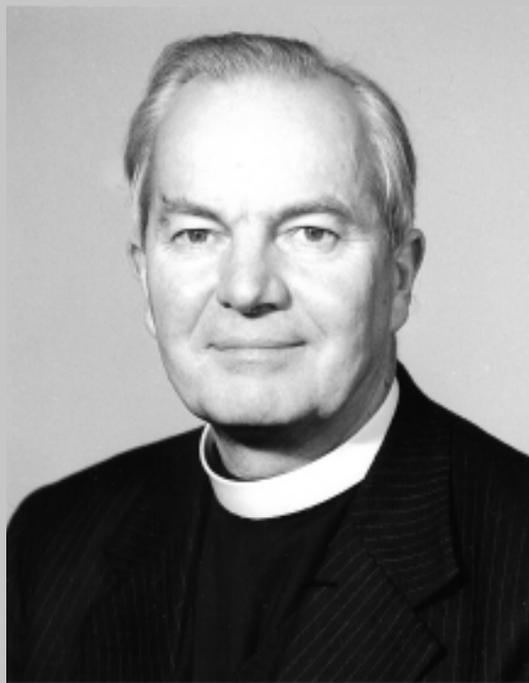


TFT

T F Torrance  
Theological  
Fellowship

***Participatio***  
***Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance***  
***Theological Fellowship***



**Vol. 3 (2012)**

***Participatio*** is the journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship ([www.tftorrance.org](http://www.tftorrance.org)), a research fellowship within the Christian Church and tradition based on the theology of Thomas F. Torrance. The journal's mission is two-fold: to apprehend the significance of Torrance's work and to advance his evangelical and scientific theology for the benefit of the Church, academy, and society.

**Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship** is published as an annual, peer-reviewed, online journal. Researchers interested in engaging the theology of T. F. Torrance may submit manuscripts in accordance with the policies specified below. Contributions from diverse disciplines and perspectives will be encouraged to explore the wide-ranging significance of Torrance's legacy. Occasional miscellaneous issues will include paper presentations and responses from the annual conference, book reviews, etc. For more information see [www.tftorrance.org](http://www.tftorrance.org)

**POLICIES FOR MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION:**

1. Electronic submission of articles (using a Microsoft Word attachment) should be sent to the Editor: [todd\\_speidell@tftorrance.org](mailto:todd_speidell@tftorrance.org) (please do not submit a manuscript that has been previously published or is being considered for publication by another journal).
2. PLEASE USE THE TEMPLATE ON THIS WEBSITE TO CONFORM TO THE FOLLOWING SETTINGS:
  - A. Use Verdana 11 font (or 10 for indented quotations and footnotes), 1.5 spacing (including between paragraphs), and American spelling and placement of punctuation.
  - B. Include a title page:
    - i. title of the article;
    - ii. your name and highest degree;
    - iii. institutional affiliation and position;
    - iv. electronic mail address.
  - C. Include headers with your name and an abbreviated title, and centered page numbers as footers.
  - D. Include an abstract of 100-200 words and a total approximate range of 5,000-10,000 words.
  - E. Use footnotes rather than endnotes.
3. All submitted manuscripts will be acknowledged promptly and processed as quickly as possible.

**Editor:** Todd Speidell (todd\_speidell@tftorrance.org)

**Copy Editor:** Jeff Reimer (jreimer@gmail.com)

**Production Editor:** Jock Stein (jstein@handselpress.org.uk)

**Technology Director:** Doug Floyd (doug@springoflight.org)

**Assistant Editors:** Matthew Baker and Ben Taylor

**Editorial Board:** Matthew Baker (Fordham University, NY), Elmer Colyer (University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, IA), Ivor Davidson (University of St Andrews, Scotland), Gary Deddo (InterVarsity Press, IL), George Dragas (Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, MA), David Fergusson (New College, Edinburgh, Scotland), Eric Flett (Eastern University, PA), Michael Gibson (Vanderbilt University, TN), Myk Habets (Carey Baptist College, New Zealand), Trevor Hart (University of St Andrews, Scotland), Alasdair Heron (University of Erlangen, Germany), George Hunsinger (Princeton Theological Seminary, NJ), Christian Kettler (Friends University, KS), Paul Molnar (St. John's University, NY), Thomas Noble (Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO and Nazarene Theological College, Manchester, England), Andrew Purves (Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, PA), Joel Scandrett (Wheaton College, IL), Alan Torrance (University of St Andrews, Scotland), Robert Walker (University of Edinburgh, Scotland).

#### **Executive Committee**

President: Chris Kettler (kettler@friends.edu)

Co-Vice President: Gary Deddo (gdeddo@ivpress.com)

Co-Vice President: Joel Scandrett (joelscandrett@sbcglobal.net)

Treasurer: Michael Gibson (mgibson@ivpress.com)

Member at Large: Paul D. Molnar (molnarp@stjohns.edu)

*Ex officio* Members: Elmer Colyer (ecolyer@dbg.edu)

Todd Speidell (*Participatio* Editor)

©2012 *Participatio: Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*

ISSN: 1932-9571

**All rights reserved.** No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact Todd Speidell, Editor (todd\_speidell@tftorrance.org).

### CONTENTS OF VOLUME 3

Feature Article:	INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT: THEIR RELATION AND INTER-RELATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE – Robert T. Walker	1
Other Articles:	ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING FLESH: ISRAEL AS THE WOMB OF THE INCARNATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE – C. Baxter Kruger	64
	THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE – David Fergusson	92
	THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE <i>HOMOIOUSION</i> OF THE HOLY SPIRIT – Victor A. Shepherd	108
Article Review:	T. F. Torrance, INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT – Paul D. Molnar	125
Book Review:	Kettler, Christian D., THE GOD WHO BELIEVES and THE GOD WHO REJOICES – Don J. Payne	142

## FEATURE ARTICLE

### INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT: THEIR RELATION AND INTER-RELATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE

***Robert T. Walker, M.A., B.D., Ph.D.***

***University of Edinburgh (retired)***

***Edinburgh, Scotland***

*bob@hebrides.u-net*

The general purpose of this article is to explore the relation between incarnation and atonement in the theology of T. F. Torrance with particular reference to the two volumes of his dogmatics lectures, *Incarnation* and *Atonement*.<sup>1</sup> While outlining the place of the incarnation-atonement relation and of the lectures in the context of his theology, the main purpose of the article will be to explore the inner logic and structure of Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement, and this will be done in terms of what, it will be argued, are its underlying starting point and its direction of movement.

The article is now very different in shape from the one originally envisaged as an examination of Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement with particular reference to his sources. It is now an exploration of his theology of incarnation and atonement in the light of its background, underlying rationale, and theological method as faith seeking understanding. While the first part of the article deals with the general background and underlying rationale of his theology, the second part is an attempt to understand Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement in terms of its inner logic and natural development. As such, part two proceeds along lines parallel to the kind of theological method

---

<sup>1</sup> *Incarnation*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2008; *Atonement*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2009.

Torrance himself used in coming to deeper understanding in faith, and may itself be seen as something of an exercise in theological method.<sup>2</sup>

The article is very much larger than that originally intended and while the two parts could in some respects stand alone and be read separately (the first more than the second) they belong very much together with each part being illuminated, deepened, and enriched by the other.

## **PART I**

### **THE BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF TORRANCE'S THEOLOGY**

#### **Incarnation and Atonement, dogmatics and the gospel**

Torrance's teaching on incarnation and atonement is scattered throughout his works but finds its fullest expression in the recent posthumous publication of his Edinburgh dogmatics lectures on "the doctrine of Jesus Christ." For reasons of size, the lectures have been published in two volumes, *Incarnation* and

---

2 The importance and nature for Torrance of theological method understood as faith seeking understanding may be illustrated by the way in which he regularly set honors dogmatics students two essays on theological method, one on Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* and one on Kierkegaard's "Interlude" in his *Philosophical Fragments*. For Torrance, Anselm's attempt to prove by reason the necessity for the incarnation by arguing *Christo remoto* (as if Christ was remote) did not mean purely logical reasoning, but a methodological putting to one side one's explicit knowledge of Christ (one's knowledge of him as already conceptualized) in order that step by step one might come to a deeper understanding of him. The whole procedure, as Anselm himself saw and Barth likewise, began and ended in faith. Throughout, one was proceeding in prayer, *theologically* not simply logically, setting one's present knowledge of Christ temporarily to one side (or at least in the background and not arguing explicitly from it) in order that one might discover and allow the steps to a richer and deeper understanding to come to view and be seen to repose on Christ. Throughout, it is actually Christ who is guiding the process, but from a distance, and the method of argumentation is one of faith and prayer. For a fine example in Torrance himself of faith seeking deeper understanding of Christ in this way see his chapter, "Questioning in Christ," T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, 1965, 117-27.

*Atonement*, but they enshrine one inseparable theology,<sup>3</sup> one whole person-and-work-of-Jesus-Christ from his earthly beginnings in the womb of Mary to his resurrection and ascension. If, broadly speaking, *Incarnation* deals in particular with Christology, the doctrine of “the person of Christ,” and *Atonement* with the doctrine of “the work of Christ,” the two are intimately intertwined and inseparable as is made clear by their full titles, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Jesus Christ* and *Atonement: The Person and Work of Jesus Christ*.

The relation between incarnation and atonement lies at the heart of Torrance’s theology, of his dogmatics lectures, and of his life’s work. Although Torrance was in the end unfortunately unable to devote sufficient time to publishing it, it was his lectures to students, as equipment for ministry, which were to have formed the basis for his own projected three volume dogmatics,<sup>4</sup> and it is they, together with his two great dogmatic monographs,<sup>5</sup> which represent the kernel of his thought. Throughout the varying phases of his life when different concerns seemed to be at the forefront of his attention, it was Christian dogmatics, the positive articulation of Christian doctrine around its center in Jesus Christ, which remained his “main love”<sup>6</sup> and ultimate central concern. His central calling, as he felt it, was as a minister of the gospel and to evangelism,<sup>7</sup> and at the core of the gospel lay the incarnational-atoning love of God to all the world.<sup>8</sup> In one way or another, his manifold activities

---

3 Torrance’s own manuscript was entitled *Incarnation and Atonement: Edinburgh Lectures on Christology and Soteriology*, with the chapters of the whole course numbered consecutively. The sheer size of the manuscript, however, particularly with the incorporation of material on the resurrection and ecclesiology, prompted its publication in two volumes.

4 I. John Hesselink, “A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ — An Interview with T.F. Torrance,” in *Reformed Review*, Vol. 38, 1984, 61.

5 T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996.

6 Hesselink, 63.

7 Hesselink, 49, 52.

8 T.F. Torrance, “*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* T.F. Torrance — My Theological Development,” 3 (unpublished manuscript covering from upbringing to education at Edinburgh University, Torrance Archives, Princeton).

and publications were all geared to the same end, so that his work on science and theology, for example, is not to be seen as a deflection from his primary calling but as part of it, as an attempt to help “evangelize the foundations...of scientific culture” so that the gospel and a positive dogmatics might be better able to take root in it.<sup>9</sup>

### **Factors underlying and informing Torrance’s dogmatics**

In preparation for tackling the key topic of the relation between incarnation and atonement, it is useful to outline some of the central factors underlying and informing Torrance’s thought, as an awareness of these is significant for developing a deeper understanding of his theology and of his lectures in dogmatics:

- (a) the importance of scripture, knowledge of God, and theological judgment;
- (b) discovering and articulating an understanding of the gospel adequate to its ontological foundations in God himself;
- (c) an awareness of the epistemological significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ;
- (d) a sense of the inherent rationality of faith and the difference between converted and unconverted reason.

An awareness of the above factors illuminates much in Torrance and his dogmatics which might otherwise be passed over without fuller understanding. It brings to light more of the rationale for what, why, and how he says what he does, and therefore enables a greater appreciation of a good deal of the content and shape of the lectures and of *Incarnation* and *Atonement*. Although interconnected and overlapping, the different factors are sufficiently distinct to warrant separate consideration.

#### **(a) Scripture, inner logic, and theological judgment**

For Torrance there are three fundamental and primary elements in all theology: an intimate indwelling of the scriptures,<sup>10</sup> careful and thorough exegesis, and a

---

9 Hesselink, 60.

10 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, 83.

knowledge of the living God.<sup>11</sup> Then through all of these there emerges a critical fourth element: discernment of the “inner logic” of the bible and the formation of a trained theological judgment, instinctively adapted to biblical habits of thought and speech.

***The inner logic of the bible and of theology***

The phrase “inner logic” represents a concept which is central to Torrance’s theology and which he uses at key points to denote the essential structure and inherent significance of something.<sup>12</sup> The word “inner” refers to its intrinsic nature, underlying fundamental pattern, and the precise relations embedded within and constitutive of it, while “logic” refers to its meaning and significance, the rationale and intelligibility inherent in it and its internal structural relations. Torrance uses “inner logic” or “interior logic” with reference to the bible, Christology, and theological knowledge,<sup>13</sup> and sometimes simply “logic” to speak of “the logic of grace” and “the logic of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

The inner logic of the bible is the inner meaning of the bible, its intrinsic intention and purpose to lead to Jesus Christ and one which is fulfilled in him. He is the *skopos*, the goal of the bible, and it is he in his person, in the structure of his person and work, who is the “inner” or “interior logic” of the bible, of grace, of Christology, and of theology.

---

11 Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

12 See for example the sentence in *Incarnation* where, in a comment on procedure (as he turns to “offer a theological account of the doctrine of Christ” faithful to the New Testament) Torrance says, “We try to do this by penetrating into its inner logic...by seeking to lay bare the precise relations embedded in the intrinsic nature of the subject matter,” *Incarnation*, 182. Cf. Torrance’s comment on the use of “‘*anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*’ as a sort of ‘theological algebra’ to help us work out the ‘inner logic’ in christology more consistently and purely,” *op. cit.* 233.

13 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, OUP, London, 1969, 217, “it is here then in the inner life and being of Jesus Christ, in the hypostatic union, that we discern the interior logic of theological thinking, the logic of Christ, the logic that is in Christ before it is in our knowledge of Him, the logic that inheres ontologically and personally in Him...”

