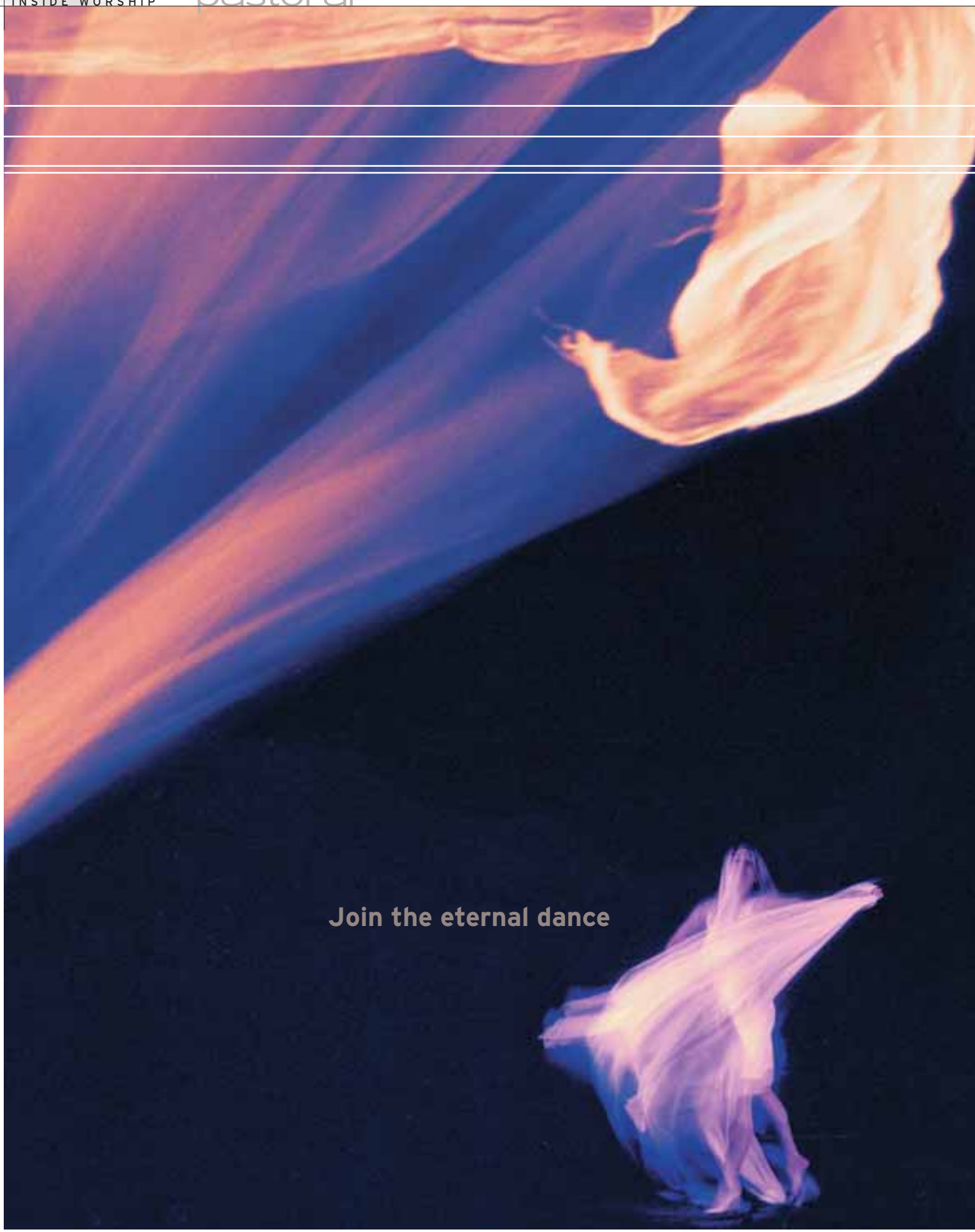

Join the eternal dance

Leading Trinitarian Worship

BERTEN WAGGONER

The Treasure Of The Trinity

The God we worship is a Trinitarian God. We know no other God than the one revealed in Jesus Christ - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. John Calvin put it well, "Unless we think of God as Trinitarian we have no knowledge of God at all, only the word 'God' flutters through our brain naked, and void of meaning" (Quoted by Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine Of The Trinity*, p.15).

The Triune God is the boast of the Christian faith. Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the doctrine of the Trinity the "idea of ideas." "It is," he said, "that great truth, in which are contained all treasures of all possible knowledge" (Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three And The Many*, p. 144). The truth of the Trinity is priceless and incomparable. It is a teaching about God's life and our life with Him that explores worship, relationship, personhood and community in light of the revelation in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sadly, the Church has neglected this treasure. Catholic scholar Karl Rahner's assessment might be a little extreme, but he is certainly right in his emphasis, "Christians are, in their practical lives, almost mere 'monotheists,' and were the doctrine to be eliminated as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged" (*The Trinity*, p. 10). The prayer and thought required to more clearly understand this blessed truth is seldom given. Thus we have a cacophony of prayers and praise that confuse the Trinitarian persons, hide their unity and randomly assign their work.

