



## Sermon Transcript February 10, 2019

### Corporate Worship Delighting in the Triune God John 17:1-5, 20-26

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on February 10, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**John 17:1-5, 20-26**

<sup>1</sup> When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. <sup>3</sup> And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. <sup>4</sup> I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. <sup>5</sup> And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

<sup>20</sup> “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. <sup>24</sup> Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. <sup>25</sup> O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

## Introduction

This morning we are beginning a four week series on corporate worship. What are we doing in this service when we gather week after week after week? Why do we do what we do when we come together to worship? Why is the weekly gathering of God's people for worship important to our spiritual formation? It is good every now and then to stop and ponder why we do what we do and how we do what we do.

The weekly gathering for corporate worship is something that has always been central to how God's people live out their faith. As early as Acts 2, at the inception of the church the church regularly gathered together. It says in Acts 2:42 that they devoted themselves to this practice of gathering together. What did they do when they gathered together? Acts 2:42 says, "*they devoted themselves to the Apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*" While the *breaking of bread* can include eating together, I think it ultimately points to the practice of communion—when Jesus took the bread and said, "*This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*"

Singing has always been part of what God's people do when they gather for worship. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:19 that we are to "*address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.*" Paul further instructs Timothy—a young pastor in Ephesus—in 1 Timothy 4:13 to devote himself to *the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching.* And of course the writer to the Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 10:25 that we should not neglect coming together for these purposes. To which he adds, sadly it has become the habit of some to neglect the weekly gathering of God's people for this very purpose.

So whenever we come to a topic like this, it is easy for us to reduce the topic of worship down to something we must do. Should we be devoted to the weekly public gathering for worship? Sure! Are there things prescribed for us to do when we come together for worship? Yes! But worship is more than an activity we do. James Torrance wrestles with what we have made of worship when we reduce it down to what "we" do. He writes, "Probably the most common and widespread view is that worship is something which we, religious people, do—mainly in church on Sunday. We go to church, we sing our psalms and hymns to God, we intercede for the world, we listen to the sermon, we offer our money, time and talents to God . . . 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 . . . We sit in the pew watching the minister "doing his thing," exhorting us "to do our thing," until we go home thinking we have done our duty for another week."<sup>1</sup> What he wants us

to see is that worship is so much more than something “we” do. Rather, worship is fellowship and relationship and participation with the living God.

In fact, the outline of this series is built around relationship. Today we will talk about the relationship between the Father and the Son. Next week we will look at the relationship between Jesus and the church. Then we will consider the relationship between the church and Jesus. And finally, we will look at worship through the lens of our relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ. Worship is all about relationship!

My aim for you this morning is not to give you a greater vision for worship. Instead, my aim is to give you a greater vision for God. The French author Antoine de Saint-Exupery said that if you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”<sup>2</sup> If they have a love and passion for the sea, then they will gladly build the ship. So as we begin our conversation about corporate worship, I want to start by contemplating “the endless immensity” of the God we worship.

The question I want to ask throughout this sermon series is this: What makes worship Christian? What are the marks of Christian worship? The first thing I want to highlight about Christian worship is that Christian worship delights in the Triune God. The wonder of the Trinity gets to the heart of who God is. That is where we need to start this conversation about worship. We need to start with God. Fred Sanders wrote a book called *The Deep Things of God*. In it he says, “It may seem counterintuitive to start so far back in the divine mystery of God’s own being, if the goal is to change lives.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, if our goal is to grow in our corporate worship of God, why spend time contemplating “heady things” like the Trinity? Sanders writes, “The cry of our day always seems to be for a practical doctrine of the Trinity, for relevance, application, and experiential payoff. . . . When it comes to the difference that the doctrine of the Trinity can make in our lives, it is crucially important that we begin with the recognition of God in himself before moving on to God for us.”<sup>2</sup> And so this morning we want to begin by taking a peek into the wonderful doctrine of the Trinity. This morning we will consider the “What” of the Trinity, the “Wonder” of the Trinity and the “Worship of the Trinity.”

