



Trinitarian Prayers for Christian Worship

EBERHARD JÜNGEL¹

*Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen
Tübingen, Germany*

IN EVERY PROPER CHRISTIAN WORSHIP SERVICE, THE BELIEVING CONGREGATION confesses its faith in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, the mystery of the triune God, though faithfully believed and solemnly confessed in worship, seems to be existentially irrelevant to the Christian life beyond the service of worship. "This secret seems to be transmitted only for its own sake. Even after it is communicated, as a *reality* it remains fully hidden."² This lament by Karl Rahner over the existential irrelevance of the confession of the triune God expresses an experiential deficiency that has been widely documented. In Germany, even the former Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who understands himself to be a

¹Translated by Frederick J. Gaiser.

²Karl Rahner, "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriß heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer, vol. 2 (Zürich and Köln: Benziger, 1967) 322.

EBERHARD JÜNGEL is professor of systematic theology and philosophy of religion. He also directs the university's Institut für Hermeneutik. His major work on the Trinity, *Gottes Sein ist im Werden* (1965), appeared in English in 1976, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being Is in Becoming*.

The doctrine of the Trinity has often been perceived as practically irrelevant. Prayers with trinitarian structure can begin to overcome this perception. The God who is confessed and proclaimed by Christians does not exist in splendid isolation, but is One who exists from eternity as a Being in community. Trinitarian prayers call Christians to experience the life of the triune God.

true Christian and who for some time served as a synod member of his church, recently declared in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*—in his own characteristically incautious honesty—that the *Mysterium trinitatis* (the mystery of the Trinity) was completely inaccessible to him and to others as well.³ Schmidt stands, without doubt, in the tradition of Immanuel Kant, who regretted that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity had no practical relevance at all.⁴

In my opinion, this disastrous experiential deficiency, demonstrable in relation to the *Mysterium trinitatis*, results—largely, if not completely—from the fact that even within Christian worship the confession of the triune God remains strangely isolated. At best it shows up in the chorales, but even there it remains more a pious quotation than something that marks the life of the believing individual and the confessing congregation in a way befitting the intention of the chorales.

Measures to counter this lamentable experiential deficiency must, therefore, begin in worship itself. That is why I have regularly given a trinitarian structure to the prayers that I am called to formulate for worship services led by me—precisely because prayers have a constitutive significance for the spiritual life of the individual Christian and the gathered congregation. Here, in the prayers of Christian worship, is where the *Mysterium trinitatis* has its *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life). Someone who notices that the address of the trinitarian God has itself a trinitarian structure begins to understand that the God who is confessed and proclaimed by Christians is in his own internal relationships many-faceted. This God does not exist in splendid isolation, but is One who exists from eternity as a Being in community, indeed, who exists as a *community of mutual otherness*.

Two things must be taken seriously in this definition: the mutual otherness itself and the community asserted within this mutual otherness. In fact, distinguishing between God the Father and God the Son calls attention to the greatest of all contrasts: faith in God the Father is faith in God as the origin of life; faith in God the Son is faith in the God who, for our benefit, died our death. But faith in God the Holy Spirit is faith in the God who, in himself, endures this contrast between life and death and who resolves the contrast to the benefit of life. The triune God is *in this way* a community of mutual otherness. *This* is the trinitarian life into which God seeks to draw us.

In the prayers that follow, the trinitarian community of mutual otherness is addressed in such a way that the respective particularity of each person of the Trinity is called to mind. This particularity is remembered so that those who are reminded of it begin to share in the life of the trinitarian God. And with that, Christians begin to *experience* the mystery of the divine Trinity—an experience

³Helmut Schmidt, “Gespräch über den deutschen Herbst 1977 und die Folgen,” *Die Zeit* (4 July 1997) 8: “Many of the Christian dogmas remain fully inaccessible to me. Among these are the holy Trinity, the immaculate conception, and the Christian ethical teachings of the sermon on the mount.”

⁴Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris, 1979) 65, 67: “The doctrine of the Trinity, taken literally, has no practical relevance at all, even if we think we understand it; and it is even more clearly irrelevant if we realize that it transcends all our concepts.”

which, then, has great practical value. For if the human is the image of God, then the human, too, is meant to turn the otherness that distinguishes among people toward community that does not level out such otherness.

We thank you, dear heavenly Father,
That every morning your grace comes fresh and new. Today also you quicken us with your inexhaustible power of life. Eternal God, we sing your praise now and forever.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You are the spring that stills our thirst for life. We thank you with our hearts and mouths and hands.

God, Holy Spirit, come,
Open our hearts, open our mouths, open our hands, that we might magnify God's name with our thoughts, our words, and our courageous acts, singing a new song before all the world!

