

# HOW GREAT IS OUR GOD: THE TRINITY IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP MUSIC

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## Introduction

According to the Bible, every good and perfect gift is a heavenly one, coming from the Father of lights (James 1:17). Such gifts must include the fullness of the revelation of God unless we want to say that humans have their own power to conjure up a true vision of God. The witness of the apostles, recorded in their writings and crafted by subsequent Christians into a statement of faith, is that God exists and acts as three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in one Godhead. This is the classic Christian faith.

If this is scriptural Christianity, then why should Christians settle for anything less in the content of worship than the fullness of this revelation of God, particularly when the revelation itself is a gift from God? Why should churches be happy with worship that is less than true to God?

Perhaps churches are satisfied with worship that does not reach for a full vision because a consumerist culture leads us to believe that the most critical thing is that worship be true to us. Perhaps some are scared that our worship will become cold if it becomes “theological.”

But could not a fuller, richer vision of God actually stimulate love, not quench it? Could not a more complete vision of God lead to a deeper love, rather than away from it? Theology can give us more motives to love God, not fewer. And there is every reason why such theology could take lyrical form in songs. Christian history is full of outstanding examples of songwriters who offered up such lyrics for the church to adore the Triune God. It is not just the latest generation who knows passion for the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is not just an abstract concept, some theological idea that Christians are supposed to take a test on or write a paper about. It is not some detached doctrine that

we know we are supposed to agree with, checking it off a list of right beliefs like items on a packing list for vacation. “Okay, kids, let’s make sure we have the first aid kit and the doctrine of the Trinity just in case something happens.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is a vision not only of God but also of our greatest longings for salvation and our deepest hopes in worship. It liberates by affirming the blessed thought that salvation and worship do not depend upon me. Both are gifts of participating through the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with God the Father. People as diverse as theologian James Torrance and songwriter Matt Redman delight in this truth.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Trinitarian belief reminds us that God is not some passive bystander in worship or salvation, desperately hoping that we will work ourselves up before being happy with us.<sup>2</sup>

And this doctrine is important to help us avoid pitfalls, perhaps even idolatry. As one person put it, “Believing right things about God is an essential component in honouring God appropriately.”<sup>3</sup> Worshiping the Trinity is a large part of what makes worship orthodox. (“Orthodox” comes from Greek words that mean “right glory.”) Because how we relate to God is shaped by our worship experience of God, Trinitarian content in worship is very important. Long after the music has faded, worship songs have created in us a sense of how all this God and salvation stuff fits together. If we lose the Trinity, if we have worship that is less than true to God, we end up with a very different faith, a very different hope of salvation, and, ultimately, a very different God than the one revealed in Scripture.

In light of the foregoing, this chapter focuses on Trinitarian theological content by asking five questions about how the most-used contemporary worship songs lead Christian congregations to pray to and worship the Triune God.<sup>4</sup> I conclude this chapter by discussing some possible reasons the core repertoire is minimally Trinitarian and whether future worship songs will become more adoring of the Trinity.

Throughout this chapter, I will argue that the theological content of the lyrics of the top 77 songs that constitute the heart of CWM between 1989 and 2005 reveals that this core repertoire has few explicit Trinitarian aspects. The Christians who write and use these songs expect them to express a relationship with God that must be rooted primarily in the heart, not in a common faith. This emphasis provides the focus of this chapter: *lex amandi*, *lex orandi*, that is, the rule of loving establishes the rule of praying. The classic maxim from the ancient church was *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, that is, the rule of praying establishes the rule of believing.

## Method of Analysis

There are five questions that govern the qualitative analysis presented in this chapter:

1. Do the songs name the Trinity or all three Persons of the Trinity?
2. Do the songs direct our worship toward the Trinity as a whole or toward one of the Persons of the Trinity?
3. Do the songs remember the activity of the Divine Persons among Themselves?

4. Do the songs see Christian worship as participation of believers in inter-Trinitarian dynamics or activity?
5. Do the songs use the character of inter-Trinitarian relationships to explore a desired character for relationship among Christians, for example, unity, love, sacrifice, or humility?