14 For example, “we must hold together ‘the logic of Grace’ and ‘the logic of Christ,’” *ibid.*; cf. “the essential logic of Grace and logic of Christ,” *op. cit.* 269.

But while the logic of Christ is the interior logic of both scripture and theology, they are related to it (or him) in different ways. Scripture is related by being itself part of the movement of the incarnation. In the Old Testament, it is the “pre-history of the incarnation,” as Torrance refers to it, for it is the Word of God beginning to become incarnate, beginning to mold and shape Israel in language and understanding that it might be a prepared womb for his coming.<sup>15</sup> In the Old Testament, the logic of Christ is seen from afar, adumbrated and sketched out,<sup>16</sup> while in the New Testament it has been fully realized and fulfilled. If the Old Testament is the Word beginning to become flesh in human thought, the New Testament is the fully incarnate Word now become flesh in apostolic word.<sup>17</sup> Both Old and New Testament, in the way they are shaped by the Word to point to him and reveal him through the Spirit, partake of his logic. Scripture partakes of and shares sacramentally in the logic of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The task of dogmatic theology is to so read and study the scriptures as to discern their inner logic and to attempt to articulate for the benefit of the church the logic of Christ and the coherence of all doctrine around him.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The inseparability of the different elements***

The various elements — knowledge of the bible, rigorous exegesis,<sup>20</sup> and openness to God — are necessarily and inseparably interwoven. In the Spirit and

---

15 *Incarnation*, 37f., 40ff., 44ff.

16 Cf. Isaiah 53; John 5.46, 8.56; Luke 24.27, 44f; 1 Peter 1.10-11.

17 Cf. *Incarnation*, 37f., 44ff., 164ff.

18 Although Torrance does not use the language of “logic” or “inner logic” here, see *Atonement*, 336ff., for a general account of the sacramental relation between the written word of scripture and the living Word of Christ.

19 For a careful summary of Torrance’s views on the relation between biblical theology, dogmatics, and Christology based on his own account in *Theology in Reconstruction*, chap. 8, “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology,” see *Incarnation*, xxiii-xxviii.

20 T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, London, 1965, 141-2, “we have to give the most rigorous attention to the actual text of the Scriptures and to their actual setting in history, that we may stand in the place of the original witnesses and go along with them in all that they suffer under the impact of the Word of the Lord. Arduous exegetical study is the foundation for all theological discipline in the Church.”

through the first two elements, God makes himself known and there emerges the fourth element, a critical instinct for the inner logic and truth of scripture, a trained theological judgment which can only be developed and acquired through participation in the mind of Christ.<sup>21</sup> It cannot be learned as such, or explicitly spelled out, but is “tacit knowledge.”

***The importance of theological judgment***

Throughout his life, Torrance laid considerable store on the importance of such theological judgment<sup>22</sup> as a primary guiding element, and his dogmatics is to be seen as the outcome of a lifetime of theological judgment based on a great deal of linguistic and exegetical work which now lay in the background and had become mostly tacit. Although Torrance never managed to produce the theological-exegetical biblical commentaries he had planned,<sup>23</sup> that side of his work does come to the fore in his dogmatics lectures more than elsewhere. In *Atonement* several chapters<sup>24</sup> open with an outline of the biblical word-study and exegetical commentary on which his theology was grounded. For Torrance, however, the essential thing was not simply the careful exegesis, indispensable and preliminary prerequisite though it was, but the theological judgments to which one is led through study of the bible as a whole in knowledge of the living God.

**(b) Articulating the gospel on its ontological foundations**

Early on in his career, Torrance became convinced of the need to discover and articulate the ontological grounds for Christian faith. Even while an Arts student studying philosophy at Edinburgh University, he had read Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith* and been struck by its christocentrism and the architectonic beauty of its theological system, but had felt it lacked adequate foundations. From then on, discovering and articulating the genuine ontological basis of Christian faith in the objective reality of God himself became one of the defining goals of his own theological career.<sup>25</sup>

---

21 Cf. *Karl Barth*, 83; *Atonement*, 444-47, cf. 376ff.

22 *Karl Barth*, 83; cf. again Torrance, *Atonement*, 445ff.

23 Hesselink, 61-62.

24 Chapters 4, 5, 6, 9, while others have word-study within them.

25 *Karl Barth*, 121ff.; cf. Hesselink, 53.

Torrance's dogmatics lectures are therefore not simply an extended account of the essential content of the gospel, but a nuanced and careful delineation of the way human faith in Christ is grounded objectively in Christ himself and through him in God.<sup>26</sup> Put in a nutshell, the knowledge of God which God has of God in God became earthed in incarnation, incarnated in the human mind and knowing of Jesus, then lived out in his human life and brought to completion in him through atonement, resurrection, and ascension. That same knowledge of God then became earthed in the apostolic mind through union with Christ and participation in his mind by the Spirit and has now been similarly earthed in us through our own union to him by the Spirit and by Christ's own self-witness to us in apostolic word and witness.

***Unfolding all the links in the epistemic chain between God and man***

In this regard the whole of Torrance's lectures can be seen as a careful spelling out in an integrated whole of all the links in the epistemic chain between God and man, and man and God in Jesus Christ, tracing the continuous connections between God in his revelation of himself to us in our humanity, and between us and the ontological termination of our faith on God himself. It is because Christ is the very Word and image of God eternally in God himself, that his incarnation as God and man in one person means that in his humanity we have communicated to us in human form, in human language and act, knowledge of God himself in his eternal being as Trinity. The identity in being between Christ and God, between Christ as man and us, and the fact that both of these identities of being are now eternally locked together in the *one person of Christ* united to us through incarnation and the Spirit, means that God has come all the way to us in his revelation, and that conversely we, human as we are, are given union and participation through word and Spirit in the mind of Christ in the heart of God. Jesus Christ's identity with God in divine being, identity with us in human being, and the essential identity of his self-proclamation in word and deed with the apostolic word and witness to him through the Spirit, means that we in the frailty of human flesh are yet given to participate in the mind of Christ and know God in his eternal being.

---

26 For an overview here see the editorial introductions to his lectures, *Incarnation*, xxxff., especially xxxvii-xli, and on the nature of faith, xliiiff.; *Atonement*, lxxixff.

**(c) The epistemological significance of the humanity of Christ**

A key factor in Torrance's theology here is his awareness of the significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ, but with his philosophical awareness and search for the ontological grounds of faith he is acutely aware also of the full *noetic* significance of the humanity of Christ and of its importance in revelation as much as in reconciliation. It is in the resurrection of Jesus, in the *noetic* significance of his risen mind, that the full significance of his vicarious humanity comes to light, for it is in the risen Christ's *human knowing* of God and fellowship with him that the final fruits of revelation and reconciliation are to be seen.<sup>27</sup>

Throughout his theology Torrance sees that reconciliation is impossible without revelation, and revelation equally impossible without reconciliation.<sup>28</sup> The two are critically and mutually interdependent in all soteriology. Torrance also sees that in soteriology, as in Christology, the person and work of Christ are to be understood as the work of God and of man,<sup>29</sup> of God acting not only as God but of God acting *as man* in the one person of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Throughout the person and work of Christ, there is an essential duality of *divine* and *human*, of real act of God and real act of man, of God and of God as man in Christ.

***The epistemic significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus***

Revelation here, like reconciliation, is thus always two-sided, involving the act of God and the act of man in Christ, and so revelation means not only God's revealing of himself, but *from the human side man's active receiving and knowing* of his revelation.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, just as reconciliation means the restoration of man to full fellowship with God, so revelation means the restoration of man to full human *knowledge* of God, and atonement means not simply the covering and annulment of sin, but the positive reinstatement and

---

27 *Atonement*, 231ff.

28 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 132f; cf. *Incarnation* 184ff., 187ff., 190ff., 194ff.

29 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 130f; *Incarnation*, 184ff.

30 *Op. cit.* 195.

31 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 130ff.

affirmation of genuine human *knowing* of God. The resurrection of Jesus is then not simply the actualization of forgiveness, but the permanent establishment *in him* of *our* human knowledge of God. The risen man Jesus Christ, the second Adam, is the one man who knows God, who embodies in himself knowledge of God in reality and truth. Torrance is at pains therefore to emphasize the epistemic significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It means that here in his risen vicarious humanity, in his risen embodied mind, we have the guarantee of genuine objective knowledge of God, the guarantee that in this man's risen human knowing of God all disjunction between the human mind and the reality of God has been finally and fully overcome.<sup>32</sup> In the risen Jesus *our* knowing of God has been permanently established.

#### **(d) The inherent rationality of faith and the nature of reason**

One of the salient, constitutive features of Torrance's theology is his understanding of the nature of reason and of the rationality of faith. It is important, however, to understand what he means by reason.

##### ***Reason as the capacity for objectivity***

Reason, for Torrance, is to be understood not substantively as a settled power, but functionally as the infinitely flexible capacity to adapt and respond to "the other" (the object or subject of encounter or investigation) in terms of the other's own nature. Reason is the capacity to respond to another in terms appropriate to what or who the other is. It does not demand that the object or subject conforms to what reason thinks it is or ought to be, but accepts the reality of the other and attempts to understand it as it is and to find appropriate ways of response or methods of investigation.

Reason is thus the capacity to respond to (understand, behave towards, investigate) the other as it is, or in other words, "reason is the capacity for objectivity."<sup>33</sup> Reason in Torrance means simply openness to the object (or subject), understanding of it as it is, obedience to its nature. It is to

---

32 *Atonement*, 233f.

33 See *Theological Science*, 11f., for Torrance's understanding of reason and his reference to Macmurray's definition of it as the "capacity for objectivity."

be understood not as an innate power that we have, but as an infinitely adaptable capacity, and is to be measured by the degree to which it can respond appropriately to and understand the nature of the object. It follows that rationality should be regarded less as something fixed that we are born with, than as something we can grow into and develop in proportion as we become attuned to the nature of the object. The more we tune into the “inherent intelligibility” of the object (or subject) and resonate with it, the more we become rational.

***The meaning and nature of inherent intelligibility***

For Torrance it is only because there is an inherent intelligibility in God and the world he has made that they can be thought and apprehended, but it is important that by “inherent intelligibility”<sup>34</sup> Torrance does not mean that the object (or subject) can be made intelligible or reduced to understanding, far less that it can be completely understood. (The intelligibility of God or of the universe far outstretches our ability to understand them.) What he means is that the intelligibility of the object is something inherent within it: the object, in other words, is not disorderly, chaotic, opaque, and completely unintelligible in itself. Its intelligibility is embodied within it, and it is because of this that we can penetrate into it and grasp something of its inherent nature. If the object or subject of knowledge were not intelligible in itself, we could not even begin in any sense to understand it. To say that God or the universe is inherently intelligible is not to say anything about the *extent* to which we can grasp them, but simply that they have an intrinsic and profound order such that we can penetrate into it to grasp something of what it is, of who God is in his nature, and what the universe is in its nature.<sup>35</sup>

---

34 T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, 20; cf. T.F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, OUP, London, 1971, 155; T.F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 27ff., 63f., 66ff.

35 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, revised edition, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1992, 2-4, for a brief account of the way in which science and theology attempt to understand things in terms of their “own intrinsic intelligibility.”

***The distinction between apprehend and comprehend***

Torrance here makes an important distinction between “apprehend” and “comprehend.”<sup>36</sup> We can grasp something in our hands, such as a large table, and hold it without being able to get our hands around it. Similarly, he argued, we can apprehend something in the sense of taking genuine cognitive hold of it without completely comprehending it or enfolding it in our understanding. In that sense, we can apprehend God (through being given some genuine cognitive hold of him) without ever comprehending him, but the fact that he is forever beyond our complete grasp does not mean that we cannot in a real sense have genuine knowledge of him as he is. Real knowledge of God means that were we indeed to know him fully, we would discover that he was no different from, and not other than, what we have known him to be — we know him in part, “through a glass darkly,” but nevertheless truly as he is in himself.

***The inherent intelligibility of God***<sup>37</sup>

The inherent intelligibility of God means that in himself God is not disordered or unintelligible, but ordered, personal, intelligible reality who gives himself to be known in his intelligibility, as rationality, love, and truth. It means that God is knowable in himself, that he is such that when we apprehend him (through his self-revealing accommodation of himself to us, not by any capacity of our own) we apprehend him as he is in himself, as Father, Son, and Spirit, as Word, truth, rationality, covenant love, faithfulness, etc. It means that when we apprehend him, we know that this is how he is in truth, that in his inherent intelligibility he lays holds of us that we might apprehend him as he is. We know that it is his inherent intelligibility which allows us to grasp him and to understand him to actually be in his inner nature what we grasp him to be.

---

36 *God and Rationality*, 22; *Trinitarian Faith*, 26, 53; cf. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1996, 26.

37 See *Trinitarian Faith*, 19ff.; cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 150ff.

***Faith as the appropriate and therefore "rational" response to God***

Faith for Torrance is the mode of our apprehension of God, the mode of our appropriate response to his being,<sup>38</sup> a mode which involves personal love and trust because it involves at its heart the prior apprehension of God as covenant love and faithfulness and the perception that as this is his inner being and nature he is inherently to be trusted. Faith is the appropriate, and in that sense the rational, response to God as he makes himself known to us in his nature. Faith here is always dependent on the primary act of God, for it is only God in his personal willingness to make himself known who can make his inherent intelligibility accessible to us.<sup>39</sup>

***Rationality and personal intelligibility integral to the gospel revelation***

Torrance's emphasis on the rationality of faith here has nothing to do with any desire to make faith acceptable. It is not a matter of apologetics in the usual sense, an intellectual *apologia* on behalf of faith. It is primarily the nature of the gospel revelation itself. God, for Torrance, is the primary rationality, the personal reality who in his own being is inherently engaging, intelligible reality. To come to know God in Christ is to encounter personal, intelligible truth to which we cannot but assent in recognition without irrationality.<sup>40</sup> This sense of the fundamental and inherent rationality of faith grounded ontologically on God informs Torrance's thought and writings from the very outset.