You, we praise; you alone, our triune God. AMEN⁵

Lord God, heavenly Father,
Even when we cannot see it, you rule the world. Give us strength and courage to trust your rule rather than human rule.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and friend of humans,
You have experienced the death to which we sent you; you have known the hell that we made for ourselves. But you have broken the power of death and hell so that you can be with us every day until the end of the age.

We praise you along with the Father in heaven, and we ask now for your Holy Spirit.

As we silently bring before our heavenly Father those things that concern us most, we pray especially for the freedom of those Christians who are oppressed and impeded in totalitarian states. Do not come to us, Holy Spirit, without coming also to them with comfort and with strength. AMEN⁶

Everlasting God, almighty Father,
From the beginning, you have been our help. You are the source of all good gifts, granting each of us more than we deserve. We give you thanks, and we ask you to open our eyes to the blessings with which you so richly surround us on every side.

Lord Jesus Christ, you human God [*Du menschlicher Gott*],
You have lived our life and suffered our death in order to begin a new life with us. You embrace us in a mystery where we are forever safe.

⁵German original in Eberhard Jünger, *Unterbrechungen: Predigten IV* (Munich, 1989) 168.

⁶Ibid., 169.

We praise your hidden presence, even as we yearn for the future glory when, fully visible, you will meet us and all the world. Come, Lord Jesus!

God, Holy Spirit,

Power from on high; you want to burn within us as a holy fire. Kindle in us a love for truth that yields an earthly knowledge which does not destroy the secrets of this world but rather enters them protectingly and lovingly. Deem us worthy to know even you, opening our mouths in awe. AMEN⁷

Lord God, merciful Father,

We thank you that you alone are our judge. You make us hope and you give us courage, for you judge us with righteousness and compassion. Lord, have mercy upon us.

Dear Lord Jesus Christ,

We praise you, for you have allowed yourself to be judged on our behalf. You gave yourself up to judgment out of love for us. You give us confidence and you make us free, for your love is strong as death. Your love frees us from our guilt and liberates us from the powers into whose hands we have fallen. Your love leads us to the Father's side where you intercede for us and rule the world with grace and mercy. Christ, have mercy upon us.

Come, Holy Spirit,

Speak to us, that we have ears to hear in a world hard of hearing.

Come, Holy Spirit,

Awaken us from the nightmares that oppress us.

Come, Holy Spirit,

Renew us through and through, that, in a world of violence, we become instruments of peace and, in a time of injustice, we become witnesses of compassion. AMEN⁸

Lord God, heavenly Father,

You know us. You know us better than we know ourselves. Look with favor upon all that is right with us and upon the good that we do. And with your love, blot out all that is evil and destructive.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You are the way to the Father's house. Keep us with you that we reach the goal.

God, Holy Spirit,

You open to us the word of truth from which we live. Come now and open our hearts as well. Gather the scattered, loosen the bound,

⁷Ibid., 169-170.

⁸Ibid., 170.

encourage the idle. Renew our minds and tongues so that we dare now to bring before our Father in heaven those things that concern us most....AMEN⁹

Lord our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
We cry to you. See how our world has grown old! Come Holy Spirit, renew the world. And give us, too, a new and confident spirit, able to withstand the assaults of unbelief.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You are the bright day who expells all our darkness. Come to us now with your creative word, that we might praise you and the heavenly Father who sent you.

Dear Father, almighty God,
Through your Son Jesus Christ, you have entrusted yourself to us. Make us so trust you and one another that we become witnesses of faith in this world of mistrust and suspicion, demonstrating to all how much you love them. For this we love you, you eternal God, you human God, you coming God. AMEN¹⁰

Lord God, heavenly Father,
You created the heaven and the earth, and entrusted your creation to us. But we have laid a heavy hand on the creation, and we have raised our hands against you and other people. We confess to you, almighty God, that we are unworthy sons and daughters, fully deserving your holy anger.

Lord Jesus Christ,
You are God's eternal Son and yet our brother: Where shall we flee that we can endure? Lord Christ, to you alone.

God, Holy Spirit,
You renew the earth and its people. Come now to us, renew us fully that our despondent hearts find new courage, that our understanding find new and better insight, and that our work not be in vain. In the midst of this perishing world, make us fit witnesses of your coming kingdom. AMEN¹¹

Almighty God, heavenly Father,
You are a praiseworthy God, for you are a friendly God. You forgive our sins and do not retaliate against us for our misdeeds. We confess to you our unfriendly acts, our malicious deeds, and the guilt we have brought upon ourselves in relation to you and our neighbors.

⁹Ibid., 171.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 172.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You have taken upon yourself our burdens. You have died for us a sinner's death in order that we might live. You are the faithful Son of God the Father. Make us also God's faithful children.