These questions build upon each other. What they get at is an upward spiral of understanding how our salvation is communion with the Triune God. They try to point at dimensions of what theologians might call a Trinitarian economy of salvation, that is, how God has been revealed and acted on our behalf to bring us into fellowship with the Trinity. It assumes that redemption is a cooperative venture by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and that salvation involves being brought into the fellowship these Three have with each other. In some real way, we can experience this communion within the church, particularly as it worships.

## Results

### *Do the Songs Name the Trinity or All Three Persons of the Trinity?*

None of the 77 songs explicitly uses the word “Trinity” or “Triune,” and only four songs explicitly refer to or name all three Persons of the Trinity: (1) *Glorify Thy Name*; (2) *Father, I Adore You*; (3) *Shine, Jesus, Shine*; and (4) *How Great Is Our God*. The first two songs are praise songs with three verses structured on the Trinity. The description of the Trinity in *Shine, Jesus, Shine* comes as the standard feature of the recurring chorus: “Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father’s glory / Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.” *How Great Is Our God* is the truly exceptional song, both in this list of four and in the entire corpus of 77 songs. It alone worships the Triune nature of God (“Godhead Three in One / Father, Spirit, Son”). Only one song in addition to these four (*How Can We Name a Love*) speaks of God as “Father.” In the handful of songs that refer to the Holy Spirit, seven refer to the “Spirit” (but none explicitly uses the name “Holy Spirit”).

Beyond an explicit reference to the Father in the five songs above, seven more of the 77 songs make clear reference to the First Person of the Trinity, using terms other than “Father.” Some of these songs use other names like “Holy One” (*Give Thanks*) or “Most High” (*Our God Reigns*). Some speak of “God,” but the composer clearly refers to the First Person as in “God sent His Son / They called Him Jesus” (*Because He Lives*).

Thirty-seven of the songs, however, make explicit reference to the Son, or Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. Twenty-seven of these songs specifically speak of Jesus, Christ, or Jesus Christ. The other ten speak of Christ more generally as “Lord,” “God,” or “King,” but Christ is clearly meant, for example, *Lord, I Lift Your Name on High* recalls Christ’s coming, cross, and resurrection.

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However, it is not always clear to which person of the Trinity the lyrics are referring. The most frequently used titles for the divine object of worship are “Lord” (47 occurrences), “God” (28 occurrences), and “King” (18 occurrences). In 29 of the 47 occurrences of “Lord,” it is difficult to determine exactly who this “Lord” is, as seen in the most frequently appearing song among the 77, *I Love You, Lord*. In 14 of the 28 occurrences of the title “God,” the lack of additional context or names likewise obscures the specific identity of “God.” For the third most used title, “King,” the level of clarity is much higher. Except in a few cases, the songs make clear that the “King” is Jesus Christ. But there is even less clarity in the five songs that do not explicitly use any common divine title or name: *I Could Sing of Your Love Forever*, *Breathe, Above All*, *Draw Me Close*, and *When I Look into Your Holiness*. *As the Deer* and *You’re Worthy of My Praise* were not included because they speak of the recipient as King.

The same pattern of Christ-centeredness is seen in those songs whose purpose is to contemplate the divine name. Only one (*Glorify Thy Name*) shows an explicit intention to worship the entire Trinity, while six songs focus on Jesus Christ and three are generic contemplations of the divine name (*How Majestic Is Your Name*, *Bless His Holy Name*, and *Blessed Be Your Name*).

### *Do the Songs Direct Our Worship toward the Trinity as a Whole or Toward One of the Persons of the Trinity?*

As noted above, only one song explicitly worships God for being Triune, and only two lead to direct worship of the Trinity. Directly addressing worship to the Trinity as a whole or to the Holy Spirit is the most minimal aspect of this body of 77 songs. Similarly, very few songs explicitly address the Holy Spirit in worship. Of the seven that name the Spirit, only four direct worship to the Spirit—the same four that name all three Persons of the Trinity (*Glorify Thy Name*; *Father, I Adore You*; *Shine, Jesus, Shine*; and *How Great Is Our God*). The other three songs that mention the Holy Spirit simply make reference to the worshiper’s enjoyment of the Spirit.

