

CHRIST, THE TRUEST DISCIPLE:

**J. B. Torrance's Vision of Worship Applied Towards a Grace-Filled,
Trinitarian Understanding of Discipleship**

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Abstract: *J. B. Torrance's Trinitarian vision of worship provides a transformative framework for understanding discipleship. This article introduces two leading models of discipleship within 20th century movements: a model shaped by an understanding of the "Great Commission" that focuses on disciple-making in terms of multiplication, alongside a model driven by spiritual practices that focuses on character formation. Both models can be applied in ways that miss the trinitarian shape of life with God in Christ. Constructively engaging J. B. Torrance's understanding of worship as a trinitarian ordinance of grace lays the groundwork for a vision of discipleship shaped by Christ himself as the true disciple, rather than our own efforts and strivings.*

Kristen Deede Johnson and Anna Erickson, "Christ, the Truest Disciple: J. B. Torrance's Vision of Worship Applied Towards a Grace-Filled, Trinitarian Understanding of Discipleship," *Participatio* 10: "The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience" (2022): 153-176. *Participatio* is distributed by the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Introduction

In *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, J. B. Torrance explores the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity for Christian worship.¹ As he unpacks worship as our participation through the Holy Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father, he reframes worship as a gift in which we participate rather than as a work that we do. This gracious vision of worship has implications that extend well beyond worship to the life of discipleship more generally.

Reflecting on how people typically understand worship, Torrance writes, "[P]robably the most common and widespread view is that worship is something which we, religious people, do... No doubt we need God's grace to help us do it. We do it because Jesus taught us to do it and left us an example of how to do it. But worship is what we do before God."² This language could be applied to many contemporary views of discipleship as well. Common approaches to discipleship focus on what Christians do to live the Christian life. These approaches may include a sense that God's grace is needed to help us live as disciples, but they often place a primary emphasis on what we do before God. If Jesus has an ongoing role to play, it is as that of example.

In this article, we will explore what it might look like to reimagine discipleship as God's work, always initiated and carried through by the Spirit via our union with Christ. As we engage with contemporary models of discipleship, we will see that they often fall short both theologically and practically. Applying Torrance's reframing of worship to the way we approach discipleship, we will find theological resources that enlarge our understanding of the Trinity's role within our Christian lives and offer a more consistently gracious notion of discipleship.

Models of Discipleship

In *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, Torrance unpacks his trinitarian view of worship in part by identifying and analyzing different theological

¹ J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, 20.

models of worship. In his analysis, he highlights ways in which these models of worship are unitarian rather than trinitarian in nature. In contrasting unitarian and trinitarian, Torrance is not drawing on technical definitions of Unitarianism but rather identifying a way of approaching faith that focuses on the human dimension at the expense of the trinitarian dimension. In a unitarian view of worship, the focus is on worship as what we humans do before God. Our activity in going to church, singing, praying, and listening to the sermon is the focus. Torrance's concern is that this misses some crucial components of a biblical understanding of worship. Worship that focuses on "what we do before God," he writes, "is in practice unitarian, has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness."³ Torrance then explores different theological models that are either explicitly unitarian or practically unitarian, before articulating in more detail his understanding of a trinitarian model.

In our research on discipleship, we are in the beginning stages of mapping out differing contemporary models of discipleship. In this section we will introduce two models of discipleship that are particularly prominent today. Both models can have unitarian tendencies, in the Torrance sense of a tendency to focus on what we do in discipleship. We will offer a brief history of these two models to provide some context for understanding the landscape of contemporary discipleship.⁴ In the next section we will engage in some theological analysis, exploring ways in which contemporary exemplars of these models are more unitarian than trinitarian. We will then offer a vision of discipleship that is trinitarian in nature, drawing on Torrance's theological framework.

One contemporary model of discipleship understands discipleship as disciple-making. Disciple-making is rooted in the belief that God's call upon us to be disciples is deeply connected with the call issued in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) to go and make disciples. As a disciple, one is called to invest in others, following the example of Jesus who in his earthly ministry invested in twelve

³ Ibid.

⁴ The history of these concepts of discipleship has not yet been told. What is offered here is a preliminary account.

disciples, and more specifically in three (Peter, James, and John), to give us an example to follow once he died and rose again. When Jesus tells us to make disciples in the Great Commission, he intended for us to look to his example as a model. Disciple-making can be understood as a multiplication model of discipleship with an emphasis on evangelism (drawing people into the faith) and mentoring (building them up in the faith until they are ready to be sent out to evangelize and mentor others in the faith). On this model the heart of discipleship is being a disciple who makes disciples who make disciples.

The understanding of discipleship as disciple-making appears to have first been articulated and embodied in parachurch ministries in the United States in the twentieth century. Within a context in the early to mid-twentieth century in which personal evangelism and evangelistic rallies were deeply emphasized within certain strands of American Christianity, few people knew what to offer Christians as a vision for discipleship after conversion. Singularly influential in offering a vision for discipleship was Dawson Trotman, the founder of Navigators. Prominent figures like Billy Graham, Bill Bright, and Richard Halverson, as well as missionaries out in the field all over the world, drew on the vision Trotman offered.