To help us contemplate the Trinity, I want us to look at the beginning and the ending of the prayer Jesus makes in John 17. In this prayer we get an intimate glimpse into the love between the Father and the Son. There is a deep intimate love expressed by Jesus for the Father in this prayer. It probably doesn’t surprise you to hear about the love that the Father and the Son have enjoyed for all of eternity. But the shocker in this passage is

when Jesus prays for us. He prays in verse 20 *“for those who will believe in me.”* That is you and me. The focus of his prayer is that we would know and enter into the fellowship and the love that exists between the Father and the Son. That is the essence of worship.

Have you ever found yourself standing outside a circle of relationship, longing to be invited into it? From afar, it looks like this group really enjoys one another and you just wish you could be part of it. And then one of them turns to you and says, “Do you want to join us?” Your heart leaps with joy over the prospect of meaningful relationship. Through Jesus, the Holy Trinity turns to us and says, “Do you want to join us?” That is what John says when he shares the reason why he proclaims the risen Jesus to anyone who will listen. He says we do so *“so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and the Son.”* Through the proclamation of the gospel, John is basically saying, “Do you want to join us?” The implication for worship is that it is not just something we do. Rather Torrance says that worship is “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father.”<sup>5</sup> Through our worship, we participate in the fellowship and the love that exists in the Triune God. So the Trinity is not just “heady” stuff. It is the stuff of the heart. It is the stuff of worship.

## **The “What” of the Trinity**

Just to make sure we are all on the same page, I want to begin with the “what” of the Trinity. What are we talking about when we talk about God being Triune? Some will be quick to point out that the word “Trinity” is not even found in the Bible. And yet, it is a word used to describe what we discover about God through the Bible. Here is what we discover about God in the Bible. There is one God. God is made up of three persons; God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity is eternal, fully divine. There never was a time when there was no God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This is who God is. This is the “what” of the Trinity.

And yet, for many Christians, when it comes to the Trinity, it feels somewhat odd and awkward as we try to explain who God is. Is it one God or three Gods? How can there be one God and three persons? And so we come up with these illustrations that never really capture the meaning of the Trinity. Michael Reeves describes the awkwardness of our attempts to describe the Trinity when he writes, “Think, for example, of all those desperate-sounding illustrations. ‘The Trinity,’ some helpful soul explains, ‘it is a bit like an egg, where there is the shell, the yoke and the white, and yet it is one egg!’ ‘No,’ says another, ‘the Trinity is more like a shamrock leaf; that is one leaf, but it’s got three bits sticking out. Just like the Father, Son and Spirit.’” To which Reeves concludes, “And

one wonders why the world laughs. For whether the Trinity is compared to shrubbery, streaked bacon, the three states of water or a three-headed giant, it begins to sound, well, bizarre.”<sup>6</sup> As a result, the Trinity becomes something we have to believe, but it runs the risk of becoming irrelevant to how we live.

One way we tend to deal with the Trinity is we simply shrug our shoulders and we say, “it is a mystery.” In fact, we can sound rather pious when we “defer to punt” in our explanation. And yet, when Paul refers to something being “a mystery” he is referring to something that had not been revealed by God in the past, but is now made known to us. So technically, we are not left in the dark regarding the Trinity because God has revealed himself to us as being Triune. And so Michael Reeves says, “Thus the Trinity is not some piece of inexplicable apparent nonsense, like a square circle. Rather, because the triune God has revealed himself, we can understand the Trinity.”<sup>7</sup> Can I put it this way? “We must understand the Trinity.” I am not saying we can exhaust our understanding of the Trinity. But we need to gain some understanding of the Triune God we worship.

So how does this prayer in John 17 help us understand the “what” of the Trinity? Notice when Jesus prays, he refers to God as “*Father*.” He does so six times in this prayer, five times in the verses we are looking at this morning. He begins in verse 1 by praying, “*Father, the hour has come to glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.*” Near the end of the prayer he prays, “*O righteous Father, even though the world does not know you, I know you, and these know that you have sent me.*” What do we discover about God when Jesus refers to him as “*Father*?” What does this tell us about the Trinity?