Directly addressing worship to the First Person of the Trinity fares no better. Of the twelve songs that make clear reference to the First Person of the Trinity (God the Father), only four explicitly worship the Father in direct address: the two songs internally structured by Trinitarian naming (*Glorify Thy Name* and *Father, I Adore You*) and two others (*Give Thanks* and *How Great Is Our God*). One other song that distinguishes the First Person of the Trinity (*Bind Us Together*) possibly addresses God the Father in petition, depending upon whether its prayer to the “Lord” has God the Father in mind. (*Open Our Eyes, Lord* is another possibility.) Perhaps some of the composers had God the Father in mind in the songs that speak of the “Lord” or “God” generically, but the lack of context or content makes it difficult to tell. However, given the stronger tendency to name the Second Person of the Trinity throughout the entire body of 77 songs, it is more likely that most of these generic references are to Jesus Christ.

Directing worship toward Jesus Christ is a much stronger phenomenon. As noted above, 37 of the 77 songs make distinct reference to Jesus Christ. Thirty-two of these directly address Jesus Christ as the recipient of worship.

However, the basis for worshiping Christ varies in these 32 songs. Twelve acknowledge Jesus Christ's divine nature, either explicitly or implicitly. Several root worship of Christ in remembrance of His activity, usually referencing His death and resurrection. Others speak of Christ's exalted status, most clearly seen in those songs that are essentially strings of Christ's titles. Songs that speak of Christ's exalted status frequently connect it to His Kingship and occasionally to sheer contemplation of the name "Jesus" itself. Clearly, worship of Christ is more fully developed in the 77 songs than worship of God the Father or the Holy Spirit. Of course, this assessment omits whatever conclusions might be drawn from songs that speak of "Lord" or "God" in a generic manner.

### *Do the Songs Remember the Activity of the Divine Persons among Themselves?*

It is not surprising that the answer is "no" or "very minimally." Without naming, and thus not distinguishing between, the Persons of the Trinity, it is difficult to discuss how these Persons have acted among themselves or in concert.

As a whole this body of 77 songs is what some might call "functionally unitarian."<sup>5</sup> In *Glorify Thy Name* and *Father, I Adore You* the composers symmetrically make each Person of the Trinity the object of worship but do not explore how they interact. The structure of the songs, with equal statements of adoration and petition, implies equality between the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit. The third, *Shine, Jesus, Shine*, has more nuance because the recurring chorus makes Jesus the mediator of the Father's glory and the Spirit the enabler of our participation in this glory. *Shine, Jesus, Shine* is exceptional in that it implies our reliance upon Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit to experience God the Father. *How Great Is Our God* is exceptional, too, in being the only song that makes God's Triune nature the explicit basis for adoration.

Eleven songs among the 77 make clear reference to two distinct Persons of the Trinity: eight discuss the Father and the Son and two discuss the Son and the Spirit. Another song (*Better Is One Day*) distinguishes between the "living God" and the Spirit of this God, but it is unclear who is meant by "living God." If the Father is in view, then this is the only song that speaks of the Father and the Holy Spirit, without reference to the Son. (*Open Our Eyes, Lord* is also another two-Person song if the unspecified "Lord" is God the Father or the Holy Spirit.)

Of the eight songs that discuss the Father and the Son, six focus on the theme that the Father has given the Son to save us. Four of them have brief references: the "Holy One" has given Jesus Christ His Son (*Give Thanks*); God sent His Son for healing, forgiveness, and pardon (*Because He Lives*); we are "purchased" by God's Son (*Bind Us Together*); and Jesus is the Lamb of God (*You Are My All in All*). The two that explore this theme in greater depth are both derived from the "Suffering Servant" prophecy

found in Isaiah 53. In *I Stand in Awe*, for example, God brings about the suffering of the Lamb of God for the singer's sin. The song *Our God Reigns* shares a similar perspective, although the emphasis on God bringing the suffering is muted.

The two remaining Father/Son songs have very undeveloped associations between the two Persons. In *Jesus, Name above All Names*, the composer speaks of Jesus as Son of God, Emmanuel, and God with us as part of stringing together names and titles for Christ without explanation. The connection between Father and Son in *How Can We Name a Love* is even more tenuous.