A convert to Christianity, Trotman was passionate about personal evangelism, and eventually came to see the significance of doing “follow-up” to help converts become disciples. Two Timothy 2:2 was a shaping verse for Trotman: “and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well” (NRSVUE). Drawing on biblical examples like Paul and Timothy and Elijah and Elisha, Trotman believed that ideal follow-up was one-on-one, as a Christian invested in a new convert with the goal of building the younger believer up in the faith until the point that he or she was ready to disciple another.⁵

Trotman also drew on the creation story to cast his vision for one-on-one follow-up. In a message he delivered, later transcribed and published as *Born to Reproduce*, he shared,

⁵ See Betty Lee Skinner, *Daws: The Story of Dawson Trotman Founder of the Navigators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974).

The first order ever given to man was that he “be fruitful and multiply.” In other words, he was to reproduce after his own kind. God did not tell Adam and Eve, our first parents, to be spiritual. They were already in His image. Sin had not yet come in. He just said, “Multiply. I want more just like you, more in my own image.”⁶

Then Trotman made the move from physical multiplication to spiritual multiplication, writing, “In the physical realm when your children have children, you become a grandparent. Your parents are then great-grandparents, and theirs are great-great-grandparents. And so it should be in the spiritual.” Trotman believed that all Christians were called to be engaged in this spiritual multiplication. “It is God’s plan that these new babes in Christ grow,” according to Trotman. “All provision is made for their growth into maturity, and then they are to multiply — not only the rich or the educated, but all alike. Every person who is born into God’s family is to multiply.”⁷

The Great Commission was a significant motivating factor for Trotman. He believed that the Great Commission could be fulfilled within the generation if the spiritual multiplication approach to follow-up was adopted. He understood it as a missing link in world missions as well as domestic ministry.⁸ Indeed, he even did the math to show that if you began with just one person investing in another person for six months, at the end of fifteen and a half years the entire population of people over three years of age could have been reached by this method of spiritual reproduction. While Trotman did not himself use the term disciple-maker, the term appears to have been directly inspired by his vision of spiritual multiplication, being introduced in the late 1950s by Lorne Sanny, who became president of Navigators after Trotman’s untimely death.⁹

⁶ Dawson Trotman, *Born to Reproduce: A Passionate Call to Maturity, Spiritual Reproduction and Spiritual Parenting to Help Fulfill The Great Commission*, A Navigator Seminar, prepared by Jim Downing, 5. Accessed at <https://www.nobts.edu/discipleship/downloadable-documents1/spiritual-formation-folder/Born%20to%20reproduce%20Dawson%20Trotman.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ See Skinner, *Daws*, 294, 303.

⁹ See Trotman, *Born to Reproduce*, 5, n. 1.

Also motivated by the Great Commission, Robert Coleman's *Master Plan of Evangelism* offers a complementary vision of disciple-making to that articulated by Trotman. Coleman's book was widely read when it was published in 1963 and continues to be influential today. The book emerged from Coleman's experience teaching evangelism at Asbury Seminary, a subject which he had not previously studied. To prepare for the course, he decided to study the four gospels directly to look at Jesus' own method of evangelism. He took notes on what he observed, teaching the class out of those notes, and eventually turning those notes into *Master Plan of Evangelism*. According to one recent source, *Master Plan* "is arguably the most influential book on discipleship to date."¹⁰

The approach taken in *Master Plan* is premised on looking at Jesus' example of evangelism and discipleship. As Coleman writes,

I realized I couldn't go wrong if I looked at Jesus. He is the only perfect person who has ever lived. His life on earth was flawless. His teachings are brilliant. His methods are masterful... As I dove deeper into the Gospels, I began to see patterns and principles emerge. Jesus lived with remarkable intentionality to fulfill His mission. This journey through the Gospels was a game changer. I simply wrote down His master plan as it emerged from a study of the Gospels.¹¹

From his study of Jesus' life, Coleman identifies methods, principles, and a strategy of evangelism that he offers as a model to be followed. Recognizing that his approach does not have a lot of precedent within the tradition, he describes it as "the new evangelism we need."¹² In this new evangelism, discipleship becomes inextricably connected to evangelism.

This is in large part because of the centrality of the Great Commission to Coleman. Coleman understands the Great Commission as Jesus' command to all

¹⁰ "Introduction," Robert Coleman and Bobby Harrington with Josh Patrick, *Revisiting the Master Plan of Evangelism: Why Jesus' Discipleship Method is Still the Best Today* (n.p.: Exponential Resources, 2014), 9. Further, it "has sold more than 3.5 million copies and has been translated into more than 100 languages" (ibid.).

¹¹ "Beginnings," Coleman and Harrington, *Revisiting the Master Plan*, 11.

¹² Coleman, *Master Plan of Evangelism*, 113.