***The conversion and transformation of reason through the gospel***<sup>41</sup>

If God is known as he is, without misconception and freed from the presuppositions which hinder apprehension of him, then for Torrance any dissent or disavowal of him can only be an act of ultimate unreason. The revelation of God in Christ is his personal intelligible self-revelation demanding cognitive and personal engagement of the whole person and calling for the

---

38 *Incarnation*, 7, 25-8.

39 On the nature of faith, see *God and Rationality*, 21-3, 153ff.; cf. 165ff. (chapter 7).

40 Cf. *Theological Science*, ix.

41 See especially *Atonement*, 437-447, "Epilogue: The Reconciliation of Mind."

transformation of human rationality. The ensuing conversion and transformation of reason through conformity to the mind of Christ is part of the essence of the gospel, and for Torrance it is through restoration to knowledge of God that reason becomes rational in the truest sense, that is, genuinely open to and cognizant of the nature of the ultimate reality or realities with whom and with which it is in relation.

***The rationality of faith a corollary of the nature of God***

The rationality of faith for Torrance is simply a corollary of the nature of God. If God is inherently rational in his inner being, if he is “intrinsically eloquent being” and personal intelligible Word in his very nature,<sup>42</sup> speaking to us and giving himself to be known as he is in himself, then to the extent that there is any genuine apprehension of him in faith, faith itself must involve elements of understanding, elements of personal, intelligent, rational apprehension of the very nature and personal being of God. Even if still in germ like a grain of mustard seed, faith from the very beginning must involve an “essential conceptuality inherent in our knowledge of Him,” some element of personal understanding and intelligent response based on the nature of God himself.<sup>43</sup>

***The nature of faith as faith seeking understanding***

The fact that when we know God such knowledge is apprehension and not comprehension, that God in his being far outstretches our feeble apprehension, but that nevertheless we do know him in himself in his inherent intelligibility as he is, means that faith, as already a genuine apprehension of God, always presses on to deeper understanding. As love and trust, faith knows that its love and trust is grounded on the prior love and faithfulness which God is and which, genuinely apprehended as it is, nevertheless stretches boundlessly beyond its

---

42 *The Trinitarian Faith*, 72-3; *God and Rationality*, 179ff.

43 *God and Rationality*, 181, 170f; cf. 21f., “Knowledge of God is thus conceptual in its essential root (*fides esse nequit sine conceptione*, as Anselm said [faith cannot exist without some conception]), with a conceptuality that derives from God’s self-revelation in Word . . .”

comprehension. And so faith seeks further understanding, deeper and further understanding of that of which it already has some genuine apprehension. Faith by nature is faith seeking understanding and continually seeking further understanding and apprehension of that which it knows.<sup>44</sup>

***The nature of faith seeking understanding in a community of knowers***

For Torrance, it is important to remember that theology and faith seeking understanding can only truly be done with others,<sup>45</sup> within a believing community of knowers, the church imbued with the mind of Christ, reconciled to God and to one another in the communion of the Spirit. It is therefore never simply a thinking by oneself but always with the other. Christian theology thus seeks to understand the faith “with all the saints” and Torrance recognizes with Polanyi<sup>46</sup> the importance of learning and thinking within a tradition of knowing.<sup>47</sup> It is only through being schooled in the womb of a fruitful tradition of belief, skill, and knowledge, be it science, theology, or any other discipline, that we can absorb its carefully constructed inherited tacit knowledge and take it further. Faith seeking understanding can advance to further understanding only from and on the basis of the foundations already laid by the shared traditions of faith and understanding bequeathed to it.

---

44 Cf. the discussion on the “open range of faith” and the way in which “through faith theology is engaged in a fathomless inquiry” in *Trinitarian Faith*, 24-26.

45 Cf. *Atonement*, 376f., “Theology is not primarily the function of individuals but of the church, for Christian thinking is essentially joint-thinking, thinking-in-fellowship, in which we share with one another and learn from one another in Christ, and refuse to run off on private byways of our own. Christian thinking is essentially ecumenical thinking in which we submit ourselves to the teaching and criticism of others that we may learn more and more of Christ through them and with them seek to let the one mind that is in Christ be in our mind.”

46 See further T.F. Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*, Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1980, 21ff.; Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958, chap. 7, “Conviviality,” 203ff., and *The Tacit Dimension*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, chap. 3, “A Society of Explorers,” 55ff.

47 Cf. *Theology in Reconstruction*, 140f., 143f., 145f.

***The light thrown by the four factors on Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement***

While the second section of the article will consider Torrance's theology of atonement and its relation to the incarnation, the present section has outlined four of the primary factors<sup>48</sup> underlying and shaping all Torrance's theology, but part of its function in so doing is to argue that his theology of incarnation and atonement illustrates and exemplifies the four factors outlined above. Throughout, he is executing exegetical-theological judgment, articulating the ontological foundations for faith in the person of Jesus Christ in the Trinity, bringing the meaning of incarnation and atonement to a head in the epistemic significance of the risen humanity of Christ, and seeking in faith to better apprehend Christ and the gospel through understanding and unfolding the mystery of his person and the cross. Such unfolding is required of us in theology as an essential part of our appropriate response to the gospel, not just in body and in heart, but in mind in "rational worship."<sup>49</sup>

When Torrance's dogmatics lectures and his theology of incarnation and atonement are viewed through the additional lenses of the four factors above, considerable light is thrown on them and on what he is doing in them and their argument. It becomes possible to follow the structure of his argument and to trace the movement and trajectory of his thought with significantly greater insight and clarity.

**PART II**

**INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT: THE RELATION**

Torrance can often be read as beginning with the incarnation, and often misread, particularly by students and non-theologians, as emphasizing its importance at

---

48 (a) the inner logic of scripture and the importance of theological judgement, (b) articulating the ontological foundations of the gospel in God, (c) the epistemological significance of Jesus' vicarious humanity, (d) the rationality of faith and the nature of reason.

49 Cf. *Atonement*, 444ff.

the expense of the atonement and the cross. This article will argue here that the starting point of his theology is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and that it is from this viewpoint that he sees the link with incarnation and its importance. The article will also argue that it makes better sense of Torrance's theology as a whole to read it as having its *ordo cognoscendi*, or order of knowing, beginning with atonement (understood through resurrection and Pentecost), while its *ordo essendi*, or order of being, and its deeper understanding and order of exposition, is from the incarnation.

Reading Torrance as beginning with the cross and resurrection and working back to the incarnation to understand them in its light, rather than simply beginning with the incarnation and coming forward has a number of reasons in its favor. It is more in line with the historical development of his theology as known and it is also in line with the historical experience of the disciples and the gospels themselves. Although manifestly written from the viewpoint of resurrection and Pentecost, and for all their focus on the cross (as indicated by the preponderance of chapters on the final week of Jesus' life), the gospels too begin with the historical antecedent to the cross in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Assuming the correctness of this reading of Torrance, his teaching on the relation between incarnation and atonement may be seen as the sustained outcome of *faith seeking understanding* of the risen Christ and his atoning forgiveness.

### **The reality and mystery of Christ and his cross: incarnation and atonement**

For Torrance, the relation between incarnation and atonement is central to understanding the reality and mystery of the gospel. We begin from the person who was born at Bethlehem and from the forgiveness identical with and found only in the risen Christ. Jesus Christ in his person and the divine forgiveness of sins in him are at once *reality* and *mystery*. They are the realities we are forced to acknowledge as the primary realities of faith, the fundamental realities from which all theology must begin, which it must recognize as its starting point, of which there can be in advance no *a priori* prediction, and into which we can

have no advance penetration of thought.<sup>50</sup> They are the incursion of God into our midst in actual space-time happening. In attempting to come to terms with them we are forced, in recognizing their essential nature, to acknowledge them as deeds of God himself done in our midst which we could not have anticipated, even with the benefit of Old Testament prophetic insight.

***Incarnation: the reality and mystery of the person of Jesus Christ***

The reality of the person of Jesus Christ is that, inconceivable as it seems to us, he is fully and really God and fully and really man and yet just as fully and really one indivisible person. That is at once his reality and his mystery, not mystery in the sense of riddle or insoluble paradox, but mystery in the sense that though his reality is indubitably, unquestionably actual, the mode of its existence is beyond comprehension. It is sheer miracle.<sup>51</sup>

***Atonement: the reality and mystery of forgiveness in the risen Christ***

So it is also with the forgiveness of sins in the risen Christ. In his resurrection out of the death of the cross, Jesus has undone sin and guilt, accomplished our forgiveness and made us righteous. But more than that, his forgiveness is not just something he has accomplished and can now dispense to us, but something

---

50 Cf. *Incarnation*, Paternoster UK & InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2008, 1ff.

51 See particularly here the chapter on the virgin birth, *Incarnation*, 87f., 94ff., where Torrance emphasizes the importance of the virgin birth as the sign pointing to the mystery of Christ: "The virgin birth is the outward sign, the signitive form in humanity which the creative entry of the Son of God takes, when he assumes our human nature into union with his divine nature. The sign points to the mystery of Christ and bears witness to it, but the sign is not itself the reality...the mystery of the birth has to be understood in the light of the mystery of his person, the sign in the light of the thing signified, not the thing signified in the light of the sign" (ibid., 95-6). For Torrance the virgin birth and the empty tomb are the twin signs pointing to the mystery of the person of Christ. Neither are to be separated from that mystery, or from one another, and it is in the resurrection that the mystery of his person and the meaning of the virgin birth is revealed (ibid., 96-7).

intimately connected with *who he is* and bound up with his *person*.<sup>52</sup> We have to say that somehow through who he is and what he did and suffered, he is now eternally living forgiveness. The reality of this, of course, and its understanding only emerges with the resurrection and Pentecost, and like the person of Christ himself the reality of forgiveness is mystery. We cannot comprehend how the death of Christ on the cross accomplishes forgiveness or understand any connection of logic between them.<sup>53</sup> We simply know forgiveness in the risen person of Christ as a reality, the miracle of God.<sup>54</sup> In person and work, the whole life of Jesus from birth to resurrection is miracle.

***The order of direction between incarnation and atonement***

Both incarnation and atonement are at once reality and mystery. What is the connection between them? The suggestion of this article is that, like the gospels, Torrance begins *de facto* from the resurrection side of the cross, from the mystery and yet reality of sins forgiven in Christ through his death and resurrection. He begins from the apostolic confession of Jesus as Lord and God, risen from the dead, the fulfillment of all that was written in the Old Testament concerning him. Jesus the Lord risen from the dead is the primary reality of which faith seeks understanding as it reads and studies the gospels and the Old Testament.

As Torrance through exegetical-theological study of the bible seeks to understand the faith, seeks to discover and lay bare the ontological foundations of its reality, it is possible from autobiographical clues and the development of his publications to put together and trace certain links and natural progressions in his thought. In one sense it does not matter where he started or the details of his actual historical progression of thought, for Christian dogmatics is a living whole in which each part is connected to every other part, so that in one sense one could start anywhere. But from the evidence available, as well as from the natural *theologic* of the inter-connections in Christian doctrine,

---

52 *Atonement*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2009, 222ff.

53 *Atonement*, 4.

54 *Atonement*, 235f.

the outline offered in this article of the underlying progression in Torrance's thought would seem to make sense and indeed to offer a naturally satisfying and deeper understanding of his theology.

### ***1 The relation between incarnation and atonement in outline***

#### **Outline A of the historical progression in Torrance's thought — ordo cognoscendi**

The outline of the progression in Torrance's thought (in so far as it can be ascertained and ordered into a historical sequence of the crucial elements as they came to the fore and became organically incorporated into his theology) would be broadly as follows:

(1) From upbringing, a basic belief in the person of Jesus Christ as the living center of scripture<sup>55</sup> and in his atoning death as the center of the gospel and the ground of its proclamation freely to all the world.<sup>56</sup>

(2) The formation of the aim, through a reading of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, to seek and articulate an adequate account of the ontological grounds for Christian faith.<sup>57</sup>

---

55 T.F. Torrance, "*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* T.F. Torrance — *My Theological Development*," 8 (unpublished manuscript covering from upbringing to education at Edinburgh University, Torrance Archives, Princeton); cf. Torrance's brother David speaking of their parents, "Theirs was a living, dynamic faith centred not on a system of belief, but on the Person of Christ. They had a deep reverence for Scripture as the Word of God. We were never taught any particular doctrine about the Bible other than that it is God's Word," David W. Torrance, "Thomas Forsyth Torrance: Minister of the Gospel, Pastor, and Evangelical Theologian" in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*, edit. Elmer M. Colyer, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2001, 4.

56 *Itinerarium Mentis*, 3.

57 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, 121f; cf. I. John Hesselink, "A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ — An Interview with T.F. Torrance," in *Reformed Review*, vol. 38, 1984, 53.

(3) The stress of H.R. Mackintosh<sup>58</sup> on revelation as the *self*-revelation of God (93),<sup>59</sup> on the person of Christ (86),<sup>60</sup> the centrality of the *homo-ousial* Father-Son relation (77), the oneness of incarnation and atonement (86), the unity of Christ with sinners (85), and the importance of the patristic principle “the unassumed is the unredeemed” (86).

(4) The teaching of Barth on the hypostatic union in Christ, the consubstantial communion of the persons of the Trinity, and the role of the Spirit as the freedom of God to connect the creature to himself in knowing communion.<sup>61</sup>

(5) A deeper outworking of a trinitarian doctrine of the atonement.<sup>62</sup>

### **Outline B of the theologic of incarnation and atonement in order of being — *ordo essendi***

If the above is the order in which Torrance, as he sought a deeper understanding of the atonement, came to appreciate the significance of the different components of doctrine and the connection between them, the following is an outline of the key components in his mature theology of the incarnational-atonement relation in its *ordo essendi* or order of being:

---

58 For Torrance’s own appreciation of Mackintosh and topics which were central to his theology, see T.F. Torrance, “Hugh Ross Mackintosh Theologian of the Cross, An Appreciation,” in H.R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, edit. T.F. Torrance, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000, 71-94 (first published by the Student Christian Movement 1912). [Torrance’s *Appreciation* of H.R.M. was first published in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* (1987), 160-73.]