Similarly, the two songs that clearly speak of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit make only passing references to their relationship. In *You Are My King* the singer has the Spirit of Jesus as a result of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. In *Surely the Presence of the Lord* the singer feels the "sweet Spirit" as a result of the Lord Jesus fulfilling the promise of His presence according to Matthew 18:20.

Apart from the lack of naming the Father and the Holy Spirit, three other factors contribute to the lack of emphasis on the activity of the Trinity.

The first is the tendency within many songs to emphasize character traits or the status of God/Jesus Christ/the Lord/the King singularly without contemplating the dynamics of the Trinity itself. The song *Forever* affirms that God is faithful, strong, and with us. *Shout to the Lord* proclaims that no one compares to Jesus as the singer's comfort, shelter, and tower of refuge and strength. *More Precious Than Silver* speaks of the Lord being of more worth than silver, gold, or diamonds. *He Is Exalted* rejoices that the King is forever exalted on high, while heaven and earth rejoice in His holy name. And *As the Deer*, a very popular song, speaks of the song's recipient being the singer's strength, shield, heart's desire, friend, brother, sole satisfaction, real joy giver, and apple of her/his eye without specifically naming the recipient as God. In these songs the nature of the Trinity and its activity are rarely put forth as the basis for the worship.

The second factor that contributes to the lack of emphasis on the activity of the Trinity is the relative de-emphasis on commemorating God's saving activity. The songs pay little attention to placing salvation within a broader meta-narrative—that is, any grand, all-encompassing master story—and thus providing opportunity to recite the specific activities or internal dynamics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Usually the saving work is attributed to a single entity, whether God, the Lord (unspecified), or the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the 19 songs that commemorate God's saving activity, almost all place the focus on the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. For example, *Give Thanks* speaks of the Holy One having given Jesus Christ, His Son. Another, *Celebrate Jesus*, remembers only the resurrection. While it is acceptable for a single worship piece to remember only one redemptive act, one still wonders whether the overall effect in using these songs would be to create the impression that God's saving activities are isolated events—rather than part of a whole plan of salvation—and that these events are solely the work of one Divine Person—rather than being a cooperative work by God the Father through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Only a few of the songs that recall the crucifixion place it in a wider context of saving activity: *Lord, I Lift Your Name on High* associates it with the *kenosis* (or the relinquishment of the form of God by Jesus in becoming man and suffering death), cross, burial, and exaltation; *Here I Am to Worship* associates creation, *kenosis*, crucifixion, and exaltation; and *Awesome God* makes the crucifixion the activity of the same God (Christ) who judged Adam and Eve in the Garden, brought judgment on Sodom, and is about to return. Two of the 19 songs remember creation.

Therefore, few of the songs, unlike the New Testament, explore the internal dynamics of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in this wider range of saving activity. Whereas the New Testament continually explores how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have acted in concert on our behalf (consider how God the Father promises the birth of His Son when the Holy Spirit overshadows Mary [Luke 1] or how the Father raises Jesus from the dead through the Spirit showing Him to be the Son of God [Romans 1]), these songs tend to see the great events of salvation as isolated works.<sup>6</sup> With respect to the Father and the Son, there is only occasional reference to Christ's saving activity being of the Father. The Holy Spirit as an active agent in our salvation is almost nowhere to be found. This leaves even the doctrine of the atonement underdeveloped in its Trinitarian aspects in this body of songs. The two possible exceptions are derived from Isaiah 53: *I Stand in Awe* and *Our God Reigns*.

Such omissions mean that possibilities for exploring the Trinitarian aspect of salvation are missed. For example, because this music's view of salvation emphasizes it as personal experience, the songs do not explore possible Trinitarian aspects in more cosmic or church-related understandings of salvation. There is also little emphasis on present aspects of God's work. There is no emphasis on ongoing mediation, whether it be on the heavenly ministry of Christ or the saving role of the Holy Spirit. God's saving activity seems to be something done in the past that is presently enjoyed. There is also little sense of God's ongoing mission in the world and little eschatology, or end-times thinking, in the songs.