Christians today to replicate the model that He followed during His earthly ministry. "Jesus told the disciples to go and make disciples. That's what He had been doing Himself... The disciples could see what He meant because they had followed Him, and He was showing them the meaning of the Great Commission in His way of life."¹³ When by grace we come to know Jesus, "we are invited to join him in his plan to heal and redeem the world. And that plan is in essence the Great Commission — to make disciples who make disciples."¹⁴ In other words, once we come into saving knowledge of Christ, we are then invited to shape our lives around the Great Commission. We become a disciple in order to make other disciples. That is God's plan to heal and redeem the world.

Evangelism is at the center of the Christian life of discipleship, according to Coleman's vision. As he writes, "Evangelism is not an optional accessory to our life. It is the heartbeat of all that we are called to be and do. It is the commission of the church which gives meaning to all else that is undertaken in the Name of Christ."¹⁵ More specifically, he believes that all Christians are to undertake evangelism according to the method that he uncovered in the life of Jesus. "Here finally is where we must all evaluate the contribution that our life and witness is making to the supreme purpose of Him who is the Saviour of the world," Coleman writes. "Are those who have followed us to Christ now leading others to Him and teaching them to make disciples like ourselves?"¹⁶ In short, disciple-making is the measure by which the contributions of our lives are to be judged.

Coleman believes that this method of evangelism was Jesus' intended plan to fulfill the Great Commission, and that he has no other plan in place. In a chapter on reproduction, he writes,

¹³ "Beginnings," Coleman and Harrington, *Revisiting the Master Plan*, 12.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Coleman, *Master Plan*, 92. In terms of living the Christian life, Coleman suggests we follow the example of Jesus as He prayed and used Scripture, and above all "what was most important in view of His ultimate purpose was that all the while He was teaching them how to win souls. Practically everything that Jesus said and did had some relevance to their work of evangelism" (77).

¹⁶ Ibid., 109.

It all comes back to His disciples. His whole evangelistic strategy — indeed, the fulfillment of His very purpose in coming into the world, dying on the cross, and rising from the grave — depended upon the faithfulness of His chosen disciples to do this task. It did not matter how small the group was to start with so long as they reproduced and taught their disciples to reproduce.... As simple as it may seem, this was the way the Gospel would conquer. He had no other plan.¹⁷

All of this culminates in the closing line of the book: “the destiny of the multitudes hangs in the balance.”¹⁸

Throughout the book, one sees a great deal of weight placed on disciples and what they do. Coleman emphasizes their dedication, their willingness to follow, their loyalty, and their obedience. Ultimately, Coleman’s vision of discipleship depends upon the faithfulness of the disciples: “What really counts in the ultimate perpetuation of our work is the faithfulness with which our converts go out and make leaders out of their converts.”¹⁹

It’s worth noting that although this book was written in 1963, Coleman still affirms its principles. Writing in *The Master Plan of Discipleship* more than two decades later, Coleman found support for his interpretation of Jesus’ strategy of evangelism as he studied the book of Acts, arguing that the earliest Christians followed the example of Jesus as they carried out the principles of discipling that he embodied and passed on to them.²⁰ Reflecting in 2014, Coleman shared, “I believe them more today than ever before! I’ve lived long enough to see the extended

¹⁷ Ibid., 105-106. See also 27, 64, 102.

¹⁸ Ibid., 126.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110. Note he’s contrasting this with making just followers, rather than multiplying leaders.

²⁰ See Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1998). Focusing especially on the book of Acts, in this work Coleman finds evidence that the disciples made disciples who in turned disciplined others, leading to the multiplication of believers throughout the region.

impact in the lives of men and women... Yes, I believe in them more than I did in the beginning."²¹

Those who helped put forward this understanding of discipleship as disciple-making seem to have understood that they were articulating something new. They viewed it as a retrieval of a biblical vision that had been lost in the intervening years, but acknowledged that they were putting forward an idea that hadn't been active in the church within recent memory. To put it in terms of the title of a 1978 book written by Navigator LeRoy Eims (with a foreword by Robert Coleman), they were retrieving "the lost art of disciple making."²²

And yet for many, this idea of discipleship as disciple-making has become *the* way to understand what it means to be and form disciples. In the final paragraph of the biography of Dawson Trotman, written in 1974, his biographer writes that Trotman offered two main contributions, follow-up and multiplication. She remarks, "the concept of follow-up has been widely accepted; that of disciple multiplication has not."²³ Today, we see that the idea of discipleship as multiplication has spread far and wide, from parachurch ministries like Navigators, Cru, Young Life, and YWAM to churches and networks of churches through writings by Bill Hull, Francis Chan (and his curriculum *Multiply*), Mike Breen (and *3DM*), Jim Putnam, Bobby Harrington, Dave Ferguson, Jeff VanderStelt, J. R. Woodward, Dan White, Jr., and Todd Wilson. Networks and online resources like Exponential, National Disciple Making Forum, Saturate, Replicate Ministries, New Thing Network, V3, Soma, and IF seem to be some of the contemporary embodiments and disseminators of this vision.²⁴

²¹ "Concluding Words," Coleman and Harrington, *Revisiting the Master Plan of Evangelism*, 36.

²² LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

²³ Skinner, *Daws*, 389.

²⁴ See, for example, Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ, Disciplemaker* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004); Francis Chan, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2012); Mike Breen, *Building a Discipling Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014); www.exponential.org; www.discipleship.org; www.thev3movement.org; and ifgathering.com.

The first model of discipleship we have been exploring understands discipleship as disciple-making, while a second model emphasizes discipleship as spiritual formation and transformation. If the first one emphasizes the “go and make disciples” portion of the Great Commission, this second model could be associated with the “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” section. The vision underlying this model is that of disciples being formed into the character of Christ through spiritual disciplines and practices. To grow as disciples in this model’s understanding, disciples need to invest in spiritual practices that shape and transform them. Names like Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Ruth Haley Barton would be associated with this approach to discipleship.²⁵ The Good and Beautiful Series, used by many churches and written by James Bryan Smith, who himself was mentored by Foster and Willard, is significant here as well.²⁶ While it has some differences, we could also include the “practices” emphasis articulated by people like Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra here.²⁷ This model of discipleship is rooted in the conviction that spiritual practices can form and transform disciples to become more like Jesus Christ and to live the way of life God intended in this world.

Because the first model of discipleship, discipleship as disciple-making, is predominant within certain segments of contemporary Christianity, it serves as the main focus of our account here. Interestingly, though, at least one strand of this second model of discipleship developed as something of a response to the model of

²⁵ See, for example, Richard J. Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978); Richard J. Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981); Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988); Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998); Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus’ Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006); Ruth Haley Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transformative Presence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2004); and Ruth Haley Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

²⁶ See James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

²⁷ See Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996) and Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999).

discipleship as disciple-making. Dallas Willard's writings are motivated by his sense that evangelicalism lacked a biblically and theologically robust vision and practice of discipleship. He recognizes that Navigators was the group most closely associated with discipleship and, while acknowledging the faith and influence of Dawson Trotman and the Navigators more widely, he believes that their model of discipleship was problematic. Willard is particularly concerned about the ways they separated the act of conversion from discipleship, so that one first became a Christian and then later, after receiving more follow-up training, became a disciple. He is also concerned that in this model discipleship is primarily associated with reproduction and disciple-making, so that to be a disciple is to be one who has been trained to convert others.²⁸

Willard worries that the emphases of this model do not give sufficient attention to the transformation of disciples into Christlikeness, nor to living as disciples in light of the Kingdom of God here and now. The vision of discipleship he offers is an attempt to correct these shortcomings. With a similar methodology as Coleman, Willard looks to Jesus to find a model for discipleship. As he explores Jesus' relationship with his disciples, he uncovers a method which he describes as, "to gather a group of people by telling the story of Jesus, featuring his resurrection and pending return, to show by example what it meant to live with him now, already beyond death, and to lead others into such a life of being 'with Jesus, learning to be like him.'"²⁹ This idea of "being with Jesus, learning to be like him," is central to Willard's vision of discipleship, in which transformation occurs largely through imitation and following Jesus' example. This includes imitating his spiritual practices. As Willard writes, "The pervasive practices of our Lord form the core of those very activities that through the centuries have stood as disciplines for the spiritual life. It would seem only logical to emulate his daily actions since he was a great master of the spiritual life."³⁰

²⁸ See Dallas Willard, "Discipleship," *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, edited by Gerald McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 236-246 and Willard, *The Great Omission*, 4-5.

²⁹ Willard, "Discipleship," 243.

³⁰ Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 29.

Contemporary Exemplars: Unitarian Discipleship

With this recent history of models of discipleship in mind, let us turn to look at a contemporary exemplar of each model. In a spirit of appreciation, we'll examine representative resources: *Discipleshift* by Jim Putnam and Bobby Harrington, which exemplifies a contemporary version of the disciple-making approach, and *The Great Omission*, which represents Dallas Willard's contributions to the stream of discipleship that is marked by transformation through spiritual disciplines and practices.

Discipleshift is written as a critique of "conversion-only" evangelism, in favor of a deeper, relational model. In the foreword to this book, Robert Coleman, author of *Master Plan*, acknowledges that much of the church growth we see today includes an "aimlessness and lack of spiritual depth."³¹ Coleman sees Putnam and Harrington's approach as a compatible next step to his work in *Master Plan*, especially in the ways that they too look to Jesus' life and ministry as the pinnacle example of a relational methodology of discipleship, one that we are supposed to imitate. While this is true, the model that Putnam and Harrington present carries forward many of the shortcomings that can be found in Coleman's work, missing the fullness of God's initiative and overemphasizing methods and strategies that rely solely on our own efforts, separate from our identity as those who are found in Christ and participate in the Spirit's work.

