Torrance is quick to point out that it is “not our religious experience, not our faith or repentance or decision, however important these are”⁴⁰ but that utterly unique Father-Son relationship in the Spirit that is unequivocally central to worship. The dual incarnational identity of Jesus as Son of God and Son of Man shows the doubly representative nature of his being and mission wherein “Christ is presented to us as the Son living a life of union and communion with the Father in the Spirit... [while simultaneously] presenting himself in our humanity through the eternal Spirit to the Father on behalf of humankind.”⁴¹ The Spirit’s unifying presence undergirds both relational poles — with God and with humankind. Concomitant with that double representation of the Son is a double movement of the Spirit, described in various ways:

... making himself open for our knowing of him in his revelation and in making us open for him in receiving and understanding his revelation... a two-way relation with himself, in which he activates his relation toward us and at the same time activates our relationship toward himself...⁴²

... the Spirit speaking the Word of God to the church and creating within it faithful hearing and understanding of the Word, the Spirit testifying to the mighty acts of God in Christ and the Spirit of response to Christ in the church forming it unto the obedience of faith in him...⁴³

... [acting] creatively upon the church in the giving of life and the distribution of his manifold gifts but... [bringing] his creative work to its completion or end in the establishment of the church as the Body of Christ, the new sphere of existence in him. He was the Creator Spirit acting always both from the side of God toward man and from the side

⁴⁰ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 30.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 152

⁴³ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 254-255.

of man toward God.⁴⁴

... a God-manward movement of the Holy Spirit, in creating, in revealing, in renewing us in worship, in giving gifts to the Church... and a man-Godward movement of the Spirit — a priestly, interceding ministry where the Spirit leads us to the Father through Christ... lifting us up into communion with God...a 'vicarious' priestly work of the Spirit.⁴⁵

The notion of participation⁴⁶ is frequently employed to depict the effect of the Spirit's work in including us in the loop, so to speak, of the Son's relation with the Father, for "by the Spirit he draws men and women to participate both in his life of worship and communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world."⁴⁷ It is indeed James Torrance's signature definition of Christian worship — "our participation through the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father," to which are added the qualifying notes "in his vicarious life of worship and intercession"⁴⁸ and "in a creaturely way."⁴⁹ Having received the adoption of sons [and daughters] into the Son⁵⁰ and being lifted up by the Spirit into this communion is vital, as both Torrances see it, for "apart from the communion of the Holy Spirit we could not enjoy the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God the Father." It must be so, for it is through the Spirit's ministrations that God's love is shed into our hearts.⁵¹ Furthermore, grace is not a package detachable from the Son but is

⁴⁴ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁵ James B. Torrance, unpublished lecture notes from "Two Views of Worship - in Scotland Today," 3.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that participation, as the Torrances understand it, does not erase our human involvement but rather establishes its proper place while retaining the centrality of Jesus: "It holds together what WE do and that in which we are given to participate — the Son's communion with the Father and the Son's mission from the Father to the world." - J. B. Torrance, "Christ In Our Place" in *A Passion for Christ*, 51.

⁴⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 31.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Also T. F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 2.

⁴⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 148-9.

⁵⁰ Galatians 4:5 (NIV).

⁵¹ Romans 5:5 (NIV); T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 3.

what has been wrought in and through the person of the Son himself, in what God has done for us in our stead and on our behalf from within his vicarious humanity and is accessed by us through *personal union* with Christ by the Spirit, not merely doled out as a parcel of benefits achieved through Christ's atoning work.. To echo 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ Jesus has *himself* become for us wisdom from God, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