God, Holy Spirit,

Come now to us unholy people and make each of us—however unlikely—a saint. Come, Holy Spirit. AMEN¹²

Almighty God, heavenly Father,

You have given us life and the means of life. Daily and abundantly, you prepare a table before us. Yet we neglect the thanks that you are due; we are afraid to share with others what you have given us: our daily bread, our time, our hearts, our lives. Lord, shame us with your goodness, and let us understand how we have sinned in thought, word, and deed.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You shared our distress, and you died for us that we might live. You have invited us to the meal for sinners, preparing for us joy upon joy at your own table. Though we are not worthy, we come gladly, confessing to you our guilt, our great guilt.

God, Holy Spirit,

You refine us and make us holy with the fire of your love. We pray that you come and renew us through and through that we might speak from a clean heart, saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" AMEN¹³

Almighty God, heavenly Father,

You awakened your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, from death. From the confines of the grave you have made a new humanity; from the darkness of death you have brought new life to light. For this we thank you. For this we praise you. Glory to you in all eternity!

Lord Jesus Christ,

You swallowed up death in victory and gave that victory to us wretched ones, to us who have failed. We glorify you and pray: lead us out of the confines, out of the prisons of our daily lives, and take us into your realm of freedom. Make us free, here and now and always.

God, Holy Spirit,

Make wide the world's gates, lift up its doors, so that this world might be touched and renewed by your power. Open also our own hearts, our minds, and our understanding that we can mutually discover one another, understand one another, learn love and respect. AMEN¹⁴

¹²Ibid., 173.

¹³Ibid., 174.

¹⁴Ibid., 174f.

Almighty God, dear heavenly Father,

You are worthy of praise, you who so wonderfully created the world, crowning it with human beings. You preserve the heaven and the earth. Every morning you give into our hands the work of your hands—though we shamefully misuse it.

You entrust to us the world that we might live on earth in peace and joy. Not we, eternal Creator and fatherly Preserver—not we, but you are worthy of praise. We praise you!

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God and Light from eternal Light,

You are to be praised by all the world, for you have borne and broken through the darkness of our sins. Your death took away the power of death. Raised from the dead, you broke through the darkness with which we so often and so furtively darken our own lives and those of others. You are and remain the Light of Life: the light that illumines, the light that warms, the light that guides our way—highly to be praised in time and eternity!

God, Holy Spirit,

You glorious bond of unbreakable love between heaven and earth! You come to people who are unable to praise. You open closed ears and touch embittered hearts. You renew what we make old. Come, Holy Spirit, you unsettling Spirit, move and free our hearts so that we heartily praise you, so that all of us, in thanks and prayer, entrust ourselves to you, the Spirit, the Son, and the Father: our God. AMEN¹⁵

Dear heavenly Father,

You give us our daily bread. We thank you, and we never cease to pray: Every morning, give us and all your children everything we need for our physical lives.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You are the bread of life, come to us from heaven. We praise you, for you have given yourself to satisfy our hunger for life. We praise you in our prayer that you nourish our souls and strengthen them with your Holy Spirit.

God, Holy Spirit,

Come to us, fill us with joy and with lust for life. Renew the hunger in those who, spiritually and temporally, are tired of life. Fill with insight those who are greedy, making us see not only where we are meant to give rather than to take, but also where we can freely take, freely pray, freely beg. Give us this day our daily bread. AMEN¹⁶

¹⁵Ibid., 175f.

¹⁶Ibid., 176.

Lord God, heavenly Father,

We praise and exalt you that we may gather here in your name, that we might be here for you just as you are here for us. Make us listen to you so that in the midst of our muddled lives we might find paths that bring us finally to see you face to face.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You are the way, the way of life that leads us truly forward. We thank you for you lead no one astray; instead you seek those who stray, calling all the world to yourself so that nothing and no one is lost.

Lord God, Holy Spirit,

Come into our hearts, we pray, and make us worthy of your truth. Give us every day the courage to know the truth and give us this day the courage to speak it in our hearts, naming our concerns before the heavenly Father....AMEN¹⁷

Lord Jesus Christ,

You know the Father's great power. We thank you for his even greater love.

Lord, Holy Spirit,

In you the Father is present. We thank you for the nearness of his help.

Lord God, heavenly Father,

Come to us, we pray, as friend, and be our help in all our days. Give direction and purpose to those among us who are bright. Give composure and courage to those who are weak. And to the lazy give a swift kick. Encourage the weary with a living spirit. Lead the way for all who have lost hope. Guide the lonely to a loving neighbor. Bring lovers happily together.