If I were to ask you to tell me who God is in a word or two, I wonder what word you would use. Would you even choose “Father” as the primary word to describe God? I have a hunch we would eventually get to that word, but it would run the risk of seeming to be lesser than other words we would use to describe God. Perhaps we would be more inclined to first think of God as “Creator” or “Ruler.” No doubt, God is those things. But they still don’t get to the ultimate identity of who God is. For God’s ultimate identity to be “Creator” he needs a creation. So what was he *before the foundation of the world*? And if “Ruler” is the ultimate identity of who God is, that affects how I view my salvation. It is nothing more than being left off the hook for my wrongdoing. Reeves said it that this makes God out to be “a divine policeman.” “If salvation simply means him letting me off and counting me as a law-abiding citizen, then gratitude (not love) is all I have. In other words, I can never love the God who is essentially just ‘The Ruler.’”<sup>8</sup> But it is in this prayer of Jesus that we discover the ultimate identity of who God is. God is Father! Before he ever created, before he ever ruled the world, before anything else,

this God was a Father loving his Son. Jesus alludes to this in verse 24 by recalling the love they shared *before the foundation of the world*.

Jesus is the revelation of God to us. We know what God is like because of Jesus. One of the titles given to Jesus is that he is “the Son of God.” *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.”* This does not mean that Jesus has a beginning. There has always been God Father and there has always been God the Son. By using the word “son” it is noted that Jesus is the exact representation of the Father. The Nicene Creed says it this way, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” Jesus is the eternal divine Son of God.

Therefore, at the core of who God is, God is Father. Even when we recite the Apostle’s Creed we begin by saying, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” Before God is “Creator” and before God is “Ruler” we confess at the core of who God is—God is Father. The implication then is that as Father, God is relational and life giving. So Reeves asks, “What does this mean?” And he says, “it does actually mean something . . . A father is a person who gives life, who begets children . . . Then this God is inherently outgoing and life-giving.”<sup>9</sup>

If I can just pause and acknowledge that whenever we talk about God as Father, people who have had a bad experience with their earthly father often have trouble relating to this image of God. James Miller says of this, “One’s heart goes out to the children of such fathers, and those of us who are fathers know that we too are far from perfect. But God the Father is not called Father because he copies earthly fathers. He is not a pumped up version of your dad. To transfer feelings of earthly fathers to him is, quite simply, a misstep. Instead, things are the other way around: it is that all human fathers are supposed to reflect him.”<sup>10</sup> The wound that comes from a broken father image reflects the yearning of our heart for the true Father. The “what” of the Trinity tells us that there is such a “Father.” And at the core of who God is, God is relational.

## **The “Wonder” of the Trinity**

I love the way Fred Sanders refers to God. In speaking of the Triune God, he refers to “the Happy Land of the Trinity.”<sup>11</sup> There is nothing flippant or irreverent in his characterization of God here. And if you read his book *The Deep Things of God*, you will see that he really does “get deep” in his description of “the endless immensity” of the

Triune God. But the tag line—"the happy land of the Trinity"—does capture the idea that God is content in himself and it is the picture we see portrayed in the prayer of John 17. It speaks to "the wonder of the Trinity."

What is the "wonder" of the Trinity? It starts with the mutual love the Father and the Son have for each other. You can hear this mutual love between God the Son and God the Father in verse 1. Jesus prays, "*Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you.*" That word *glorify* means to honor, magnify, celebrate. Do you see the mutuality of honoring and celebrating that exists between the Father and the Son? The Father glorifies the Son and the Son glorifies that Father. He picks up on this same mutual love in verse 24 when he recalls the glory and the love they shared in the Godhead *before the foundation of the world*. James Torrance describes this unique relationship as one of "mutual love, mutual self-giving, mutual testifying, mutual glorifying."<sup>12</sup> Why is this important? Why is the "happy land of the Trinity" important for us to understand? It is important because it tells us that we worship a God who is not lonely, but who has been loving for all of eternity as the Father has loved the Son in the Holy Spirit. This is the character of God and therefore, Reeves says, "Loving others is not a strange or novel thing for this God at all; it is at root of who he is."<sup>13</sup>