At the opening of their project, Putnam and Harrington offer the following litmus test of effective disciples: "whether the people who are getting saved are being conformed to the likeness of Christ."³² Then, they ask this question: "Are we making mature disciples of Jesus who are not only able to withstand the culture but are also making disciples of Jesus themselves?"³³ Our efforts, strivings, and strategies take center stage in their framework of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, especially in their emphasis on multiplication and "effective transformation."

³¹ Jim Putnam and Bobby Harrington, *Discipleshift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

³² *Ibid.*, 20.

³³ *Ibid.*

In the opening section about who a disciple is, Putnam and Harrington operate under the assumption that the whole process of growing disciples is up to us. Their definition of a disciple of Jesus places *some* emphasis on God's act that might create potential room for discipleship as an "ordinance of grace" ("A true disciple of Jesus is a person who follows Jesus, is transformed by Jesus, and joins with Jesus on his mission"³⁴), but the way that they implement this definition throughout the rest of their project strays from the idea of joining with Jesus. It is in practice unitarian, in the sense of being entirely dependent on human strategies and implementation.

For example, "How to Start Growing People" is the title of chapter three, where Putnam and Harrington outline a process for leading people through five stages of spiritual growth. For them, "if a person is saved, that person was saved for a purpose — the born again are given a new DNA that, when developed and becomes fully grown, will result in a mature disciple who makes disciples. It's every Christian's destination and destiny."³⁵ This kind of "arrival" that depends on certain benchmarks of Christian maturity does find its grounding in a New Testament vision of flourishing life in Christ (Colossians 1:28). However, Putnam and Harrington's discipleship model excludes the idea of being made complete in Christ in one's baptismal reality of union with Christ, instead defining one's discipleship identity in terms of output.

While Putnam and Harrington do acknowledge Jesus Christ's role as one who transforms us ("he transforms how we see the world, and what we value and consider important"³⁶), in their framework, Christ's transforming work in us is always serving the broader goal of our discipleship-production. In their view, any character transformation and shaping of how we see the world is to serve the purpose of making more and more disciples, rather than Christlikeness being a telos and eschatological reality in itself. They do not use identity categories of being "in Christ," instead using language of character development. While Christians are

³⁴ Ibid., 54.

³⁵ Ibid., 75.

³⁶ Ibid., 49.

called to always be open to the Spirit's long work of shaping and growing us, Putnam and Harrington present an "up and to the right" picture of discipleship marked by productivity and control that does not seem to hold space for true suffering, seasons of questions, or a deeply-rooted identity found in the person of Christ himself in our moments of weakness and frailty. Overall, Putnam and Harrington's project of shifting an approach to discipleship depends on a unitarian theological framework that prioritizes our efforts and progress for fulfilling the church's mission in the world, rather than acknowledging discipleship as something God does in and through us, even as we are already joined to Jesus and made participants in God's Triune life.

In a slightly different way, Dallas Willard's approach to discipleship, which primarily emphasizes spiritual disciplines and practices as the pathway to growing as a Christian, presents an alternative set of contemporary assumptions and resources available to practitioners. Willard's vision, while offering a slower, more contemplative alternative to the high-powered programmatic vision of Putnam and Harrington, is still largely unitarian in its emphasis on what disciples do for transformation. It falls short of a robust trinitarian vision of discipleship in similar ways to *Discipleship* and *Master Plan*, missing the trinitarian reality that Torrance so beautifully brings to the fore: that we are joined to Jesus by the Spirit and given full access to God through Christ's work, made participants in the Triune life, fully adopted and cherished.

For Willard, making disciples looks like this: "The Great Commission is fulfilled as the regenerate soul makes its highest intent to live in the commandments of Christ and accordingly makes realistic plans to realize this intent by an adequate course of spiritual disciplines."³⁷ High intentions and realistic plans, rather than the initiative of God in Christ, are emphasized within Willard's vision. And how does spiritual growth happen for Willard? It seems to be equal parts our effort and God's effort, some sort of collaborative reality in which our efforts might make or break success: "What brings about our transformation into Christ-likeness is our direct, personal interaction with Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit makes

³⁷ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 7.

Christ present to us and draws us toward his likeness."³⁸ Willard makes this work of the Spirit dependent on our capacities to open ourselves to the Spirit, and we reach maturity "because we have learned to let the Spirit foster his life in us."³⁹

Willard states this reality differently in his section on the keys to the kingdom, in which he explains that spiritual practices are a pathway toward claiming the reality of the abundance of God in our lives:

The abundance of God to our lives, our families, and our ministries is not passively received or imposed and does not happen to us by chance. It is claimed and put into action by our active, intelligent pursuit of it. We must seek out ways to live and act in union with the flow of God's Kingdom life that should come through our relationship with Jesus.⁴⁰

Willard's project is marked by our initiative and pursuit in a way that seems more unitarian than the vision of worship, and constructively, discipleship, that Torrance presents. What would it look like to maintain and reframe the best parts of Willard's and Putnam and Harrington's projects within a more expansive vision of discipleship that is marked by adoption, participation, and union rather than practices, performance, and striving? Could Torrance offer a way forward for embracing a vision of discipleship that is generously Reformed in its emphasis on God's initiative, while also generating robust space for participation in mission, worship, community, and spiritual practices, all in response to God's love?