The Objective Spirit who Frees and Personalizes

A distinct emphasis in the Torrance brothers' thought is the Holy Spirit as God's freedom to be present to God's creation, echoing the Scriptural witness: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."⁵² We have already seen this with respect to the Spirit's freedom to mediate and actualize the knowledge of God within us,⁵³ "making himself open for our knowing of him in his revelation."⁵⁴ God is free to make himself accessible to us by communicating to us through the incarnate Son — free to become human as the man Jesus — as well as through imparting the Spirit to actualize his self-giving to us and effect our receiving of him in that self-giving.⁵⁵ In saying this we must not reduce such impartation solely to information about God; it is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, God imparting *himself* through the Spirit. In addition, T. F. Torrance cites Basil's depiction of the work of the Spirit as manifesting "God's sovereign freedom to be present to his creatures in the world in order to realise and bring to completion the creative purpose of God in which creatures are established in enduring relations with the holiness and Lordship of God."⁵⁶ Paraphrasing Gregory of Nazianzus, Torrance alludes to the Spirit's eschatological work by referring to the Spirit's ministry of "upholding living rational creatures from below and within them... bringing them to their true end or telos in

⁵² 2 Corinthians 3:17 (NIV).

⁵³ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 203.

⁵⁴ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵⁶ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 228-229, alluding to Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 49, 51-53, 55-57, 61-62.

God... [enabling them to] participate in the very life and holiness of God himself."⁵⁷ Elsewhere Torrance refers to Basil's notion of the "royal freedom of the Spirit (*C. Macedonium*) who though he is exalted infinitely above and beyond all creatures and all powers of heaven, is yet free to be present to the creature and to fulfil from the side of the creature the perfecting work which binds the creature in relationship to the Creator, and so to realize its life."⁵⁸

In speaking of the Spirit's involvement in fulfilling God's "perfecting work" and purpose within human beings, we must not suppose that the Spirit steamrolls over human creatures to bring them to the telos God envisioned for us. Torrance appeals to yet another ancient church father — Cyril of Jerusalem — to underscore the fact that this is not a coercive impress of the Spirit upon recalcitrant individuals. Rather, "His coming is gentle... with the compassion of a true Guardian, for he comes to save and to heal, to teach, to admonish, to strength, to exhort, to enlighten the mind." Torrance urges us to envision the Spirit as "the creative, energizing, enlightening presence of God who freely interacts with his human creatures in such a way to sustain their relation to himself as the source of their spiritual, personal and rational life.... [H]e does not overwhelm us with might and violence, for his coming is altogether of a different kind,"⁵⁹ even though it is with God's "sheer unlimited power" that the Spirit comes to us. He neither crushes our creaturely nature nor overrides our personal individuality but rather as the Personalizing Person comes to emancipate us from our imprisonment in self-centeredness and our narcissistic self-preoccupation, "healing, restoring and deepening human personal being"⁶⁰ as well as lifting us out of ourselves to find our true being-in-communion with God and with one another.

⁵⁷ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 229.

⁵⁸ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 223.

⁵⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 227-228.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 230. Also J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 41.

Worship with a Difference

In speaking of the Spirit's interior work of actualizing within us what has been done for us in Christ's vicarious humanity in our place and the renewing, sustaining, sanctifying, transforming work that the indwelling Spirit effects upon us, we must never confuse our subjective spirits with the objective presence and impact of the Holy Spirit. To blur this distinction is to set ourselves up to be redirected away from the source of our new life in Christ and become unhealthily engrossed in ourselves. The antidote is to recover the objectivity of the indwelling Spirit, through whom we "come up against the relentless attack upon us of God's love incarnated... in the exclusive particularity of Jesus Christ"⁶¹ that saves us from such a distortion.

Despite all that has been said about the decidedly trinitarian incarnational depiction of the Gospel of grace that both T. F. and J.B. Torrance have devoted their life's work to expounding, it might look to some onlookers that corporate worship services which embrace this perspective don't look all that externally different than before. Worshippers still gather together at a prescribed time and sit typically in rows, Scripture is still read, sermons are still preached, prayers are offered in profusion, confession of sin and assurances of pardon have their allotted place and musical contributions in the form of hymn singing, praise choruses, and/or special music from a choir or select musicians are still offered. But the Torrances would contend that beneath the regularity of observable activities is a swirling undercurrent of monumental differences. At the heart of it is this: though we do sing, pray, listen, confess, partake of sacraments, we are not the center of worship. Worship does not hinge on what we do or how worthy we deem our worshipping "performance" to be: we have been blessedly displaced by Jesus, our great High Priest who is present through his Spirit to lead us to the Father that we might be joyfully and gratefully caught up in the wonder of participating in the Son's communion with the Father. "The Holy Spirit renews us by drawing us within the self-consecration of Christ made on our behalf and by assimilating us into his holiness."⁶² The Holy Spirit is not the "filler" who has taken the place of Jesus after