We must not lose sight of the fact that this prayer Jesus offers in John 17 is a prayer he offers right before he goes to the cross. In fact this is part of what it means for Jesus to glorify the Father. Looking to the cross, Jesus says in verse 4, "*I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.*" By going to the cross, Jesus demonstrates the self-giving love of the Father, who gave of his Son. For what purpose? Hebrews 2:10 says that Jesus suffered "*to bring many sons to glory.*" Or as Paul says in Galatians 4:5, "*that we might receive the adoption of sons.*" This is the wonder of the Trinity. Do you see it in the prayer Jesus made in John 17? Jesus ends the prayer with an amazing and profound statement. "*I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me . . . .* Stop right there and recall that back in verse 24 that it was a love he and the Father enjoyed before the world began. And now he completes the prayer by asking that the love they shared, "*the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.*"

There is an image I discovered in my reading that is used to describe the wonder of the Trinity and the love that is shared with us. It is the image of a waterfall that cascades down to us. Reeves describes it this way, "The shape of the Father-Son relationship begins a gracious cascade, like a waterfall of love; as the Father is the lover and the head of the Son, so the Son goes out to be the lover and the head of the church."<sup>14</sup> Jesus says

in John 15:9, “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.*” That is part of the wonder of the Trinity.

Do you know what this tells us about God? It tells us that God is outgoing. It tells us that God is welcoming to those who come to him through his Son, Jesus. You can hear the sheer delight in the voice of Jesus when he says of us, “*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*” You can see this image of the Father that Jesus portrays in the story of the Prodigal Son. What is the image of the Father in that story? It is one who runs and embraces and welcomes the sinner who comes to him through Jesus. “Come ye sinner, poor and needy. Weak and wounded, sick and sore. Jesus ready stands to save you. Full of pity, love and power.” The wonder of the Trinity is that through Jesus, we have been brought into “the Happy Land of the Triune God.”

### **The “Worship” of the Trinity**

What does this have to do with “corporate worship?” How does the fact that God is our Father and that through Jesus, we are brought into the love that exists in the Godhead impact our approach to our weekly gathering on Sunday morning?

For starters, the understanding of the Trinity ought to be the fuel for our worship. Our corporate gathering this morning is far more than just something we do on a weekly basis. This is not just some duty we perform nor is this just something religious people do. J. I Packer wrote in his classic work *Knowing God*, “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and whole outlook on life, it means he does not understand Christianity very well at all.”<sup>15</sup> This is what turns our worship into delight. It is that word that echoes from the lips of Jesus to our ears, “*Father, you have loved them even as you have loved me.*”

This is the source of our delight. When the Westminster Confession says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever it is not because God is lacking in anything. Some look at that and wonder what kind of a God would create with the intention of being worshiped. It is the understanding of the Trinity that tells us that God is self-giving and overflowing with love. God is full and flowing over with love. And therefore, worship—our delight in the Trinity—is our natural response as we are

brought into the love of the Father and the Son. This is why our worship ought to be joyful. This is why our worship ought to be glad. This is the work of the Third person of the Trinity. In Romans 5:5 it says, “*God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*”

This ought to also impact the form of our worship. We ought to make much of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Keep your ears open for signs of the Trinity in our songs and in our confessions. “I believe in God the Father, Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Or when we sing, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow . . . Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Amen—Or, Holy, Holy, Holy . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity. Or, when we sing, “Heavenly Father, Beautiful Son, Spirit of light and truth, Thank you for bringing sinners to come to you—don’t just think that these are doctrinal statements to be believed in order to be orthodox and to consider yourself Christian. Rather, the rehearsal of the truth of the Triune God in our form of worship reminds us that worship is a gift of God’s grace. But because of the Triune God, we have been drawn into the very life and love of God himself. And so as we worship we are participating in the Spirit through the Son in the love of the Father.