Discipleship as an "Ordinance of Grace": Identity and the Ongoing Priesthood of Christ, the "One True Disciple"

In J. B. Torrance's *Worship, Community and Triune God of Grace*, he insists that all our worship must be seen as an ordinance of grace.⁴¹ For Torrance, worship is an

³⁸ Ibid., 8.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 59-61.

utter gift from God to us, in which Christ the one true priest is “the one true worshipper.”⁴² Mirroring this language, how might a vision of discipleship, which includes and is informed by worship, flow from an understanding of Jesus as the “one true disciple?” And how could this vision incorporate the best impulses of the multiplication method (more people knowing Jesus) and spiritual practices method (experiencing God’s transforming presence), while holding those realities within a theologically grounded framework of identity in Christ and Christ’s ongoing work of incorporating us into God’s life by the Spirit? Torrance’s emphasis on calling as an outflow of our God-given identity, as well as his unique emphasis on Christ’s ongoing priesthood, can lay the groundwork for a discipleship-imagination shaped by Christ himself as the true disciple, not our own efforts and strivings.

“There is no more urgent need in our churches today than to recover the trinitarian nature of grace,” Torrance writes, “that it is by grace alone, through the gift of Jesus Christ in the Spirit that we can enter into and live a life of communion with God our Father.”⁴³ When we lose sight of the Trinity, according to Torrance, we miss the extent of the grace offered to us by God. It is not simply that we are offered salvation in and through Jesus Christ and then set on a path to live for Jesus, but that through Jesus Christ we are drawn by the Holy Spirit into the very communion that Jesus shares with his Father. To know Jesus Christ is to be drawn by the Holy Spirit into that shared intimate communion.

For Torrance, this language of communion is central as we consider the nature of worship, with implications for the Christian life more widely. A trinitarian understanding of worship, as Torrance articulates it, views worship as the gift of participating in the Son’s communion with the Father through the Holy Spirit. This places the relationship between the Son and the Father at the center of worship, and indeed at the center of the New Testament, according to Torrance. That is to say, at the center of our worship is not our experience of worship, nor our activity of worship, but the triune God. Similarly, at the center of our faith is not our experience of conversion nor our activity of discipleship, but the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Putting this in terms of the Great Commission, we could say

⁴² Ibid., 61.

⁴³ Ibid., 59.

that discipleship involves being baptized and incorporated into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, we are drawn into the communion that the Son and the Father share, so that we have union with God at all times and in all places, both in times of formal worship and in our daily lives offered to God (Romans 12:1).

As we are drawn by the Spirit into the communion shared between the Father and the Son, we are simultaneously invited to participate in a life of mission and service. By the Spirit, Christ draws us "to participate both in his life of worship and communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world."⁴⁴ This life of mission and service is realized in and through the church, as we are connected through the Spirit to the body of Christ. As we are invited by the Spirit to participate in the triune God, we are in fact invited into a "twofold relationship... a relationship between God and humanity realized vicariously for us in Christ... and at the same time a relationship between Christ and the church."⁴⁵ That is to say, to be invited into the communion shared between Father and Son by the Spirit is simultaneously to be invited into the communion shared between other members of the family of God by the Spirit. Our adoption as children of God connects us to the wider family of God, and to live as God's children is to receive and participate in God's mission in the world. This mission continues to be God's mission, so that God remains at the center even as we are invited to participate with God in a life of mission and service.

Central to Torrance's trinitarian understanding of worship is a belief that our identity is found in communion with God and others. He calls us to understand the human person not primarily as an individual but as one created to be in relationship. As Torrance writes, "[God's] primary purpose for humanity is filial... we have been created by God to find our true being-in-communion, in sonship, in the mutual personal relationships of love."⁴⁶ When the Spirit draws us into the communion shared between the Father and the Son, we find our identity as children

⁴⁴ Ibid., 31; see also 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

of God. To be a disciple, then, is to find our full and true selves in communion with God and one another by Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is to find our identity as children of God, as the Spirit enables us to know God as "Abba! Father" (Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6). Here, Torrance provides a theological bridge between the discipleship language of the gospels and the adoption language of Paul's epistles, reminding us that our calling in Christ is an outflow of our identity as members of the family of God.