The third factor that contributes to the lack of focus on the activity of the Trinity is a possible confusion of Persons, that is, "Lord" is often used in an ill-defined, generic way. Although the term is sometimes clearly used to refer to Jesus Christ, that is not always the case. *Open Our Eyes, Lord*, for instance, is a case where the Lord appears to be a very different Person than Jesus. *Awesome God* complicates the matter by tossing "God" into the mix: in this song "God" and "Lord" appear to be interchangeable names for whoever expelled Adam from Eden, experienced the crucifixion, and poured judgment on Sodom.

### *Do the Songs See Christian Worship as Participation of Believers in Inter-Trinitarian Dynamics or Activity?*

There is little, if any, sense of worshipers being in Christ or Christ being in worshipers, particularly as a church-related reality during corporate worship. Because so

few of the songs commemorate the internal dynamics or activity of the Trinity, little space exists for worship as participation in the Trinitarian activity.

On the whole these songs tend to objectify God as the recipient of worship to emphasize a distinction between the One worshiped and the worshiper. God/Christ/the Lord/the King is Someone *out there* Who is to be worshiped and adored. The One worshiped is someone Whom we love and enjoy and Who is with us, but there is little sense of Christians being brought into the activity of this God, particularly if this God whom we worship is conceived of as a Triune community. Almost all the songs describe the dynamic between worshipers and the Divine recipient of worship, not the relationship and activity—past, present, and future—among the Persons of the Trinity. A more classic approach is to make God’s activity on our behalf—from the Father through the Son in the Spirit—mirrored in the response of worship—in the Spirit through the Son to the Father. Thus the classic approach, in contrast to the tendency of these songs, puts the emphasis on God’s graciousness from first to last. The classic approach keeps Jesus as the “lead worshiper” within the internal love of the Trinity.

Neither do these songs consider worship as participation in Christ’s activity *through* us with reference to either the Father or the Holy Spirit. The 43 songs that are some sort of prayer (identified by the worshiper addressing a divine “You”) have virtually no sense of being addressed to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. The songs mainly address Christ—and occasionally the Father—in prayer, but none speaks of us addressing the Father through Christ or the church’s prayer being Christ praying through us. The songs also do not speak of Christ’s intercessory ministry.

These omissions are partly a result of the absence of a strong emphasis on the Trinity’s current activity and partly to the overwhelming character of the songs as expressing only our own human love to the divine Object of worship (in contrast to our sharing in the love which the Father, Son, and Spirit share among themselves). *I Love You, Lord* is perhaps the most representative song of the whole group. Not surprisingly, CCLI’s database reveals over 400 songs with the phrase “I love you” in the title. Songs that would be truer to the Trinity would delight in how the Spirit brings us into the love the Father and Son share as described in the Gospel of John.

*Do the Songs Use the Character of Inter-Trinitarian Relationships to Explore a Desired Character for Relationship among Christians, for Example, Unity, Love, Sacrifice, or Humility?*

The answer is a strong “no.”

These 77 songs have a very low explicit consciousness of the church. Only one (*Lord, Be Glorified*) uses the word “church,” and only one (*We Have Come into His House*) has a church theme. There are a handful with an explicit sense of God’s people as community, but only two are about fellowship: *We Have Come into His House* and *Bind Us Together*.

Moreover, only *Bind Us Together* derives a vision for the church from contemplating the nature and activity of the Triune God (although the song does not speak of the Holy Spirit). The song petitions the Lord for a greater measure of a unity of love, basing the request in the essential unity of God and in the activity of the Father and the Son.

## Discussion

Acts of omission, not commission, cause the lack of a Trinitarian dimension in most CWM: Songwriters, marketers of the songs, and churches do not seem to value explicit Trinitarian content or even miss it if it is not included. Robin Parry's description of the British situation seems applicable to America: "If there is a problem with Christian worship songs, it is more a failure to bring out the Trinitarian dimensions of the God we worship than a problem of violating Trinitarian faith."<sup>7</sup>

To a significant degree the root for this omission is the lack of theological expectations for the songs. Even when theological review does come into play, the goals are often limited to either making sure the song avoids obvious error or making sure the song expresses a scriptural idea or sentiment. In general, few composers intentionally seek to include a wider breadth of theological contemplation of the Triune God and Trinitarian activity.