59 Note: numbers in brackets here after each topic are all references to the page numbers in Torrance’s *Appreciation* of Mackintosh.

60 Cf. 76-78.

61 *Karl Barth*, 122-25, esp. 123.

62 While Torrance had a trinitarian understanding of atonement early on (see for example his 1954 Albrecht Stumpff Lecture published in T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, vol. 1, Lutterworth Press, London, 1959, 238-47) which he continued to develop in various essays or articles, his fullest and most systematic articulation of it came, as detailed below, much later in his career.

(1) The complete equality in deity (the eternal inter-trinitarian *homoousion* of being) and oneness in *perichoretic* unity of the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the consubstantial communion of the Trinity.

(2) The consequential *homoousion* between Father and incarnate Son, or Father and incarnate Word (as also between the Son or Word and the Spirit) — the deity of the *homoousion* is the guarantee that the salvation of the Son is that of God.

(3) The hypostatic union, as the eternal bond between God and man in the one person of the incarnate Son, is the eternal linchpin of salvation, of revelation and reconciliation.

(4) The *homoousion* of the Son with human being is the guarantee that God has reached us in our humanity, that salvation has been achieved by God *as man*, in man, and for man.

(5) The Son's twin incarnational dynamic of assumption-and-sanctification of sinful human flesh, the total oneness of Christ with sinners, is the guarantee of redemption.

(6) The incarnational union of God and man is the beginning of the atoning assumption and sanctification of sinful humanity, maintained and climaxed on the cross through judgment and death, triumphant in resurrection and ascension.

(7) The Son's sending of the Spirit is the completion of atonement, the realizing in humanity of the salvation completed in his own vicarious humanity as the one for the many.

(8) The Son's continual ministry in uniting humanity to himself in communion as his body through the Spirit and his Word in the apostolic word of scripture.

## ***2 The logic of Torrance's incarnation-atonement theology***

Torrance does not break down his theology in the following way, but in order to bring out its logic at this point, his teaching on incarnation and atonement will be divided into its fundamental elements and expounded in its approximate *ordo cognoscendi*. As the different elements and doctrines of theology are all interconnected, the order can only be approximate since each of the principles

singled out below inevitably overlap with each other, and some may precede rather than succeed others or may be simultaneously grasped with them. The order of knowing can be seen as corresponding to some extent with Torrance's concept of the stratification of truth or different levels of theology.<sup>63</sup>

It is highly significant that Torrance opens his discussion of atonement with a statement of procedure and a warning that in any approach to the doctrine of the death of Christ we need to bear in mind two fundamental points: the essential mystery of atonement in both Old and New Testaments, and the fact that the decisive new deed of divine intervention in atonement in Christ has interrupted all rational continuities of understanding and set our thinking on an entirely new basis.<sup>64</sup>

**(a) The mystery of atonement and the nature and method of understanding it**

Torrance argues that the mystery of atonement and the radically new act of God in it means that all our normal attempts at rational understanding of it are set aside and turned upside down. That does not mean that we cannot gain any understanding of the death of Christ but that we can only do so by thinking "our way from it" and not "into" it.<sup>65</sup> There is a rationality in the death of Christ, but it is the wisdom of God, and one we can only access by following, *a posteriori*, Christ himself in the Gospels as he gradually unfolded in his life, in word and act, the meaning of his death.<sup>66</sup>

**(i) The sacred mystery of divine atonement**

In emphasizing the holy mystery of atonement to his students, Torrance began by reminding them of the awful solemnity of the Day of Atonement in Israel

---

63 On levels of knowledge and their stratification see T.F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 156-63, 166-73; T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1982, 35ff. and T.F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 35ff.

64 *Atonement*, 2-5.

65 *Ibid.*, 3.

66 *Ibid.*, 4.

when the high priest entered once a year alone behind the veil into the holy of holies. Shrouded with a cloud of incense and at the risk of his life he sprinkled the sacrificial blood upon the divine mercy seat, there holding communion with God and making intercession for Israel.

That inner mystery God ordained to be completely veiled from human eyes: the innermost heart of atonement, its most solemn and awful part, was hidden from public view.<sup>67</sup> It is ineffable.<sup>68</sup>

Torrance then proceeds to draw out the parallel with atonement in the New Testament.

That divine ordinance from the old covenant serves to remind us, as we seek to understand the cross, that though the veil of the earthly temple was rent from top to bottom,<sup>69</sup> Jesus entered within the veil "into heaven itself,"<sup>70</sup> into the holy of holies of God's immediate presence and there he acted as our high priest and mediator beyond the view of humankind — the nature of his work was unutterable. That means that the innermost mystery of atonement and intercession remains mystery: it cannot be spelled out, and it cannot be spied out. That is the ultimate mystery of the blood of Christ, the blood of God incarnate, a holy and infinite mystery which is more to be adored than expressed.<sup>71</sup>

It is the ultimate and inviolable nature of the mystery of atonement and the impossibility of ever adequately understanding it or expressing it in words which is "in part at least" the meaning for Torrance of the Lord's Supper, for

here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the saviour.<sup>72</sup> That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.<sup>73</sup>

---

67 Lev 16.17. Note: references within quotations from Torrance in this article are part of his original text.

68 *Atonement*, 2.

69 Matt 27.51; Mark 15.38; Luke 23.45.

70 See Hebrews, especially chapter 9.11-12, 24.

71 *Atonement*, 2.

72 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

73 *Atonement*, 3.

Such is Torrance's reiterated emphasis in these pages on the infinitely holy mystery of atonement and the inadequacy of mere words to match its import that any reading of him here makes it very difficult and indeed impossible to accuse him of over emphasizing the incarnation at the expense of the atonement.

**(ii) *The decisive new deed of divine intervention***

The mystery of atonement is reinforced here for Torrance by the very nature of the act of God in Jesus setting "our life on a wholly new basis."<sup>74</sup>

It is a decisive deed which makes the ground of our approach to God an act and word of God that cuts away the ground from all our human religion and establishes a new relation to God so utterly wonderful that we are overwhelmed, and so radical that it entails a complete reversal of our previous attitudes and of all our preconceived ideas. This reversal means that *we cannot think our way into the death of Christ because the continuity of our thinking and striving has been interrupted by it, but we may think our way from it* if we follow the new and living way opened up to us in the crucifixion. Here is a deed of unearthly magnitude before which we can only bow in utter humility — far from being able to fit the death of Jesus into our life and our own preconceptions or notions we face the demand that we should be conformed to his death. We can understand the cross only by *metanoia*, repentance and a change of mind...we must be obedient in our understanding and mind if we are even to begin to apprehend its significance.<sup>75</sup>

The atonement sets our lives and thinking on a totally new basis in which we must now begin with the reality and mystery of what God has done for us in Christ. Even beginning to understand it involves a new way of thinking in which we obediently *follow* it, thinking our way out *from* the reality established for us and not attempting to think our way *into* it by normal patterns of rational thought.

**(iii) *The meaning of atonement only unfolded by following Christ a posteriori***

The only way to understand something of the atonement, Torrance says, is to follow Christ in the gospel accounts of the way that he himself unfolded the meaning of his death. Torrance stresses here the remarkable way in which Jesus revealed the meaning of his mission only gradually, and then only in such a way

---

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

that his revelation of himself by word and by act kept pace with one another and that he unfolded both together only in tune with the actual unfolding of his mission in life.<sup>76</sup> Thus he refused the final revelation of himself in *act* "until the hour of God arrived," and likewise

restrained his *words* revealing this purpose and communicated them only as the pattern of his mission began to unfold in its actual course, making his words and acts proceed *pari passu*<sup>77</sup> in the one mission of revelation and reconciliation...hence the nearer he approached his "hour" as he called it, the more he was ready to reveal the mystery of his passion. That he did in two supreme "words" about his atoning death...*first*, "the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,"<sup>78</sup> and *second*, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins."<sup>79 80</sup>

Torrance takes these two "words," together with their accompanying acts, as the basis for his doctrine of atonement. Interpreted together with all the other teaching of Jesus and of the rest of the New Testament,<sup>81</sup> and interpreted too against the background of the Old, but in the light of his critical and creative fulfillment of it,<sup>82</sup> the two "words" take primary place in any understanding of atonement. Torrance looks at all the language and concepts employed by both Old and New Testaments in their teaching on atonement and at how it is all gathered up in the person of the mediator. For Torrance, there can be no abstract theory of atonement, but only an examination of biblical teaching in which we allow the person and work of Christ in word and act to shape our thought, and only a putting together of biblical material "based upon the inherent synthesis to be found in the person of the mediator."<sup>83</sup> No merely theoretic understanding can gather up and encapsulate the meaning of atonement. It is only in gathering

---

76 *Atonement*, 5ff.

77 Latin, "with equal step," in line with each other.

78 Matt 20.28; Mark 10.45.

79 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24. Cf. Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

80 *Atonement*, 5-7. Note again that references within quotations of Torrance in this article are part of his own text.

81 *Ibid.*, 7.

82 *Ibid.*, 1; cf. 7ff., 25ff., 61f., 63ff., 139ff., 174ff.

83 *Op. cit.* 4.

together biblical material and interpreting it in strictest faithfulness to Christ in whom alone biblical images and concepts are held together that we can gain any understanding of the atonement while remaining faithful to its mystery.

Here above all, then, in seeking to understand the death of Christ, we must *follow* Christ, and think only *a posteriori*,<sup>84</sup> seeking throughout to be conformed in mind to Christ himself as the truth. That is the only way to understand and at the same time to reverence the infinite mystery and majesty of this atoning deed on the cross which by its very nature reaches out beyond all finite comprehension into eternity.<sup>85</sup>

**(iv) *The unfathomable depth of atonement***

There is understanding of the wisdom of God in the atonement, but any apprehension given to us of the death of Christ, while real and genuine insight, is only possible in part. Like a beam of light shone up into a dark sky, the meaning we apprehend through following Christ's self-revelation in word and act may be clear and defined at our end but opens out into the infinite depths of his passion and of the love and being of God.<sup>86</sup> Through his communication of it by word and act in the human language and concepts chosen and molded by his person, the meaning Christ gives us to understand through the Spirit is defined and truly apprehended at our end, but that genuine apprehension reaches into the depths of God and the "mystery of the blood of Christ" for which no words can suffice.

Here we tread the holy ground of the garden of Gethsemane and Calvary and here we must clap our hand upon our mouth again and again for we have no words adequate to match the infinitely holy import of atonement. It is precisely (in part at least) for that reason that before he suffered Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord's supper...here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the savior.<sup>87</sup> That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the

---

84 Latin, literally "from after," hence "following on the event," "according to the fact," i.e. obedient to reality.

85 *Atonement*, 4-5.

86 Cf. the discussion in T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, 22, 25-26, on the two-fold character of faith and understanding, "determinate and bounded" at our end and "indeterminate and unbounded" at God's end.

87 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.<sup>88</sup>

**(b) The “who” of atonement — the person of Christ as God and man**

Reflection on the Gospels and on Jesus Christ as we meet him there inevitably raises all the questions raised in the Gospels themselves. “Who is this that can forgive sins?” “He speaks with authority and not as the scribes.” “No man ever spoke like this man.” “Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?” “Who is this that makes himself equal with God” and calls him colloquially “Abba,” my Father? The questions “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” and “Who is this who does what only God can do?” arise inevitably of Jesus and his work. Who is this person who does these things?<sup>89</sup> But more than that, the deeds which Jesus performs, extraordinary as they are, are not simply deeds done by him, but deeds which in the Gospels betray a connection with his person. They are the deeds of *his* person, only *he* can do these things. There is something in the nature of an intimate connection between the actions and the person. This person does not just raise people from the dead but proclaims “I AM the resurrection and the life.” Who is this?

In any attempt to understand the Gospels and the forgiveness of sins in the risen Christ, the christological “who” question inevitably raises itself of Jesus and his work. As faith searches for understanding, the only answer which really matches the gospel accounts and makes definitive sense is that of classical Christology (echoed by Torrance), “this is God, this is man, yet this is one person.” Such a response not only answers the “who” question but highlights and defines the work also. To say of the atonement, “this is God” and “this is man” defines the work as being that of God himself and yet as being also the act of man in atonement, and to say “this is one person” is to say that this is God acting *as real man* for us.

Such questions and answers have already inevitably raised also the question of the relation between the person and the work of Jesus, between the “who” of his person and the “what” of what he has done for us, and as just seen, the answer to the first affects the understanding of the second. What is the relation between person and work, faith asks?

---

88 *Atonement*, 2-3.

89 Cf. the account of the majesty and authority of Jesus in *Incarnation*, 128; cf. 138-40 and *Atonement*, 235-6.

**(c) Person and work inseparable and only understood in the light of each other**

That there is a manifest relation between person and work is clear from the outset: a work is the work of a person and intimately shaped by that person, while the person is shaped by the work. Person and work mutually define each other and each is also known through the other. We come to know the person through the work they do and through knowing the person we can better understand their work. If such mutuality in relation between person and work is true at the human level, it is evidently even more true at the divine, but at the level of divine personhood there are also very significant differences from the human level in the relation of person to work.

In the Gospels, Jesus reveals himself, his person, through his word and act and does so, as Torrance emphasizes, only gradually.<sup>90</sup> We come to know who he is by what he says in word and does in act. In both, he is revealing the person he is, and it is only through his word and act that we know his person. It is, for example, because he does the works which only God can do — forgiving sins, raising the dead, stilling the storm, teaching with authority, etc. — that we begin to discern the secret of his person. At the same time, it is only through knowing *who* he is that we can truly understand his work and its significance.

With Jesus, however, the relation between person and work is intrinsically and inherently closer than that known anywhere else or in anyone else. This is because of the nature of God and the relation between his being and word and act. He speaks and it is done. There is no gap between his person and what he does, for his act is in perfect accord with his person and being,<sup>91</sup> and the nature of his work is in perfect accord with the nature of his person. Torrance emphasizes, for example, that the nature of the resurrection as the mighty, creative act of God was in complete correspondence and consistence with the nature of the person of Christ. Similarly, the being of God is love, and everything that he does in Christ is in perfect accordance with his being as love.