Lord, touch also the powerful with a spirit of insight. Lead them out of the wicked struggle for power and into the wholesome struggle for justice and order, the worthy struggle for human compassion. Their labor is hard; may it serve the well-being of all peoples, above all those who are oppressed, those whose wounds cry aloud to heaven. Heal Lord, for it is time.

Bring peace to Vietnam, protect the peace on the borders of Israel. Give freedom to all who have none. Touch the church with a new spirit, that they never complain without also giving thanks, that they never fight without suffering, that they never stand still without growth. Drive out of us the thirst for spiritual violence. In its place bring the courage of spiritual power, to *forgive* sins in a decaying world and to call forth the time of resurrection of the dead. Give us courage to cry to you: Lord, never cease to seek us, you with the Son

¹⁷ibid., 176f.

and the Spirit, in life and in death, until we find ourselves in eternity.
AMEN¹⁸

Dear Father in heaven,

You seek us tirelessly, though we go astray. We are grateful that no place is off-limits in your search for us. Your dear Son Jesus Christ has told us how much you care. In him, you come after each of us. Your good Spirit opens our eyes to the good gifts with which you enliven the lost and the found. Give us that good Spirit, and take care of us through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who with you and the good and Holy Spirit lives and rules from everlasting to everlasting. AMEN¹⁹

We thank you, almighty God, dear heavenly Father,

For your Son Jesus Christ, who came to earth for our sake, who died so that we could find peace: peace, O God, with you; peace with one another; and for each of us, peace with ourselves.

Lord Jesus Christ, we give you thanks

That you have come near to us in bread and wine, closer to each of us than we are to ourselves. Where you are, Lord, sin departs. Where you are, there is life and happiness. Lord, abide with us always.

God, Holy Spirit, bond of love between Father and Son, between heaven and earth,

Bind us, too, to one another; make us grow into a community that does not require sameness, but that affirms and strengthens and defends the otherness of each. Strengthen our faith, renew our love, and enliven our hope that we might live, speak, act, and, if need be, suffer as witnesses and instruments of your truth, always stirred and held by you, the Three in One—until, freed from sin and error, we see you in eternity.²⁰ AMEN²¹

Lord, our God and heavenly Father,

You have appointed and called us mortals to your eternal kingdom. We know that we are not worthy of you, so all the more we are grateful for your fatherly mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, God of God, Light of the Father's Light,

You have illumined the darkness of this world and have brought warmth and brightness into our own lives. We trust you, and we entrust ourselves to you.

¹⁸German original in Eberhard Jünger, *Geistesgegenwart*, 3rd edition (Munich, 1979) 23f.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰Translator's note: The final words are from a hymn by Rudolf Alexander Schröder: "bis wir von Sünd und Fehl befreit ihn selber schau in Ewigkeit" (*Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* 133:5).

²¹Prayer for service of Holy Communion, Evangelical Stift, Tübingen, 13 November 1992.

God, Holy Spirit,

You visit us in our frailty. You carry our frail existence to the Father and to his everlasting life, to the life that endures. Come to us now and pull us together, each one. Gather us all, different as we are, into your own congregation that we might bear common witness to the truth that comforts us in life and in death. AMEN²²

Almighty God, dear heavenly Father,

You give us our daily bread and preserve our lives in your loving kindness. We thank you and ask that you continue to feed us so that we in turn might work to feed a hungry world.

Lord Jesus Christ,

You are the bread of life. Awaken in us a hunger for you.

Lord, Holy Spirit,

Gather us around this living bread; unite us through this bread that makes us live for time and eternity. May we taste how friendly you are, God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. AMEN²³

Almighty God, dear heavenly Father,

In surpassing wisdom you guide the course of our world. The world always seeks to escape you, Lord, but with a gentle hand you guide all things back to you. We thank you, Lord, and pray that you would guide also the course of our lives within this world that we might find rest, O God, in you.

Lord Jesus Christ,

Your surpassing wisdom is revealed in the depths of human misery and in words and actions that seem foolish in our eyes. Open our blind eyes to your hidden glory that shines where it is least expected.

God, Holy Spirit,

You are the Spirit that makes the foolish wise and the weak strong. Lift us, Holy Spirit, out of our own weakness. Encourage the weary, gather the scattered, calm the distracted. God, Holy Spirit, you are the Spirit of joy. Fill us now with the joy of faith, so that we, free of fear and timidity, can come out of ourselves and entrust ourselves fully and completely to you, O Triune God. AMEN²⁴ ☩

²²Prayer following the sermon, Stiftskirche, Tübingen, 14 November 1993.

²³Prayer for worship, Berliner Dom, Laetare Sunday, 26 March 1995.

²⁴Prayer for service of worship, Stiftskirche, Tübingen, Cantate Sunday, 5 May 1996.