⁶¹ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 227, 235.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 250-251.

his Ascension back to heaven, "acting in the place of, as if in the absence of, the exalted Lord."⁶³ It is so elegantly said that I include this lengthy quote in its entirety:

[T]hrough the coming of the Spirit God brings his self-revelation to its fulfilment, for the Spirit is the creative Subject of God's revelation to us and the creative Subject in our reception and understanding of that revelation. The Holy Spirit does not do this by continuing a work begun by Christ and now left off by him, as if we now passed from the economy of the Son in the economy of the Spirit. On the contrary, through the Spirit, in and with his coming, Christ himself returns to be present among us, living and speaking and operating in the Church which through the Spirit is constituted his Body on earth and in history. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church means that it is the living Lord himself who is here in his redeeming and sanctifying activity.⁶⁴

The Spirit "assimilates us into the one all-sufficient worship of Christ," who is himself very much present to gather up our worship and sanctify it with his own, presenting us in him to the Father. Enlivened by our ongoing participation in the triune life of God mediated through God's indwelling Spirit, the Church is called to share in Christ's ongoing ministry within the gathered community as well as sharing in Christ's mission in the world.

We pray, but we do so knowing we have twin allies: the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us when we are clueless about what or how to pray; and Jesus himself who ever lives to intercede for us, joining our paltry attempts with his prayers to sanctify and present them to the Father. The Spirit "makes the intercessions of Christ to echo inaudibly in our hearts" as we join in the Son's cry of "*Abba* Father" as adopted sons and daughters.⁶⁵ We are not left on our own in our

⁶³ Ibid., 249-250.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁶⁵ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 154.

stammering attempts to call upon God as we present our praises, petitions or laments.

We take sobering stock of ourselves to confess our sins, knowing that we do not come to a "Contract God"⁶⁶ who is all too ready to nail us to them and impose penalties for our failure to meet certain conditions for acceptance. Rather, we dare to come boldly and confidently before the throne of grace, knowing that "we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need"⁶⁷ because our brother Jesus has preceded us in taking upon himself all of our failings in order to judge and deliver us from them through his forgiving grace. The Gospel of Jesus Christ does not sentimentalize sin; rather, the Holy Spirit indicts the sin within us that tugs at our heart daily. At the same time we dare to own up to it in the confidence that just as our being forgiven implies being found guilty, we are clothed with the total forgiveness of Jesus which has embraced in our stead the total judgment merited by our sin and absolved us of any condemnation, including us in the new humanity he has wrought for us and now shares with us.⁶⁸

We still listen to Scripture read and proclaimed, but realize that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical writers is present with us to illumine our understanding, to speak personally to us in the depths of our hearts so that the life-giving Word can saturate and sanctify our minds, cleansing our thoughts so as to bring them into closer alignment with God's redemptive purposes. We trust that in the Word proclaimed we hear the grace notes of a God who doesn't "throw us back on ourselves to make our response" to God but who in Christ has "already provided for us that Response which alone is acceptable... the Offering made for humankind in the life obedience and passion of Jesus Christ."⁶⁹ We lean into the notion that faith is a "response to a Response already made for us and continually being made for us in Christ."⁷⁰

⁶⁶ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 72.

⁶⁷ Hebrews 4:16 (NIV).

⁶⁸ T. F. Torrance, "Preaching Jesus Christ" in *A Passion for Christ*, 28. See also *Theology in Reconstruction*, 221.