---

90 *Atonement*, 5f; cf. *Incarnation*, 19, 21, 161f.

91 T.F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, OUP, London, 1971, 141; T.F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, 236.

If there is no gap in God between being and act, what he does as man is equally so. What he is in himself, he does, and what he does, he is in himself:

As incarnate Son of God he confronts us as he in whom person and work and word are indissolubly one. It is his own person that he communicates in his words and deeds, while his words and deeds do not only derive from his person but inhere in it.<sup>92</sup>

It is here above all that we see the Word made flesh in the unity of person and word, truth and life, word and deed in Jesus Christ...here in Jesus Christ God acts in such a way that he is himself in his act, and what he acts he is, and what he is he acts.<sup>93</sup>

The identity of person and word, person and work in Christ lies at the core of Torrance's theology and is a major strand running right through it. Christ's work, for Torrance, is inseparable from his person and his person is likewise inseparable from his work. The whole work of Christ is part of his person, and **together person and word and work make up one whole Jesus Christ**. Thus we cannot think of the work of Christ "simply as an act done by Christ." It is the act of *his* person, and it is the person doing the act which makes the work what it is.

It is above all the person of Christ revealing so that revelation cannot be separated off from his person. Similarly, it is the person of Christ atoning, so that atonement cannot be divided from Christ's person. It is because revelation is the person of Christ revealing that it is revelation, and it is because atonement is the person of Christ atoning that it is atonement. Thus, for example, the significance of the cross does not lie simply in the death or in the blood of Christ shed in sacrifice, but it lies in the fact that the person of Christ is the one who sheds his blood for our sin — it lies in the identity of his person and work. The atonement is his person in action, not the action by itself.<sup>94</sup>

It is because it is the person of Christ on the cross, God himself, that atonement is atonement. But equally, atonement is not atonement without the action. It is the person in action, not the person by itself. It is God acting in time and space for our salvation. Person and work are equally necessary and inseparable.

As faith continues to search for fuller understanding of the new life in Christ, the "who" of his person (true God, true man) and the inseparability of his person and work are narrowed down and further defined. Understanding of them is crystallized to find in the hypostatic union their own immediate and deeper basis.

---

92 *Atonement*, 211.

93 *Incarnation*, 107-8.

94 *Ibid.*, 108.

**(d) The hypostatic union the linchpin of salvation**

The hypostatic union is the union of God and man in the person of Christ. It is the event in which the eternal God now became also man in such a way that without ceasing to be true God, he became true man in the person of Christ. In time and for all time, God united himself to man in the person of Jesus Christ. That living and permanent union in one person of God and man (“two natures in one person”) is the doctrine of the hypostatic union, and though expressed in technical language, it is simply precise, condensed, theological shorthand for the reality which Jesus Christ is in his person.

Because he himself, in his risen and ever living person, is both God and man, he is *himself* the bond between God and man. In his person Jesus straddles both sides permanently, and because it is the same person who is God who is man, his one person is the living ontological bridge between, and union of, God and man.<sup>95</sup> This union, forged at the incarnation, can now no more be undone than the incarnation can be undone or the person of Christ torn in two.<sup>96</sup>

For Torrance, it is critically important that the hypostatic union is understood dynamically and not just statically.<sup>97</sup> The incarnation was a once for all event, the union of God and man in the birth of Jesus, but it was simply the beginning of a union which had to grow. It had to be lived out throughout a human life, be maintained in the teeth of sin, judgment and death on the cross, and rise into resurrection.<sup>98</sup> It was the beginning of a continuous dynamic event which was only completed in the resurrection and ascension:

the incarnation involves a union of God and man in Christ accomplished once and for all, but it also involves a living union continuous throughout the life of the historical Jesus Christ moving from his birth to his resurrection.<sup>99</sup>

---

95 *Incarnation*, 184, 190f., 195; cf. *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 160-1, “the *homo-ousion* [the oneness in being between Jesus and God] is the ontological and epistemological linchpin of Christian theology. With it, everything hangs together; without it, everything ultimately falls apart.”

96 Cf. *Incarnation*, 196, *Atonement*, 167.

97 *Incarnation*, 85f., 182ff.

98 Cf. *Incarnation*, 118ff.

99 *Incarnation*, 85.

Torrance thus speaks of the hypostatic union as “the mainstay of a doctrine of atoning reconciliation”<sup>100</sup> and as “the heart of revelation [and reconciliation] and its full substance.”<sup>101</sup> It is the union of God and man in Jesus himself which, in his vicarious humanity, is the center point of our own union with God and is to be seen as the heart of his whole work of revelation, atonement, and reconciliation. He was that living dynamic union throughout his life to its atoning climax on the cross, and he still is, undefeated in resurrection.

**(e) The difficulty of the sinless one being “made sin” – the patristic principle of redemption**

The statements of Paul (“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures”),<sup>102</sup> of Isaiah 53 and of Peter (“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree”),<sup>103</sup> all express the heart of Christian belief. Paul even says that God “made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin,”<sup>104</sup> but how was our “iniquity” laid on the suffering servant; how did he bear our sin, and how was he the sinless one made to be sin?

How can the innocent bear the sins of the guilty, unless merely by imputation or by agreeing to stand in the place of the guilty and bear their penalty? How could the holy God bear sin and how can God the Son possibly be *made sin* on the cross?

***The Son’s incarnational identification with sinners – the assumption of fallen flesh***

Torrance’s answer to these questions is that Jesus Christ bears human sin not just by imputation, or by being made sin on the cross, but by assuming fallen flesh and fallen humanity from the very beginning of his life. In the incarnation Christ assumed our actual fallen flesh.<sup>105</sup> At the Jordan he the sinless one identified himself

---

100 *Incarnation*, 196.

101 *Ibid.*, “The hypostatic union of God and man in one person is the heart of revelation and its full substance” (192); “The hypostatic union of God and man in one person is the heart of reconciliation and its full substance” (194).

102 1 Cor 15.3.

103 1 Pet 2.24.

104 2 Cor 5.21.

105 *Incarnation*, 61f., 204f.

with sinners in their baptism into repentance. In his ministry of increasing solidarity with sinners he took their iniquities on himself and bore their diseases even as he healed them<sup>106</sup> all until, "bringing his relation of solidarity with them to its purposed end or completion on the cross,"<sup>107</sup> there "at last all the sin of humanity is finally laid upon him."<sup>108</sup> For Torrance, Jesus bears human sin not just by imputation or by bearing its penalty but by actually identifying himself with sinners and taking their fallen humanity on himself. Christ assumes not unfallen but fallen flesh in the incarnation. His self-identification with sinners and bearing of their sin is therefore *actual*, not simply by imputation, fiat, or "legal fiction." It is also something which *begins at the incarnation* and did not just take place at the cross.

***The patristic principle of redemption – "the unassumed is the unredeemed"***

In line with the patristic principle of redemption, as he considers it, Torrance argues here that "the unassumed is the unredeemed,"<sup>109</sup> that whatever has not been incarnationally assumed by Christ is unredeemed, that is, that if Christ assumed a human body, but not a mind, then the human mind has not been redeemed or healed. Christ has to become and take on himself all that we are in order for us to be healed, and therefore if we are fallen in body, mind, and soul, then he himself has to assume fallen body, mind, and soul in order for each of them to be restored.

Torrance's position is not without controversy, but the perceived difficulty is not so much with what Christ assumed as with its fallenness, for how

---

106 Matt 8.17.

107 *Incarnation*, 137f.

108 *Ibid.*, 136.

109 *Incarnation*, 62. For a fuller account by Torrance of the patristic principle together with the citations and references offered in support, see *Trinitarian Faith*, 161-68. Cf. also Athanasius, "the Saviour humbled himself in taking 'our body of humiliation,' and took a servant's form, putting on that flesh which was enslaved to sin," *Contra Arianos* 1.43, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, "Athanasius," Eerdmans repr, Grand Rapids, 1971, 331. Cf. further *Contra Arianos*, 2.61, 66, 69; 3.33, 34 (grateful acknowledgement here to James B. Walker for these references from Athanasius and for his reading and comments on this article).

can Christ assume fallen human nature without sin, without being a sinner himself?

***The question of sinless assumption of fallen flesh can only be answered in dynamic terms***

Torrance's answer is that Christ's assumption of fallen flesh can only be understood dynamically and not statically.<sup>110</sup> Understood statically, Christ's assumption of fallenness would mean that he too became fallen, but for Torrance the incarnation can only be understood dynamically: in the very act of assuming fallen flesh and making it his own, Christ sanctifies it and continues to do so all the way through his life.<sup>111</sup> At each stage, throughout his ministry of deepening solidarity with sinners, he is engaged in a movement of cleansing and bending wayward human nature back to God until the completion of that mission in atoning sacrifice on the cross.

**(f) Incarnation and atonement inseparable and only understood in the light of each other**

If the incarnation is already the assumption and sanctification of sinful flesh, how precisely does Torrance see the connection between incarnation and atonement?

Put briefly, Torrance sees the incarnation as the hypostatic foundation for the atonement, while the atonement (followed by resurrection) is the completion and goal of the incarnation. Incarnation and atonement are integral and inter-locking components of the one whole event of salvation, mutually inter-dependent and ontologically inseparable from one another. The incarnation is one end of the whole atoning work of Christ, while atonement followed by resurrection and ascension is the other end. Both belong to the inseparability of Christ's person and work.<sup>112</sup> There are several overlapping points here.

---

110 *Incarnation*, 206; cf. 85.

111 *Incarnation*, 204f; cf. 63f.

112 *Incarnation*, 37, "Jesus Christ is one person whose word is wholly involved in his act and whose act is wholly involved in his person. We cannot therefore think of his person apart from his atoning work, or of his atoning work in abstraction from his person. We begin with the person of Christ, but it is his person who carries out the work of salvation, and in the strict sense it is Jesus Christ himself, the mediator, who

***(i) As the hypostatic union of God and man, incarnation is the ground of atonement***

For Torrance, the hypostatic union is the ground, the bedrock, and the heart of atonement and is so in two ways:

(1) The whole aim of atonement is to restore humanity to fellowship and union with God, but that union is the union which was established in the incarnation in the person of Christ himself.<sup>113</sup> As the *union of God and man*, the hypostatic union is the reality forged in the person of Christ in order that it might be worked out through all the full estrangement of humanity from God, through judgment and atonement on the cross, into reconciliation.<sup>114</sup> This union of God and man with sinful humanity at Bethlehem, lived and battled out in the life of Jesus, is deliberately taken down into judgment and death on the cross that there it might be fully maintained and established and so issue in full and final reconciliation in the resurrection of Jesus.

Reconciliation is the full outworking of the hypostatic union. Reconciliation begins with the birth of Jesus when God and man are brought into real union and it is that real union carried throughout the conditions of our human life in its estrangement from God, in such a way as to restore our human life from its estrangement to fellowship with the Father. Thus the whole life and action of Christ from birth to death constitutes reconciliation. It is ultimately in the death of Christ when he plumbs the deepest depth of our estrangement, in our death, in his suffering the divine judgement upon our sin, that union between God and humanity, begun in the birth of Jesus, and carried throughout his human life, reaches its complete fulfilment. . . . That is the eternalising of reconciliation with humanity in the life and person of the resurrected Son.<sup>115</sup>

(2) The union in Christ is not simply *between his divine and human natures*, in which case the glue as it were (if we can possibly speak this way) might come unstuck and the union undone, but is a union in which *the person of Christ himself*

---

is the atonement. It is Christ atoning who concerns us here. Therefore even when we begin with his incarnation, and with his birth at Bethlehem, we are beginning right away with the atonement, for his birth, as the beginning of his incarnate person, is one end of the atoning work, with the resurrection and ascension as the other end."

113 Cf. *Incarnation*, 81f.

114 *Incarnation*, 105-7.

115 *Atonement*, 149-50; cf. 216.

*is the bond*, a union in which the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in the one person of Christ can no more be undone than the person of Christ can be undone.<sup>116</sup> The hypostatic union, forged in incarnation and unbreakably firm on the cross, therefore forms the ontological bond of the union of God and man which lies at the heart of atonement: just as the hypostatic union meant that at Bethlehem he who was God was now also man, so it means that on the cross he who atones is God and is man in the one person of Christ. The atonement is the full act of God and the full act of man, *in man, for man, and by man* in the person of Christ, but an act of *God as man*.<sup>117</sup> It is the one person of Christ, which means that atonement is one, at once the full and complete act of God in atonement and the full and complete act of man, one indivisible act of God reaching man and undoing sin, and of man in atoning sacrifice and reception of atonement and reconciliation. It is thus the oneness of the one person of Jesus Christ which is the inner bond of atonement on the cross.

. . . it is important to see that the doctrine of Christ's work of atoning reconciliation presupposes the doctrine of the hypostatic union of two natures in his one person, for the whole work of reconciliation depends upon the fact that *one person acts both from the side of God, and from the side of man*, both in his divine acts and in his human acts, and that these acts are really and truly identical in the person of the mediator.<sup>118</sup>

***(ii) It is the whole incarnate life of Jesus Christ which is offered up in atonement***

For Torrance, the death of Jesus cannot be isolated from his whole life for a moment. It is his *life* which he has come to give as a ransom in atonement, and only in atonement does his life come to its completion and appointed end.

---

116 Cf. again *Atonement*, 167.

117 *Incarnation*, 195.

118 *Incarnation*, 184; cf. 195, "The atonement is the work of the God-man, of God and man in hypostatic union, not simply an act of God in man, but an act of God *as man*. And so the hypostatic union and atonement belong together. Atonement is possible on the ground of the hypostatic union, and only on the ground of atoning reconciliation can the oneness of the Word and our flesh of sin be brought to its full *telos* in the hypostatic union of God and man in the risen Jesus Christ."