If explicit witness to the Trinity is not the high priority, then what is? The songs demonstrate a common concern: *the priority of a shared affective experience in the worship of God*. Worship is seen as the expression of our hearts and ministry to God's heart. It is this law of love, *lex amandi*, that determines the rule of praying, *lex orandi*.

This concern with affections is evident in writings from and about the composers of the 77 songs in this study.<sup>8</sup> One influential composer puts it this way: "As songwriters, our job is to hook people's hearts and emotions for the Lord. . . . So a worship song, more than almost any other type of song, needs to express a universal sentiment, something we can all agree on as our own expression of love to Him."<sup>9</sup> That "something" seems rarely derived from God's own Trinitarian nature and work.

This affective sentiment is frequent among the composers who describe worship as singing authentically from one's heart to express true affection to God. It is also reflected in how the composers describe the origins of their songs and contrasts with the composer's rejection of worship that is mainly singing about God. Occasionally, the composers speak of God's reception of these authentic worship songs in affective terms, too, as they speak of touching the heart of God. For these composers, then, worship is foremost about God's Presence affectively discerned and experienced. In this respect, they share a similar worship piety with many churches that use their music. Few of the composers seem to have a piety shaped by Trinitarian contemplation, so they are unaware of the omission of the Trinity.

The desire for the heart's authentic expression to God also shapes the nature of the language in the songs, which seldom leads to speaking of the Trinity. Following the

lead of much recent popular music generally, CWM lyrics lean toward an oral, conversational style. Composers avoid complex sentences; attention to strict rhyming and metrical schemes is rare. Most seem to follow Paul Baloche's suggestion that "it's best to make your lyrics move straight ahead, as they would in conversation."<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the absence of Trinitarian content in many of the songs may be because it is not "conversational" to speak to and about the Trinity. Composer Graham Kendrick makes the same point in connecting CWM lyrics to their pop music counterparts: "It has to be said that the rock-pop genre, into which category many worship choruses fit, is not always ideal for carrying extensive, deep, or content-rich lyrics."<sup>11</sup>

The dynamics of composing also contribute to a lack of Trinitarian emphasis. Of the 44 songs for which I found background information, 29 were spontaneous creations. Some came about during private devotions, and a few were written while the composer was actually leading corporate worship. Four composers even wrote theirs while driving. This kind of composition allows no time for deeper theological reflection or revision.

In addition, some composers speak of their songs being God-given since many had no intention of writing a song when they "received" a song from God. *I Love You, Lord* is one example. The composer, a young, financially strapped housewife with no home church or friends, first prayed to God to give her a song that "He would be in the mood to hear." The resulting song, Laurie Klein reports, was "like an early Valentine" or what her editor called "a gift from God that emerged spontaneously from her lips."<sup>12</sup> So strong is this sense in a few composers that they speak of taking "dictation" from God, and, in such cases, there seems to be no need for further theological reflection or revision.

Another important compositional dynamic is that many of these songs were written at a low point in the composers' lives, expressing their encounter with God at that time. The economy of salvation in these songs is an intensely personal story of salvation, which would call for little theological reflection or revision.

A final compositional dynamic that tends to marginalize explicit Trinitarian content involves the sources for the songs. The most critical source for many of the songs is Scripture. The Psalms, in particular, are the scriptural material most mentioned in the accounts of composition. While the use of psalms is commendable and has an extensive historical pedigree in Christian worship, in the case of CWM it contributes to the lack of explicit Trinitarian content. Since the Trinity is not obvious in the Psalms, the composers are not likely to tease out their Trinitarian dimensions as have some past Christians who used the Psalms as Christ's prayer to the Father or the Father's address to the Son. The same is likely true for other biblical sources, even New Testament ones. The scriptural backdrop to the songs, then, precludes asking further theological questions about the songs. If a song is "scriptural," this biblical connection seems self-validating, and it does not occur to the composers to make Trinitarian concerns a factor.