⁶⁹ J. B. Torrance, "Christ in our Place" in *A Passion for Christ*, 41.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

We baptize, though in doing so we banish any illusion that it is our faith decision, our pious striving, our commitment that saves us. Rather, we cast all reliance on our Lord and Savior Jesus whose baptism in the waters of Jordan in identifying with us sinners culminated in the ultimate baptism of his atoning death and resurrection in our place. By faith we trust that in his representative capacity as our High Priest his self-offering included us and raised us up to new life in and with him. The repeatable rite (*baptismos*) has no converting power in and of itself; it is wholly on the reality (*baptisma*) of Jesus' saving acts for us on our behalf signified by the rite of baptism that we lean. When he died, we died; when he rose, we rose⁷¹... not merely in some watered-down metaphorical sense but in all actuality attested by God's self-revelation.

We imbibe the elements of the Lord's Supper, not because there is some magical concoction in the elements themselves that will cleanse and renew us with one easy gulp. Rather, we partake in recognition that Jesus is truly present as our great High Priest, "the one true worshipper who unites us to himself by the Spirit in an act of memory and in a life of communion as he lifts us up by word and sacrament into the very triune life of God."⁷² We do not harangue ourselves with guilt and crippling self-recrimination for our failings but gladly "participate in his self-consecration and self-offering to the Father... with him and in him and through him before the Majesty of God in worship, praise and adoration with no other sacrifice than the sacrifice of Jesus Christ our Mediator and High Priest,⁷³ ever mindful that he who meets us in the present to nurture and empower us by his Spirit will also come in glory in the full pageantry his majesty surely warrants.

Music as a Way of Opening Us Up to See and Hear Anew?

We sing and listen to musical offerings, not merely to entertain or perform but to let the Holy Spirit use the gift of well-ordered sound to open us up to divine realities that point beyond themselves through our sanctified human imagination to Christ

⁷¹ Romans 6:3-8.

⁷² J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 17.

⁷³ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 134.

through the medium of music. The one reference to music I found in my foray through the Torrance brothers' writings was James Torrance's statement that "true theology is theology that sings."⁷⁴ Most likely he meant that sound theology well-grounded in the Gospel of grace naturally engenders an air of joy rather than fear, guilt or dreaded obligation. He himself composed a hymn.⁷⁵ Certainly singing is deeply rooted in the worship life of God's people down through the ages, as the Psalms attest.⁷⁶ But I would like to suggest an idea that emerges from the relatively new domain of the interplay between theology, worship and artistic imagination. While the lyrics of hymns and spiritual songs can remind us of God's saving acts and prompt us to lift our hearts in grateful praise, can we not envision the music itself beyond the lyrics as engaging our humanity at an ever more profound level than words can express? The Spirit's intercessions for us "with groanings too deep for words"⁷⁷ suggest such a level of engagement is possible. If Jesus embraced to the fullest extent the very human nature we inhabit, is it stretching the boundaries too much to imagine that the human capacity to make music, to be moved by it, might be a vehicle through which the Spirit can reach beyond our defenses, turning our hearts toward Christ and opening us up more fully to God?⁷⁸ Could the arts, and specifically music here, harbor an ability "to reunite the intellect with the other facets of our human make-up — our bodies, wills, emotional life, and so on" in such

⁷⁴ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 10.

⁷⁵ "I Know Not How To Pray" by J. B. Torrance, "Christ In Our Place" in *A Passion for Christ*, 53.

⁷⁶ The Spirit's activity of "lifting up all creation in praise and rejoicing in God" (T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 242) would strongly suggest that happening through musical expression.

⁷⁷ Romans 8:26.

⁷⁸ Cf. N. T. Wright Online, "Get Me A Musician! - II Kings 3:15," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPKMyQOh-XY>. In this brief podcast Wright insightfully contends that "music like the arts in general — like painting, poetry, dance, all sorts of things — music is a way of stirring up the imagination, and the imagination is one of the faculties with which we humans perceive that larger world than the rather shrunken world we are always tempted to live in — the larger world within which God the Creator is doing new creation, is redeeming us, is rescuing us, and is bring us forward in his purposes.... [T]hese may be ways in which we can draw out fresh meaning, fresh meaning from God, fresh meaning in the world. Then it may be that the arts, and not least music, can be used as a way of cracking things open, a way of opening the darkened rooms in which we so often live and letting in the light of God's truth."