For Torrance, our identity in Christ comes first and this, in turn, shapes our calling as we participate in the triune God's mission in the world. Torrance articulates a link between being children of God and seeking God's kingdom. As by the Spirit we participate in the communion shared between the Father and the Son, so by the Spirit we participate in the kingdom of our triune God. This is because Jesus Christ came to save humanity from their sins and also "to bring to fulfillment the trinitarian purposes of God in creation."⁴⁷ To enter into union with Christ by the Spirit is to enter into the larger biblical story in which the saving work of Christ brings to fulfillment God's purposes in creation. To find our being in communion with God and one another is to participate in God's mission to the wider created and redeemed world. For Torrance, in short, to enter into "sonship" by the Spirit is to simultaneously enter into communion with God in the kingdom of God.⁴⁸

As we are united to Christ, living as God's children and seeking God's kingdom, we have the gift of relying not only on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit but also on the ongoing priesthood of Jesus Christ. This is an important biblical concept to Torrance, who draws on passages in Hebrews to remind us that in Christ we have a priest who continues to live to intercede for us. As the high priest of the old covenant represented God to the people of Israel as well as the people of Israel to God, so as our great high priest Jesus Christ represents God to humanity and humanity to God. Through Jesus' vicarious humanity, he was able to live his life, suffer, die on the cross, rise again, and ascend on behalf of all humanity. He lived a life of perfect communion with the Father by the Spirit, which culminated in his self-offering on our behalf, and then through His resurrection and ascension Jesus'

⁴⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁸ See *ibid.*

ministry continues on our behalf. Jesus, as Torrance puts it, has a twofold ministry: the once and for all ministry composed of his earthly life and sacrificial death *and* his ongoing ministry of worship and intercession.⁴⁹

Through Jesus' ongoing priesthood, we are able to rely on the grace of God not only for our salvation but for our ongoing lives as disciples. Jesus continues to live in communion with the Father on our behalf, to offer worship in our place, to pray for us, and to engage in God's mission in the world. By the Spirit, we are invited to participate in this communion, in the worship of Christ, in the ongoing intercessions of Christ, and in God's mission and kingdom in the world. In this trinitarian vision, we are never left on our own as disciples, but always depend upon the ongoing priesthood of Christ and the active role of the Holy Spirit. Our faith is a response to God's grace and a participation in God's ongoing ministry. As Torrance writes, "In our human, frail, broken, unworthy response, the Spirit helps us in our infirmities, lifting us up to Christ who, in his ascended humanity, is our God-given response, the leader of our worship, the pioneer of our faith, our advocate and high priest, who through the eternal Spirit presents us with himself to the Father."⁵⁰

For Torrance, the ongoing priesthood of Jesus Christ is also essential for defining our participation in worship as a response to God, rather than something we initiate ourselves. It is because Jesus brings us before the Father as our representative and brother that we are able to worship God at all: "He presents us in himself to the Father as God's dear children, and our righteousness is hid with Christ in God."⁵¹ God sees us as righteous and pure, worthy to worship him and worthy to be called his children. And all of that is possible because God has acted first, in Christ, to be in relationship with us and offer us his own self; Torrance points toward this reality of God's initiation when he describes worship as an "ordinance of grace." What might it mean to apply this reality of Christ's ongoing advocacy for us to an understanding of discipleship? Could discipleship too be an

⁴⁹ See *ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

ordinance of grace? If Christ as our Great High Priest is the “one true worshipper” in Torrance’s framework, could Christ also be “the one true disciple” on our behalf?

Putnam and Harrington suggest that a true disciple is “a person who follows Jesus, is transformed by Jesus, and joins with Jesus on his mission.”⁵² Given this definition, we argue that because Christ is the one who walked steadfastly with the Father on our behalf during his life on earth, and still now in his ongoing vicarious humanity, Christ himself is the truest disciple. What could this mean for our understanding of a life of discipleship? Because our union with Christ by the Spirit enables our communion with God, we are no longer pressured to achieve increased closeness with God in a way that can be measured or controlled. Christ’s closeness with God, as the one true disciple for our sake, empowers and elicits our own closeness with God as an utter gift, because we are in Christ.

Just as Christ the High Priest as the one true worshiper presents us to the Father as God’s dear children, Christ the one true disciple, as one who has lived perfectly in fellowship with the Father in his human life, extends that same fellowship to us. Our growth in Christian love and faithfulness, then, is always a response to Christ’s own fellowship with God. Torrance puts it this way:

[T]he human-Godward movement, in which we are given to participate (as in worship and communion), is given freely and unconditionally. Our response in faith and obedience is a response to the response already made for us by Christ to the Father’s holy love, a response we are summoned to make in union with Christ.⁵³

Any faith and obedience that the Spirit carries through in us is made possible by and remains inextricable from the reality of Christ’s own obedience to and relationship with the Father. Christ speaks of the Spirit’s work in this process in this way: “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:15).

⁵² Putnam and Harrington, *Discipleshift*, 54.

⁵³ Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 54.