Jesus does not regard the work he has to fulfil in his death as divorced from his life. It is his *life* which he has come to give in redemption, or in ransom for the many, and that concerns his whole course of obedience as the incarnate servant-Son. His life as the servant comes to its completion in his sacrifice on the cross...It is his whole life, and above all that life poured out in the supreme sacrifice of death on the cross, that makes atonement for sin, provides the ground and basis for forgiveness, and means the redemption of those whose lives have been forfeit before God.<sup>119</sup>

Such was the importance for Torrance of not divorcing the death of Jesus from his life and of integrating incarnation and atonement in theology that he always set his students an essay on the relation between the two.<sup>120</sup>

***(iii) As the sanctification of fallen flesh, incarnation is the beginning of atonement***

Torrance's teaching, that in assuming fallen flesh and making it his Jesus sanctified it, means that the incarnation is already atoning event, already the beginning of atonement and of the atoning exchange (where he who knew no sin was made sin for us)<sup>121</sup> of the cross:

We must . . . say that in the very act of assuming our flesh the Word sanctified and hallowed it, for the assumption of our sinful flesh is itself atoning and sanctifying action.<sup>122</sup>

---

119 *Atonement*, 22.

120 Cf. "This integration of atonement and incarnation, of the work and person of Christ, is of the most fundamental significance and must not be lost sight of for a moment. The death of Jesus cannot be isolated from his life, while the whole mission of his life presses toward the final act of obedience to the will of God when through the sacrifice of himself in death on the cross, he made expiation for our sins and mediated a new covenant," *ibid.*, 23.

121 2 Cor 5.21.

122 *Incarnation*, 63; cf. "The verse 'he made him to be sin who knew no sin' does not mean that God made him a man who sins, or sins again, but that he was made that by way of exchange, *katallagē*, or substitution. That carries us right into the heart of the atonement. That atoning exchange begins right away with the incarnation, with its assumption of our flesh of sin, its condemnation of sin in the flesh, its sanctification of our humanity through the gift of divine righteousness and sanctification of man in Christ." *Ibid.*

[The union in Christ] between our fallen human nature and his divine nature, [is] a union in which he, while assuming our fallen nature, sanctifies it in the very act of assumption, and so begins our redemption from his very birth. Thus incarnation in the narrower sense of the term is itself redeeming event.<sup>123</sup>

The incarnation needs to be seen as itself the beginning of atonement, as “the reconciliation wrought out on the cross . . . already at work in the person of Christ,” and the life of Jesus needs to be seen in turn as the visible working out, to its climax on the cross, of what had already actually begun to take place in his birth.<sup>124</sup>

***(iv) Jesus’ redeeming life and ministry proleptically dependent on the atonement***

Such is the inter-relation between incarnation and atonement that while the incarnation is often described by Torrance as the beginning of an atoning action which is completed on the cross, he also sees it (as just mentioned above) as the cross “already at work in the person of Christ.”

For Torrance, Jesus’ miracles of healing and forgiveness in which he rescued the sick and the possessed from the power of evil already involved a taking of their sins on himself and a struggle with evil which looked forward to the final conflict and victory of the cross:

It was only in anticipation of Calvary that Jesus wrought those miracles, in which he healed the sick, drove out demons, forgave sins, and raised the dead. All through his life and ministry, from the baptism to the cross, he was at work in holy atonement, bearing the sins of the world on his spirit. . . . In this way we see that the whole of his life was an atoning sacrifice, although it is on the cross that at last all the sin of humanity is finally laid upon him, and there that through the eternal Spirit he offered himself once and for all in complete and final expiation for the sin of mankind.<sup>125</sup>

Although Torrance does not do so (as far as the present writer is aware), it seems fair to draw something of a parallel between what he says about the daily

---

123 *Incarnation*, 82.

124 *Incarnation*, 108, “The reconciliation wrought out on the cross is already at work in the person of Christ, and all his life is the visible working and working out of what took place when the Son of God became man in the midst of our flesh of sin.”

125 *Incarnation*, 136.

forgiveness of sins in ancient Israel and what he is saying here. Just as the day to day atonement for sins in Israel looked forward to and was dependent on renewal of the covenant on the Day of Atonement, so here Jesus' exercise of atoning and redemptive power in his miracles looked forward to and was only in anticipation of final atonement and redemption on the cross.

Despite the parallel there is an essential difference. Daily forgiveness in Israel was in no sense the ground for forgiveness on the Day of Atonement and was completely proleptically dependent on it. By contrast, the incarnation, as the sanctifying union of God and man in the person of Christ, was already the beginning of atonement while reaching out to its future completion. In that sense, the hypostatic union worked out in Jesus' life and ministry is both the essential ground of atonement on the cross and proleptically dependent on its final realization and permanent actualization in the cross and resurrection.

***(v) Atonement (and resurrection) the indispensable fulfillment of the incarnation***

If atonement is only possible on the ground of incarnation and hypostatic union, it is equally true that it is only through his ultimate identification with us on the cross in our sin and God-forsakenness, only through his maintenance of the hypostatic union in the depth of our estrangement,<sup>126</sup> only through atonement at that point of damnation and final judgment, only in and through all that, that Christ's incarnational assumption of our humanity and the union of God and man in him is fully and finally fulfilled<sup>127</sup> and so issues in resurrection.<sup>128</sup>

We have to see reconciliation not only as the outworking of the hypostatic union, but as the ultimate fulfilment of God's assumption of our humanity in the incarnation. . . . That assumption of our fearful and lost condition reaches its supreme point in the cross where the Son freely assumes our damnation and final judgement, freely assumes our God-forsakenness in the *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani* of death on the cross under judgement. And so he achieves our assumption into oneness with himself, and because that assumption is

---

126 *Atonement*, 149f.

127 Cf. *Incarnation*, 137-38.

128 Cf. again, *Incarnation*, 195, "Atonement is possible on the ground of the hypostatic union, and only on the ground of atoning reconciliation can the oneness of the Word and our flesh of sin be brought to its full *telos* in the hypostatic union of God and man in the risen Jesus Christ"; cf. also *Atonement*, 120-25.

maintained even in the hell into which the Son descended, it achieves its end in the resurrection of man out of hell and the exaltation of man in Christ to the right hand of God.<sup>129</sup>

If the incarnation does not reach down into the very depths of human guilt and estrangement under final judgment it has not really assumed our humanity to its ultimate actuality, but because it has done so, and because the hypostatic union held firm even there, the incarnation emerges on the other side of death into its permanent fulfillment in the risen humanity of Christ.

### **(g) The relation of incarnation and atonement one of profound inter-relation**

It is clear from the above that the relation between incarnation and atonement is not simply one of mutual relation, but one of the profoundest *inter-relation* in which incarnation and atonement are constitutively interlocked with one another: incarnation cannot be understood without reference to atonement, nor atonement without reference to incarnation, while incarnation is already the beginning of atonement and atonement is the completion of incarnation.

#### ***The several aspects of the constitutive inter-relation***

There are several aspects to the inter-relation and inseparability of incarnation and atonement: the need for redemption to involve real God and real man, for it to be the true act of both God and of man worked out and accomplished in history, and the need for all of these to be held together in an unbreakable unity. Torrance therefore is at pains throughout to emphasize both the unity of God and man in hypostatic union and the inseparability of person and work in the whole Jesus Christ from birth to resurrection and ascension.

To put the argument in Anselmian terms: as the human race is incapable of saving themselves, only *God* can redeem them, and only by reaching them as they are in their state of *fallen flesh*. He can only do that by *himself becoming man* and therefore by *himself assuming fallen flesh*, but as holy God he cannot do so without *sanctifying the fallen flesh even as he assumes it* to make it his, and that means that incarnation is already atonement in commencement. Or to put the same argument the other way around: if atonement must reach man

---

129 *Atonement*, 150; cf. 216-7.

as *fallen* flesh, and if only God can do so through becoming man and taking fallen flesh on himself, then atonement can only be achieved on the ground of incarnation and is its completion.

It must be stressed here that for Torrance, as for Anselm, the “necessity” of God becoming man and becoming what we are is not one of logical necessity or of *a priori* rational reasoning. As Torrance emphasized in his classes, the “need” or the “had to” behind God becoming man was not one of external compulsion on God, far less any kind of logical necessity, but simply the “logic of grace,” the inner logic of his freedom and act of grace. We cannot think our way *into* the atonement but only *out from* it, for we cannot demonstrate the necessity for incarnation and atonement on purely logical grounds: we can only begin from and unfold the logic and rationale inherent in the whole act of God in Christ.

**(h) The twofold mystery of the incarnation — the person of Christ and his sanctifying assumption of fallen flesh**

Torrance does not speak of there being a twofold mystery in the incarnation but only of the mystery of the person of Christ. He does speak of the mystery of atonement and of the incarnation as already atoning event. Although the primary mystery of incarnation is the person of Christ, and although it is only on the cross that we have in all its fullness the mystery of atonement, it is fair to see in the incarnational assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh a second element of mystery, and in that sense to speak of the twofold mystery of incarnation.

**(i) The mystery of God and man in one person — the givenness of duality in unity**

The mystery of Jesus Christ is “*the mystery of true divine nature and true human nature in one person.*”<sup>130</sup> Its mystery is that here is “a new and unique reality” which we cannot know in terms of anything else, which we can know “only out of it itself,” and in which as we “acknowledge it in wonder and thankfulness, in adoration and praise” we know that “it remains a mystery,” ultimately inconceivable and impossible of exact expression even “in the midst of its disclosure.”<sup>131</sup> It is “the duality of God and man in the unity of

---

130 *Incarnation*, 83.

131 *Ibid.*

one person,"<sup>132</sup> the irreducible "starting point" of Christology or "the given" in theology.<sup>133</sup>

**(ii) *The mystery of divine assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh***

The assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh in the incarnation is likewise a mystery. We cannot say how God can really assume actual fallen flesh and sanctify it without taint or becoming a sinner. Just as we cannot say how the sins of the whole world were laid on Christ at the cross and he was made sin for us, so we cannot put together the sinlessness of Christ and the assumption of fallen flesh. The *how* of atonement on the cross is the mystery of God and so in the incarnation is the *how* of assumption. Both can only be conceived in their reality as the creative and dynamic act of God, but their *how* remains a divine mystery beyond human knowledge. As with the creation itself, we can know them as realities brought into being by God, but their *how* is hidden in him.

**(iii) *The patristic principle as a statement of faith***

The patristic principle, as Torrance terms it, that "the unassumed is the unhealed," and therefore that Christ assumed fallen flesh in the incarnation, is a statement of faith. It is a theological judgment arrived at through interpretation of the bible as a whole and endeavoring to understand it in its inner logic.

The bible nowhere says in quite so many words that Jesus assumed fallen flesh,<sup>134</sup> far less, as Torrance does, that all the way through his life Jesus was bending human nature back into obedience to God. What then are the grounds for Torrance's assertion that the whole life of Jesus was one of atoning conversion of human nature, begun in the incarnation and fulfilled on the cross and in resurrection?

While he may be able to point to certain biblical passages, Torrance is apparently going beyond anything they explicitly say and understanding them and a raft of other biblical material in terms of a theological framework of interpretation. What kind of rationale would he give for doing so?

---

132 *Incarnation*, 37; cf. 3.

133 *Incarnation*, 3, 7.

134 Though see and compare here the discussion of "sinful flesh" just below under the heading "Incarnational solidarity in Romans and John."

He would certainly agree that he is using a theological framework to interpret biblical texts, but he would argue that it is a framework which is derived from them and which offers a deeper, more illuminating and coherent understanding of them, and so makes for deeper christological sense and greater fidelity to the bible. Torrance would argue, in other words, that such a framework brings to light the "inner logic" of the bible and of the salvation which is in Christ.

If to say with Paul that "Christ died for our sins" and was made sin for us<sup>135</sup> is to make a statement of faith, to say that the atonement began with the incarnation is to make a similar statement of faith, but one based on sustained theological reflection on what Paul says and formed also in the light of all that the Gospels and New Testament have to say about the person and work of Christ. Taken together with statements about Jesus bearing sins on the cross, passages such as Matthew's that in healing people Jesus took their iniquities and diseases on himself,<sup>136</sup> or the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in identification with sinners when he was at once driven into the wilderness to experience temptation in conflict with evil, or accounts of Jesus touching unclean lepers and cleansing them,<sup>137</sup> such passages point to Jesus' public ministry as being one in which he identified himself with sinners from the outset, and in healing them was already taking their iniquities on himself. Such passages thus point in the direction of Jesus' redemptive activity having its beginning before the cross in the ministry inaugurated at his baptism.

***The argument in Hebrews of Christ's incarnational solidarity with human nature***

The argument in Hebrews that if "the children are flesh and blood" then the high priest has to be so likewise in order that by sharing their nature and dying their death he might destroy death,<sup>138</sup> is very close here to the logic of the patristic principle that the unassumed is the unhealed. It is the argument that if the children have human nature, are tempted, and die, then the priest who represents them must do so likewise, sharing in all that they are and experience in order to be truly one with them and redeem them. The redeemer has to

---

135 1 Cor 15.3; 2 Cor 5.21.

136 Matt 8.17 (quotation from Isaiah 53).

137 Matt 8.2-4; Mark 1.40-44; Luke 5.12-14.

138 Heb 2.14f.

share the same nature as those who need redemption in order to redeem them from it. In Hebrews, although the redeemer shares the nature of those he redeems and makes *himself* an offering for their sin, there is no explicit concept of the redeemer incarnationally assuming the *fallen* human nature of those he redeems.

It may be argued that the logic of the Hebrews passage points in that direction, but it does not take that step as Torrance does. It simply stops at the point of incarnationally solidarity with sinners in flesh and blood and in temptation, suffering, and learning obedience.<sup>139</sup> It can be legitimately argued that Hebrews does not rule out such a step, and in fact leaves it open. Torrance takes that step, and at this point there are further passages he can adduce in support, in particular Romans 8 and John 1.