Finally, worship of the Trinity is ultimately worship that forms us. We become what we worship. Richard Sibbes was a Puritan pastor, a contemporary of Shakespeare. The image of a Puritan is usually rather dour. Or as one person put it, “so boring that pigeons could roost on them.” But not Sibbes, dubbed the “honey-mouthed preacher.” He believed that your view of God shapes what you become. We become like what we worship. He likened God’s love to the sunshine. I walked out of the office on Tuesday into the unbelievable 62 degree sunny day and felt the warmth of the sun, a feeling I haven’t felt for a long time. It is amazing how the warmth of the sun can affect your disposition. That is how Sibbes thought about the love of the Triune God. It was the knowledge that God is so sunny, so radiant with goodness and love, that made Sibbes such an attractive model of Godlikeness. He said, “those that are led by the Spirit of God, that are like him; they have a communicative, diffusive goodness that loves to spread itself.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, those who know God’s love, become loving. When you see corporate worship as an opportunity to participate in the love of the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, it does something to you. It forms the love of God in you and through you. It produces the love of God within us.

## **Conclusion**

Corporate worship is more than what we do when we come together on a Sunday. We

will talk about what we do and how we do it during the third and fourth week of this series. But before we even get there, it is important to lay the foundation for our worship. I think the shift I need to make in my mind and in my heart is that worship is not just something I do. Rather, it is a gift of God's grace. In worship, I have the joy of participating through the Spirit in God the Son's communion with the Father. Wow! Or, perhaps a more biblical expression is "Hallelujah!"

And so Father God, may the love that you have loved the Beloved Son—Jesus—from all eternity also be in us by the work of your Spirit. And may Jesus, who is in us—unite us in his love—forming his love in us—so that the world may believe that Jesus Christ is indeed the Son of God.

The "what" of the Trinity tells us that God is Father before anything else.

The "wonder" of the Trinity tells us that we have been brought into the love that exists between the Father and the Son.

The "worship" of the Trinity delights in the love we have in God and it forms God's love in us.

Praise Him . . . Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>James B. Torrance *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996) 20

<sup>2</sup>Antoine de Saint-Exupery *The Wisdom of the Sands* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950)

<sup>3</sup>Fred Sanders *The Deep Things of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) 94

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 94

<sup>5</sup>Torrance, 20

<sup>6</sup>Michael Reeves *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012) 10

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 11

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 10

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 24

<sup>10</sup>James Miller *The Passion of Michael Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993) 366

<sup>11</sup>Sanders, 61

<sup>12</sup>Torrance, 31

<sup>13</sup>Reeves

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*; 28

<sup>15</sup>J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (London: Hodder& Stoughton, 1973) 224

<sup>16</sup>Reeves, 48

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## COMMUNITY GROUPS



### Getting To Know Me Questions

1. What is a word that comes to mind when you think of your Father? Why did you choose that word?
2. Why do you think the weekly corporate worship of God is important?
3. What did you take from the sermon and how might it impact how you worship?



### Diving Into The Word

4. Read John 17:1-5, 24. What do you observe about the love between God the Father and God the Son in this passage? (See also John 3:35; 5:20 and 14:31) What does it mean that God is “Father”?
5. Read John 17:20-24. What does Jesus pray for us who believe in him? (See also Hebrews 2:10; Galatians 4:4-7). What does this tell us about the outgoing and sharing nature of God?
6. Read 1 John 3:1-3. How does comprehending the love of God lead you to worship?
7. Read John 17:25-26; 1 John 4:7-8. What is the impact on our lives when we worship the Triune God? How would you like to see “the outgoing nature of God’s love” reflected in your life this week?



### Taking It Home

8. What do you think is the difference between approach corporate worship as “something you do” versus seeing worship as “the gift of participating in the Son’s communion with the Father?” How does it impact the way you approach worship?
9. Share one thing you are taking from your conversation.