We want to make sure to include an important trinitarian clarification. In describing Christ as the one true disciple in the spirit of Torrance, we are not meaning to carry subordination into the eternal triune life. Just as Torrance emphasizes that it is the ongoing vicarious humanity of Christ, post-incarnation, through which he is the one true worshiper on our behalf, it is this same ongoing vicarious humanity through which Christ is the most faithful, true, obedient disciple on our behalf, for us and for our salvation. In his book *Theology as Discipleship*, Keith Johnson describes sharing in Jesus' life of self-giving discipleship this way:

We have been united to Christ, and he lives his own eternal life together with us. And the fact that he lowered himself to the floor to wash feet while reflecting on the reality that he was about to return to his Father in heaven tells us precisely how Jesus intends to live his eternal life: he is going to spend it giving himself to us in love so that we can live more faithfully with him. This is what he is doing even now at the Father's right hand.⁵⁴

Christ, the one true disciple, is not just our example of faithfulness and obedience; rather, his ongoing self-giving is the truest discipleship in which we participate by the Spirit. Just as our worshiping life is not our own, by nature of our union with him, our life of discipleship is not our own. Our discipleship is Christ's, because Christ has made it his own.

What would it look like to bear witness to, or participate in, practically, the kind of discipleship that we are describing, a discipleship that is truly an ordinance of grace? A discipleship that is shaped by theological categories and emphases like identity, adoption, union with Christ, and Christ's ongoing priesthood on our behalf that Torrance offers?

Imagine these ideas taking shape within a small group ministry, or perhaps a weekly shared meal in a church basement: Oftentimes, in the beginning stages of group formation and life together, folks in small group ministries share their stories of faith with one another as a pathway toward getting to know each other. A

⁵⁴ Keith L. Johnson, *Theology as Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 148.

truncated framework of discipleship that draws from Coleman's multiplication method might lead to a certain way of sharing stories. Perhaps people would narrate their stories of life with God with attention to who led them to Christ and the people they had led to Christ, evaluating their spiritual maturity in terms of producing effective disciples. An alternatively truncated framework of discipleship that narrowly emphasizes spiritual disciplines and practices might lead to a different way of sharing stories. Perhaps these people would narrate their stories of life with God in terms of growth in prayer, longer periods of time reading scripture, perhaps sharing insights from their quiet time with God.

A more expansive vision of discipleship, in concert with the Torrance's contributions, could lead a congregation to a different way of telling their stories of life with God. While mentors, practices, and significant encounters with God's word would still be mentioned as participants in the story, the main actor would be God: God as the one who initiates, enables, and carries through our lives of discipleship, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This kind of story-telling would be theocentric with retrospective reflection on the Spirit's work all along: "God drew me, God led me, God joined me to this body of believers." It would also emphasize the disciples' reliance on the ongoing intercession of Christ, rather than on their own lives of prayer.

As disciples seek to fulfill the Great Commission, they would recognize that it's not up to them to make disciples, but it is part of their calling as members of the family of God to invite others to recognize their adoption into God's family and their identity as beloved children of God. Receiving this identity and living as God's children means actively participating by the Spirit in the ongoing mission of God in the world. These disciples would ask questions like, "Where is Jesus Christ making all things new around us?" and "How can we participate by the Spirit in the ongoing mission and service of Jesus?"

Disciples following this trinitarian vision would focus first on *who* questions before moving to *how* questions. As Torrance writes, "It is only as we know *who* God is and *what* he has done and is doing that we can find appropriate answers to the question of *how*, and then see the incredible relevance of the gospel to every

area of life.”⁵⁵ “Who is the triune God?” This is the question with which these disciples begin. And then, “Who are we, who are invited to participate in the communion shared between the Father and the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit?” As we participate in this intimate communion, we are invited to participate in the ongoing ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship as an ordinance of grace can be understood as responsive in nature, a response to who God is, to a triune God of love and grace. This is discipleship understood not primarily as a response to a command (such as “go and make disciples”), but as a calling flowing from disciples’ identity as adopted children of God. In this sense, the work of the Spirit in conforming disciples to Christ is more significant than their work trying to obey a command. As Jeremy Begbie writes, “We are thus at our most obedient, not when we conform to some law imposed from without, but when we are conformed through the Spirit to the likeness of Christ our brother.”⁵⁶

To consider discipleship as a calling that flows from our God-given identity and to remember that as disciples we are utterly reliant on the ongoing work of Christ and the Spirit both in our lives and in the world shifts the emphasis of discipleship from our efforts and striving. It keeps the triune God at the center, rather than what we do as disciples. It offers a vision of the Christian life in which both salvation and ongoing discipleship happen entirely by the grace of God. As Torrance writes:

It seems to me that in a pastoral situation our first task is not to throw people back on themselves with exhortations and instructions as to what to do and how to do it, but to direct people to the gospel of grace — to Jesus Christ, that they might look to him to lead them, open their hearts in faith and in prayer, and draw them by the Spirit into his

⁵⁵ Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 70-71.

⁵⁶ Jeremy Begbie, “Creation, Christ, and Culture in Dutch Neo-Calvinism,” in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World, Essays Presented to James Torrance*, edited by Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (Exeter, UK: Paternoster Press, 1989), 131.

eternal life of communion with the Father.⁵⁷

Torrance's theological vision helps us uncover a vision of discipleship that points disciples to the gospel of grace rather than throwing them back on themselves. Rooted in Jesus as the one true disciple, we can be invited into a trinitarian picture of discipleship that is gracious all the way through.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, 45.