a way that "it takes us beyond the surface in some sense to see or experience something which otherwise remains hidden from us"?⁷⁹ Trevor Hart suggests such possibilities in his discussion of the incarnation and artistry, seeing the incarnational "taking flesh" of the Son as lending "a significant theological warrant for a human project of imaginative creativity such as all art involve," even venturing the intriguing thought that "the God of Scripture... is the first and last patron of the arts."⁸⁰ The following series of quotes convey a sense of the kind of rich, provocative out-of-the-box interplays between art and theological reflection that tease our sensibilities and entice further reflection:

The artist... sees more or otherwise than what is generally perceptible, and symbolizes her vision that others may share it. Her art grants 'eyes to see and ears to hear' to those whose seeing and hearing is otherwise less full, or differently focused and attuned.⁸¹

[Referring to the painter Wassily Kandinsky:] The realm within which he perceives artistic meaning as rooted is not subjective. The 'inner need' (of artist and beholder) and the 'inner meaning' (of physical objects) to which he repeatedly alludes are not products of human subjectivity, but means by which humans as essentially spiritual beings, are meshed into or related to the wider spiritual network of the real. Artistic creativity, therefore, is for him not a matter of *sheer* creativity so much as a discernment of the true meaning of a world existing beyond the artist's subjectivity.⁸²

If Christian faith apprehends more than the humanity of Jesus... it certainly apprehends nothing less.... That God has graciously placed himself in our midst for touching, hearing and seeing means that this same 'physical' and historical manifestation must always be the place

⁷⁹ Trevor Hart, *Beholding the Glory. Incarnation Through the Arts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001, 9.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

where we put ourselves in our repeated efforts to know him again and ever more fully. We cannot appreciate Mozart's artistry unless the sound of his music remains our constant companion; we may appreciate more than the sounds themselves, but never less. There is something more than the 'flesh' to be considered, but the two levels must be held together inseparably if the essential significance of each is not to slip from our grasp.⁸³

Perhaps in our attempts to recover a chastened theology of worship that is more consonant with the incarnational-trinitarian markers replete throughout the biblical witness, we might consider allowing the winds of the Spirit to blow more freely across the terrain of our lives to open us up afresh in the deepest recesses of our being to the Gospel of grace by means of some level of artistic engagement. And just perhaps the Spirit might harness the creative power of music toward such an end to help us "reimagine a too-familiar theology"⁸⁴ that has lost its connection with the High Priestly mediation of Christ, which summons us by the Spirit and enables us through union with the Son to find our true being-in-communion with God and one another.

In all our knowledge and proclamation of God in worship and witness we make use of human and earthly forms of thought and speech, cognitive, linguistic or liturgical forms... In themselves they are merely expressions of human and earthly activity and reveal no God but man. If they are really to serve their purpose they must be made to point beyond themselves to the divine realities they are meant to signify. That can happen only through the power of the Holy Spirit as he himself testifies of God in and through them, for he alone can make the forms of faith and witness transparent by making the Reality of God shine through them.⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid., 24-25.

⁸⁴ Jeremy Begbie, "Through Music: Sound Mix" in *Beholding the Glory*, 139.

⁸⁵ T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 257.

It is a difficult task for pastors and congregations to break free from well-grooved patterns and habits that are deeply entrenched in the belief that worship is primarily centered on what we do. The Torrance brothers have posed a serious challenge to the Church to reconsider that all-too-common assumption. Through their writings they exhort the Church to reframe its theology as well as actual practice of worship unapologetically around a more solidly trinitarian, Christocentric framework wherein Jesus Christ is not only the object of worship but the ever-present leader of our worship as well through the Holy Spirit. The creative ways in which the Spirit is constantly at work aligning believers with the redemptive tempo of corporate worship as well as actualizing our participation in the dynamic grace-filled life of the Triune God is both indispensable and awe-inspiring. What an invaluable, if sometimes underestimated, gift the Torrances have bequeathed to Christian communities of faith everywhere!