### ***Incarnational solidarity in Romans and John***

**(1) "The likeness of sinful flesh"** — *"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (**en homoiōmati sarkos hamartias**) and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."*<sup>140</sup>

Referring to the phrase "in the likeness of sinful flesh," Torrance would ask the class in his dogmatics lectures whether such "likeness" was just the likeness of the beard of a billy goat to the beard of a man, or whether it was not something much more than that. For Torrance, Jesus' likeness was not simply one of outward resemblance but a real likeness and a real sharing in sinful flesh although without sin himself. Torrance's argument was that unless Jesus actually lived in and shared our sinful flesh, he could not by his sinlessness condemn sin in it and so free us from it.<sup>141</sup>

**"The likeness of men"** — In the somewhat similar passage in Philippians,<sup>142</sup> the use of the same word "likeness" (*homoiōmati*) most certainly does not mean that Jesus was not really and fully man. The "likeness of men" no more means

---

139 Heb 2.10-18; 5.7-9.

140 Romans 8.3.

141 Cf. *Trinitarian Faith*, 161.

142 Philippians 2.6-8.

that Jesus was only *like* man, than being “in the *form* of God” means that he was not really God, or than “taking the *form* of a servant” and “being found in human form” means that he was not really a servant and really man. The whole force of the passage is that Jesus who was really God, became really man, and as man did not repeat the sin of Adam but went the other way, humbling himself to become a servant.<sup>143</sup> The use of the word *homoīōmati* by Paul in Philippians here confirms Torrance’s understanding of the Romans passage as meaning much more than external resemblance.

**(2) “The Word became flesh”<sup>144</sup>** — Torrance argues that when the Word became flesh it was not some neutral flesh he assumed or some ideal humanity, but “our actual human nature and existence in the bondage and estrangement of humanity fallen from God. . . . There can be no doubt that the New Testament speaks of the flesh of Jesus as the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam’s fall.”<sup>145</sup> Torrance would undoubtedly have agreed with Barth’s whole account that the “flesh” the Word assumed was our actual flesh in its state of unholiness and corruption<sup>146</sup> and indeed Torrance’s language in the above citation echoes that of Barth.<sup>147</sup>

---

143 Although Torrance did not refer to this passage in the context of the Romans one, he did regularly refer to it in class and make the point that it was an implicit allusion to Adam. In contrast to Adam who was not God but man, Jesus who was God became man, and unlike Adam who as man tried to snatch at equality with God, Jesus took the form of a servant and became obedient to death. Speaking of Christ the passage runs, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the *form* of God (*en morphē Theou*) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the *form* of a servant (*morphēn doulou*), being born in the **likeness** of men (*en **homoīōmati** anthrōpōn*). And being found in human form (*en schēmati heuretheis ōs anthrōpos*) he humbled himself and became obedient to death” (RSV), *ibid.*, vv.5-8. For Torrance’s understanding of the passage, see *Incarnation*, 74-6.

144 See *Incarnation*, 58-67, for Torrance’s full exposition of “the Word became flesh.”

145 *Incarnation*, 61.

146 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, English translation, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956, 147-159.

147 Cf. *op. cit.* 151ff.

“Flesh” is also used in the bible in a more neutral sense (as in “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,”<sup>148</sup> or simply to speak of the body,<sup>149</sup> or of the life-giving flesh of Jesus<sup>150</sup>), but it remains true that all flesh is fallen and that it is “flesh” in the narrower sense<sup>151</sup> of flesh in its hostility to God which is commonly used in Paul, while in John it is of flesh as that which is “of no avail”<sup>152</sup> and indeed in “darkness.”<sup>153</sup> Torrance (and Barth likewise) can therefore argue with good reason that the flesh assumed by Christ was flesh in its human condition of sinfulness and weakness.<sup>154</sup>

---

148 Joel 2.28 (Acts 2.17).

149 E.g. 1 Cor 15.38-39f.

150 John 6.51ff.

151 *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, 151ff.

152 John 6.63 RSV (“counts for nothing” NIV, “profiteth nothing” KJV), cf. John 3.6.

153 Cf. John 1.4-14; *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, 151.

154 In response to a personal query about the meaning of the three passages considered here, N.T. Wright indicated his general agreement with the above analysis and offered three further comments. He first makes the point that though “it’s hard to know if the distinction we make between fallen/unfallen humanity corresponds to anything Paul would have recognized,” he suspects that “he [Paul] would have said that if Jesus’ humanity wasn’t fully Adamic he would have been incapable of dying.” Wright adds, “it seems to me clear that the ‘condemnation’ is not simply that Jesus lived a sinless life but that on the cross God condemned sin in the flesh of the Son. Paul doesn’t say that God condemned Jesus but that God condemned sin in his flesh.” The point behind both comments is ultimately the same, that if Jesus had not assumed fully Adamic humanity (the “flesh of sin” in Pauline language) he could not have died and the death that he died on the cross could not have been God’s condemnation of sin in his flesh.

Wright’s final comment was to draw attention to his suggestion that the Philippians *ouch harpagmon* should be best translated as “he [Jesus] did not regard his equality with God as something to exploit.” See N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, chap. 4, for his full analysis of the Philippians passage. Wright indicated that he regards Torrance’s analysis and rendering of the text as complementary rather than as in conflict with his own. Wright’s understanding can be seen as

The fact remains, however, that Torrance's bold affirmation of Christ's assumption of *fallen flesh* seems at first sight to go beyond any one passage and beyond any explicit statements of scripture. It needs to be seen as a statement of faith and a theological judgment unfolding the logic of redemption in Christ and of the New Testament as a whole. Like the statement that Christ died for our sins, albeit on a very different theological level, Torrance's argument that atonement begins with incarnation is a statement of faith. Is it a legitimate extension of the logic behind the Hebrews statement of Christ's incarnational solidarity with humanity? Before attempting an answer and in preparation for it, it will be helpful to consider the question of the nature of theological understanding.

***(iv) Apprehending the reality while guarding the mystery – divine disclosure and the nature of theological understanding***

The person of Jesus Christ and the atonement he effected are realities we recognize as at once realities to be apprehended and realities whose existence is miracle in our midst. We acknowledge them as realities to be known, and yet as realities whose very existence is mystery, whose coming into being and mode of operation reach beyond our understanding.<sup>155</sup>

This lays on theology a double task: to acknowledge and endeavor to understand, in faith, the nature of the reality which is Jesus Christ, and yet in doing so to recognize and preserve the essential mystery of his person and work and so preserve his reality as it is. The task is to explore the nature of his positive reality without trespassing on its mystery, the sheer miracle of his presence in our midst, understanding him in the nature of his person and work *in so far as it may be understood*, while respecting its nature as mystery and therefore refusing, *in so far as it may not be understood*, to attempt to reduce it to our prior categories of human understanding and so falsify it.

---

rightly highlighting the full deity of Christ in the Pauline text while Torrance at this point, in total agreement here with the complete and continuing equality of Jesus with God, highlights also the soteriological significance of the difference between the action of Adam and that of Jesus as man.

155 Cf. again *Incarnation*, 83, *Atonement*, 3.

The two tasks belong essentially together as both involve the attempt to be scrupulously faithful to the reality of Jesus Christ: it is strict attention to who and what he actually is in his positive reality which leads at once to recognition of him *as God and man in one person*, and at the same time to acknowledgement that *how* he is or can be both these is beyond our understanding. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ involves recognition of his reality and nature even as his existence remains mystery and miracle. The reality and mystery of his person are mutually interlocking.

For Torrance, it is only by indwelling the scriptures and allowing them to soak into the depths of our being in faithful study, prayer, and worship<sup>156</sup> that we can begin to be conformed to the mind of Christ and begin to acquire a theological instinct and judgment which guides us in the search for understanding of what may be understood while respecting the boundaries of what may not.

***Allowing positive disclosure of Christ by separating off wrong ways of understanding***

It is important here for Torrance that while we cannot understand the *how* of the mystery of the person of Christ or of atonement, we can understand what are wrong ways of attempting to do so, and therefore can state or mark out, as the Chalcedonian formula does, how the person of Christ is *not* to be understood, that is, with any confusion, change, division or separation of the divine and human natures of Christ. It is through such careful delineation and fencing off of wrong ways of understanding Christ that we can better focus on allowing him to disclose himself to us in his positive reality. Outlining the way in which the mystery of Christ is only capable of negative definition, Torrance writes,

The place of the mystery of Christ in our understanding can only be stated and guarded in *negative* terms. The mystery is that in Jesus Christ true God and true man are united in one person — that is the doctrine of the *hypostatic union*. But we must mark out, on either side of that mystery, what it is by saying what it is *not*. In this way we allow the mystery to declare

---

156 “We can only acknowledge it [the reality of Christ in his mystery] in wonder and thankfulness, in adoration and praise. That doxological approach to the person of Christ is the first step in the doctrine of Christ,” *Incarnation*, 83.

itself to us, and to keep on declaring itself to us without hindering the depth and breadth of its self-disclosure by positive man-made definitions of what it actually is.<sup>157</sup>

For Torrance, “the early church rendered theology magnificent service” here in the way it succeeded in acknowledging the reality of Christ while preserving his mystery:

It gave its account of him in such a way as to acknowledge the reality of his divine and human natures in their union in the one person of the Son, but declined to state *how* those two natures were united in Christ. . . . In other words, the early church sought to preserve the mystery of Christ, and sought to guard that mystery from errors that divided or separated the two natures of Christ on the one hand, or that confounded them or fused them into a higher or lower unity on the other hand.<sup>158</sup>

***Discerning the boundaries between fruitful and unfruitful ways of understanding***

An important task of theology is therefore that of marking out the boundaries (by marking out the wrong ways of understanding beyond them and fencing them off so to speak) within which the biblical revelation may continue to delineate Christ to us and Christ reveal himself through the Spirit. It is as we learn, in and through scriptural study, to discern in godly reverence the nature of the mystery of Christ that we can learn to direct our attention more and more

---

157 *Ibid.*,

158 *Incarnation*, 183 — the full quotation runs, “The doctrine of Christ in the early church had at least this great advantage, that it sought to give its account of Christ in such a way as to leave Christ himself ample room for his own glory and self-revelation. It refused to encase the doctrine of Christ within the mind of man. It gave its account of him in such a way as to acknowledge the reality of his divine and human natures in their union in the one person of the Son, but declined to state *how* those two natures were united in Christ. It was content to declare that the difference of these two natures was not removed by their union, but rather that the propriety of both natures was preserved precisely in their concurrence and union in the one person of Christ the Lord. In other words, the early church sought to preserve the mystery of Christ, and sought to guard that mystery from errors that divided or separated the two natures of Christ on the one hand, or that confounded them or fused them into a higher or lower unity on the other hand.” *Ibid.*

precisely to him and away from ways of understanding which do not respect his reality and mystery. It is then that as we learn the direction and manner of focus on Christ, he can further disclose himself to our understanding and we can more appropriately apprehend him. Just as an astronomer needs to know where in the sky to direct the telescope in order to hone in on and observe a particular star, so in theology and in faith seeking understanding we need to hone in on the "interior logic" of the bible, as Torrance calls it, in order to allow it to direct us to Christ and deeper apprehension of him.

All theology points to God (or should do!), but each theology necessarily does so in terms of its particular framework of understanding and interpretation. The more a theology "hones in" on the central logic of the bible, the more it is able to direct people to God in Christ "clothed with his gospel," and when they know him through the offered framework, their understanding of him is in terms of it. The aim is to allow the reality and mystery of Christ himself to come more into view through continually refining the conceptual tools of apprehension to give richer and deeper understanding. The more faithful these are to the gospel, the less they distort him and the more they allow him to come to light in our understanding. Through discovering and articulating the inner logic of the bible, theology aims to construct a window or refined lens through which Christ in his gospel may be grasped more clearly and in more of his significance as he reveals himself to us.

***Discerning where best to look and where not to look for fruitful understanding***

A key factor here is not only discovering and articulating the inner logic, but the process of discerning where to look for it, how to follow it, and what it is. It is learning to judge, as the inner logic begins to come to light, which are the most fruitful points at which to search for illumination and understanding. Then, as the whole picture begins to take shape and one continues to search for understanding, it is discerning and learning how to follow the most fruitful thread of illumination. Much of the time in theology, the task can almost be more one of discerning where *not* to look for understanding, of discerning which concepts or modes or thought do *not* have sufficient mileage in them, in order that by *not* following unfruitful leads one can focus on the fruitful as one searches there and waits for understanding. The key task of theology is

discovering how to read scripture, how and where to look, and how and where not to look, in order to focus on the inner logic of scripture which leads to Christ and brings him to light.

***Orienting the focus of theology towards the center***

The task of theology then, for Torrance, is to state the truth of Christ as accurately and faithfully as possible in its depth and coherence. In doing so, theology aims to refer beyond itself to the reality of Christ that he might disclose himself. The direction and manner of that referral depends on the framework of understanding and interpretation employed and these should always be oriented to the central focus of the bible which is Christ. The search for greater understanding of the bible and of it as a whole should thus always be oriented towards that center, towards the points at which illumination most opens up the inner trinitarian-*christologic* and *soteriologic* of the bible.

Through the shape and content of its framework, the resulting theology will broadly mark out the boundaries within which it has reached its understanding and within which it judges that understanding is best and most fruitfully to be found. What is outside those boundaries of understanding is thereby adjudged to be less fruitful or inadequate and even scripturally unfaithful. Torrance's theology may therefore be read as saying, "Look here in this direction, through the framework of this lens and along these lines for the most fruitful, adequate, and compelling understanding of the person and work of Christ in incarnation and atonement!"

To return now to the question posed above: Is Torrance's concept of incarnation as already the beginning of atonement a legitimate extension of the Hebrews logic of incarnational solidarity between Christ and those he saves? It is time to bring the discussion to a head and crystallize Torrance's whole argument here. Though he himself does not raise the issue or the question as such, *should the assumption of fallen humanity be part of the theological lens?*

**(i) The inner logic of incarnation as atoning event**

For Torrance, the assertion of Christ's incarnational assumption of fallen flesh is an integral part of such a lens and of the whole inner logic of Christ and his gospel. Positively, it coheres with scripture and offers a deeper and more

illuminating understanding of everything it says. It is a missing piece in the theological jigsaw, cementing together the person and work of Christ and reinforcing the unity of the priest with those he redeems and the link between incarnation and atonement.