Worship Leaders Shape Our Theology

Much of the blame for this demise in Trinitarian thought can be laid at the feet of the theological community who became enamored with the Enlightenment and pushed this rather embarrassing doctrine to the periphery of theological discussion; but the worship community must also bear part of the blame. Worship influences doctrine and doctrine influences worship (*lex orandi, lex credenti* - "the rule of prayer as norm for belief").

This pattern of mutual influence can be seen in the New Testament. Paul consistently corrects the worship of the Church by applying theological criteria (I Corinthians 11 and 14). He also used the liturgy of the Church to support theological points (Romans 10:8-13 and Philippians 2:5-11). Who ultimately has the most influence in formation of faith – the theologian or the worship leader? Though this truth may be frightening, worship leaders are much more influential in shaping the theology of the average worshiper than is the theologian, teacher or preacher. That really places a high responsibility on the worship leader and causes me to ask: "If the worship of the Church plays such a vital role in faith formation, and if the most fundamental reality in our faith is the Trinity, how should the worship leader prepare him- or herself to lead in the worship of the Triune God?"

Leading Trinitarian Worship

There are several options, but in my judgment it is most important that a worship leader become a prayerfully and thoughtfully informed Trinitarian. Disciplined study and reflection brings us to a point of conviction in terms of a model (doctrine) of the Trinity; the model helps us worship. As Miroslav Volf states, "A...doctrine of the Trinity is a model acquired from salvation history and formulated in analogy to our experience, a model with which we seek to approach the mystery of the Triune God, not in order to comprehend God completely, but rather in order to worship God as the unfathomable..." (*After Our Likeness*, p.198). If this is true, then one of the most important things a worship leader must do is to define a Trinitarian model in his/her mind.

Several models have been proposed in the flow of church history. In this short article I cannot either introduce or evaluate the multiplicity of models. Some such as Arianism were clearly destructive to our faith as they denied the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Others such as Modalism were rejected because they failed to recognize the diversity of persons in the godhead.

I would recommend the doctrine of *perichoresis* for your study. The term means mutual indwelling or, better, mutual interpenetration and refers to the understanding of both the Trinity and Christology. In the divine perichoresis, each person has "being in each other without coalescence" (John of Damascus ca. 650). The roots of this doctrine are long and deep. Recent Evangelicals that have worked at clearly defining the model include such notables as Millard Erickson, Royce Gordon Gruenler, Gilbert Bilezikian and Miraslav Volf. It is seen most clearly in the passages in John where Jesus speaks of his relationship with the Father:

> *"But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father"* (John 10:38);
>
> *"Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing His work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father*



Learn to worship the Triune God

> *and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves"* (John 14:9-11);
>
> *"...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me"* (John 17:21).

In no other place in the teachings of Jesus are we provided with such a clear window into the divine relationships. The picture Jesus gives us here is that of an eternal community (of two persons at this stage), totally dwelling in one another, totally interpenetrating each other so much so that when one speaks it can be said that both speak. The Son totally dwells in the Father, and the Father totally dwells in the Son. We do not have a human analogy to divine perichoresis because one human cannot indwell another. The closest we can come to this reality is human empathy.

The dynamic quality of the perichoritic Trinity is symbolically captured in the vision given to the prophet Ezekiel (1:3-28) which pictures a tri-personal being who is full of energy, life and love. It speaks of mutuality and relationship, of love that is eternal. It has been called the divine dance, the polyphony. It presents the three persons, in perfect harmony, giving without reservation to one another, interdependent, bound together in love, all involved in a celebration of life, love, peace and joy.

Joining The Divine Dance

I have given only a brief introduction to an idea that has captured my heart. I do not have time to develop it further, but I would like to share some implications for worship and worship leaders that I have drawn from my study of the perichoresis. This is not meaningless theological minutia. If it is true, it has tremendous implications for all of life and especially for worship.

1. The perichoresis is already happening when we begin to worship. Worship leaders lead the community of faith into what has always been happening in the divine perichoresis. Worship leaders simply help God's people join the eternal dance.

2. The perichoresis reminds us that we are not the worship leaders. God is the worship leader. The Son is the one that leads us into worship of the Father. He is the mediator of all worship (see T.F. Torrance, *Worship, Community And The Triune God Of Grace*). But within the divine perichoresis any one of the persons might lead us in glorifying the others (John 17:5).

3. The perichoresis makes clear the distinctness and diversity of persons in the Triune God. Each person who abides in the other, remains uniquely what He is. The Father does not become the Son, the Son not the Father, etc. Each has a unique role to play in redemption and should be praised for His unique work. To lead the Church in worship, the worship leader must join with the persons of the Triune God in praising them according to their unique glory and work.

4. The perichoresis informs the worship leader that worship is always a corporate activity. True worship is never singular. We do not come to Jesus alone. We come to the Father who is in the Son and to the Son who is in the Father. The object of worship is a divine community.

I've written to challenge you, our worship leaders, to become students of theology and especially of the Trinity. You play such a vital role in the continuation of the faith of the Church. I have only begun to understand this model of the Triune God, and the applications I have made from this wonderful truth are only initial possibilities of the significance it holds for the Church's worship. Come join with this pilgrim worshiper and "wanna-be" theologian, as together we learn to worship the Triune God.



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