While for Torrance the assumption of fallen flesh is so much of an essential, compelling factor in an adequate christology and soteriology that he takes it for granted and simply expounds it rather than detailing all the reasons, it is not too difficult to see some of his reasons immediately from his own positive exposition and by tracing and gathering others from his theology to understand the logic of his thinking here and spell out a case for him.

***(i) The meaning and reasoning behind Torrance and the assumption of fallen flesh***

The thrust of Torrance's argument would be that for several inter-locking reasons (each coherent with scripture and certainly not inconsistent with it but on the contrary positively in line with it) an assumption and sanctification by Christ of fallen flesh at birth makes much more scriptural and theological sense than a bearing of sin only on the cross:

**(1) it means that God has come all the way to us as we are**, that he has not stopped short of us by assuming only unfallen humanity, but that in his love has from birth taken on himself what we are in our fallenness in order to save us;

**(2) it means that he bears sin by full incarnational identification with us**, that is, by taking on himself our actual fallen human nature, our actual human physical and mental existence which committed the sin and *is* sin in its concrete corrupted condition, not simply sin in the abstract as though sin could somehow be separated from the physical doer, or sin simply by imputation;

**(3) it means that atoning sanctification of human nature began already before the cross** and therefore that in line with certain biblical indications Christ's actual life has redeeming significance;

**(4) it takes seriously the life of Jesus**, his whole ministry of revelation in preaching and teaching the word and applying it to people in healing and forgiveness, as well as Jesus' own saying that he had come to give his *life* as a ransom on the cross;

**(5) it takes the incarnation seriously, and therefore the importance of the relation between incarnation and atonement** in which each is only seen in its full significance in relation to the other;

**(6) not least and perhaps most importantly of all, it takes the person of Christ seriously and the essential relation between his person and work.** It sees that it is the person of Christ (God and man in one person) atoning which makes atonement what it is, and not simply the work by itself. If it is just the work which is important, it is much easier to think of atonement as happening only on the cross, with sin being laid on him or imputed to him there, and much easier also to think of his dying the death due to sin without his *person* assuming actual sinful human nature. But if it is the person atoning, and if above all it is the union of God and man *in one person* which is the heart of salvation, it is very much harder to understand atonement unless Christ in his person assumes fallen human nature into union with his person thereby sanctifying it in the process.

For Torrance, the centrality of the person of Christ in atonement and redemption here is further reinforced by the Old Testament concept of *go'el*,<sup>159</sup> the “kinsman redeemer” who redeems someone out of slavery, bankruptcy, or forfeited rights in virtue of their own kinship with the person in family ties and community of property. Applied to Christ, the *go'el* concept emphasizes the solidarity of his person with us. He redeems us in virtue of his complete incarnational kinship with us in flesh and blood.

**(ii) The arguments against Torrance and the assumption of fallen flesh**

The arguments against Torrance’s position are principally (1) that it conflicts with Christ’s sinlessness, (2) that it detracts from the centrality of the cross as the pivotal atoning event, and (3) that the assumption of fallen flesh goes beyond the statements of scripture.

**(1) The conflict with Christ’s sinlessness?**

Torrance’s reply could be said to be threefold.

---

159 For Torrance’s analysis of *padah*, *kipper*, and *go'el*, the three component strands of the Old Testament concept of redemption and their application to Christ, see *Atonement*, 27-53 (*go'el*, 44-50) and *The Trinitarian Faith*, 168ff.

(A) As already stated, he argues that ***in the very act of assuming fallen flesh Christ sanctified the flesh he assumed and so remained sinless***. He also argues that the incarnation cannot be interpreted *statically* (in which case it might be taken to imply Christ's becoming sinful) but *only dynamically*, and that the whole life of Christ to its climax on the cross was one of increasing solidarity with sinners in which as he took their sin on himself he sanctified it in himself and so remained sinless throughout.

(B) He argues that there is *an essential mystery to atonement* and he would therefore argue that just as we cannot say *how* Christ atoned on the cross, or *how* he the holy God was made sin at the cross, so we cannot say *how* he assumed actual fallen flesh in his birth and sanctified it while remaining sinless. But ***the fact that we cannot understand the how does not mean that Christ could not have assumed fallen flesh without sin***. Atonement is the dynamic act of God and is something which he has worked out and accomplished and which we know as a living reality, although we cannot begin to plumb its depths or say *how* he accomplished it.

(C) Although Torrance nowhere discusses the point as such (at least not to the knowledge of the present writer), he would have argued that if we believe that Christ bore sin and was made sin on the cross (as we have to if we take scripture seriously) while remaining sinless himself, we cannot legitimately argue that he could not have done so in the incarnation. The same arguments used against Christ's assuming fallen humanity apply equally to his bearing and being made sin on the cross. Conversely, ***if we believe that Christ took sin on himself on the cross and remained sinless, we can believe that he did so in his birth***, and indeed Torrance would argue (as outlined just above) that it makes infinitely more sense to do so. It is much easier and simpler to believe that Jesus took sin on himself by assuming fallen flesh in full incarnational solidarity with us rather than by having it abstractly laid on him at the cross or imputed to him. It also enhances understanding of the *go'eI* element in redemption, giving it more depth and meaning.

**(2) Does Jesus' sanctification of fallen flesh at birth detract from the cross?**

Torrance's arguments here can be said to be threefold.

(A) As outlined above (section 2 [a]), everything he says about the cross abundantly illustrates **the central place of the cross in his theology** and the unfathomable depth of its mystery.

(B) **Far from depreciating the cross, its relation to the incarnation enhances rather than diminishes its importance.** It is now understood as the critical and climactic fulfillment of the struggle which began at the incarnation, and in that light the cross is seen to have *more* and not less significance.

(C) **It is a mistake to think of any sanctification of fallen flesh at the incarnation statically or as a completed event at that point in time.** In addition, it is wrong to think of it simply in terms of a time-line on the horizontal dimension. It must also be thought of in terms of the vertical dimension, of God breaking into history and of Jesus bringing the truth of God more and more to bear on the human heart. In both, the horizontal dimension of the life and ministry of Christ in time and the vertical dimension of his divine penetration into humanity and the kingdom of evil, **the action of Jesus in his person as God and man is one of increasing intensity to its final and great climax on the cross and in the resurrection.**

As Torrance also points out (section 2 [f] [iv] above), Jesus' miracles of healing and forgiveness are not just part of a salvation begun at the incarnation and completed on the cross, but are themselves only done in anticipation of the cross and proleptically in dependence on its redeeming power.

(D) For Torrance, it would be complete nonsense to think of incarnation and atonement as in any way in competition or separable. They are part of the one great saving event which is Jesus Christ and in fact **incarnation and atonement are the same saving event**, with *one at the beginning and the other at the end*. The incarnation, God and man in hypostatic union, is the basis and presupposition of atonement, while atonement is the completion of incarnation. Neither could be what it is without the other. The incarnation is the beginning of atonement, and the atonement is the outworking of an incarnation which could not be what it is without the full and final atonement of the cross.

### **(3) Does the assumption of fallen flesh go beyond scripture?**

There are several things to be said. The first is that the question as it stands is ambiguous. What does it mean to go *beyond* scripture and should the question itself not perhaps be reframed?

For Torrance, all theology must be faithful to scripture and must have sufficient warrant for it in scripture, but it is a mistake to think that every doctrine can be read off its surface or must be grounded on its explicit statements. The doctrine of the Trinity is nowhere explicitly stated in scripture as such, although there is a more than abundant basis there for it.

***The need to go through scripture to know God in person***

In all reading and interpretation of scripture, even the simplest reading of it in faith, we need to go beyond or behind it to know the God it bears witness to.<sup>160</sup> We only know him through the words of scripture, but we do not stop there. We penetrate into the thought behind it and know the God who speaks in it. Only then, in understanding the words of scripture in their reference to God can we truly interpret them. It is only the reality of God himself (whom we only know through the words) who can truly give meaning to the words which point to him, for he is himself their ultimate content.

***Interpreting scripture and all doctrine from its center in Jesus Christ***

In theology and dogmatics, for Torrance, we penetrate into the inner logic of scripture and understand all doctrine in its coherence around Jesus Christ. To do that we necessarily go beyond scripture in one sense, not in order to leave it behind, but in order that we might follow the reference of scripture to its termination on Christ in God, and through interpreting it from its center in him have a deeper and truer understanding of it.

In Christology and soteriology the task more specifically is to understand the whole logic of the person and work of Christ through searching for understanding of all that the bible says about him. Granted that all theology must go beyond scripture in the sense mentioned above, should the teaching that Christ assumed fallen flesh in the incarnation be regarded as a legitimate and integral element of Christology and soteriology?

Torrance's answer would undoubtedly be in the affirmative. From the

---

<sup>160</sup> See here *God and Rationality*, 37f., on the way in which biblical interpretation should follow the intention of scripture to the reality or realities it indicates in order to interpret its words in the light of those realities.

examination of his thought and argument above, we can agree that his theology of full incarnational solidarity is certainly not inconsistent with scripture. We can also agree that there are definite scriptural indications in its favor, and that although the bible does not explicitly speak about it in so many words, the theology and language of "assumption of fallen flesh" does cohere with and can be seen to be a natural extension of the logic of the biblical indications cited (Jesus' baptism, the healing miracles in Matthew, and his incarnational solidarity with humanity in Hebrews, Romans 8.3, and John 1).

### **(iii) The assumption of fallen flesh dovetails with scripture and deepens its understanding**

The assumption of fallen flesh remains an article of faith, but one that dovetails with and fits beautifully into the whole logic of the person and work of Christ as expounded by Torrance. Although atonement in its inner heart and unfathomable depth must always remain an essential mystery to us, the theology of Christ's assumption of fallen flesh does shed considerable light on the logic of incarnation and atonement as we think our way *out from* the reality of the cross in the attempt to understand something of that inner logic.

Positively, then, far from lacking consistency with scripture, the assumption of fallen flesh can be argued to be more faithful to it and has a great deal to offer in deepening its meaning and reinforcing the rationale in theology for holding together incarnation and atonement, priest and people, and person and work in Christ. The light offered by the assumption of fallen flesh at all these points goes a long way in favor of its adoption.

### ***Alternative positions possible but less fruitful and illuminating***

Another factor may help to persuade the doubter. As we search for understanding in theology, we often peer through a glass darkly, especially where scripture may appear to offer no help and be silent, leaving ends open and questions undecided. Here we simply have to search for light where it may be found, but possible alternatives appear even darker. The alternatives to incarnational assumption of fallen flesh are (i) Christ's bearing sin only on the cross by having sin in the abstract (sin in abstraction from the persons of sinners) somehow laid on him or imputed to him, or (ii) the more intermediate position (intermediate

between incarnation and the cross) of his voluntary identification with sinners in a baptism which he completed on the cross and where in life he was already taking their sins on himself in “wonderful exchange” for healing and forgiveness.

If adopted, the first alternative simply has to be accepted in faith without further understanding. Other than the claim that this is the biblical position truly interpreted and that therefore this is the way God has willed it, the first alternative offers no light of deeper understanding, and as such appears to be a dead end. It thinks in terms of purely imputational and legal or forensic categories which, if accepted as the full biblical position, offer no possibility of further understanding.<sup>161</sup> Granted that there is genuine and irreducible mystery in atonement we cannot penetrate and therefore a line which understanding cannot pass, the first alternative appears to draw that line prematurely and unnecessarily early.

The second alternative takes on board important biblical elements bypassed or overlooked by the first alternative and so is able to provide a richer, deeper, and more meaningful account of Jesus’ atoning identification with sinners. The second alternative, however, is content to leave it where the bible leaves it without seeking to press on to fuller understanding. While recognizing the redemptive significance of the human life and ministry of Jesus before the cross, the second alternative sees the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of his identification with sinners and of his ministry of atoning exchange. It leaves unexplored the relation between baptism and his *person* in incarnation and life before baptism.

### **(j) The incarnational assumption of fallen humanity – summary and conclusion**

Torrance’s work integrates Christology and soteriology fully together, incorporating patristic, Anselmian, Reformation and modern insights in a theology which

---

161 It needs to be emphasised here that Torrance’s theology does not deny the forensic and penal substitutionary elements in atonement, only the adequacy of a *purely* forensic and penal substitutionary conception of atonement. His theology is in fact radically substitutionary in its understanding of the full implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ. For the importance of this point for Torrance and the stress he lays on it, see further “Preaching Christ Today,” in T.F. Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry: T.F. Torrance, Collected Studies I*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 2012, 248-54 (previously published as *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994).

argues that Christ's work of atonement can only be rightly understood in the closest possible association with his *person* as God and man and therefore with his incarnation. Seen in this light, the atonement is no longer simply a work on the cross but one in which the person and the nature of the person doing the work become foundational. Seen in the light of Jesus' baptism and the passages in Matthew, John, Romans, and Hebrews, in which identification with sinners and the redemptive significance of the healing miracles comes to the fore, the question then becomes whether the person of Jesus can be said to have redemptive significance from the incarnation itself, or only from baptism. Is the assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh constitutive of and integral to his person and work (or *person in act*) from the very beginning?<sup>162</sup>

Torrance's argument would be that in every way it makes much more sense biblically, christologically, soteriologically, and theologically, to think person and work, incarnation and atonement, into each other, and to see Christ's bearing of sin not simply as a work occurring on the cross, but as the act of God himself in his incarnational assumption-and-dynamic-sanctification of human-nature-in-its-ontological-fallen-reality into hypostatic union with his own person. The

---

162 The question raises the issue of the nature of the incarnation, for Torrance, and the relation between person and work. The nature of the incarnation, "new even for God" (as Torrance used to put it, as he paused in lectures to stress the need to think of the incarnation as an entirely new event, even for God), is that God became what he was not before, true God *and* true man in one person. In the inseparability and indissolubility of his person and work (cf. *Atonement*, 222), Christ's work is in accordance with the nature of his divine person (op. cit. 235f.) and inherent in it ("his words and deeds [and work and *kērygma*] do not only derive from his person but inhere in it," op. cit. 211). Without any change or confusion, nor division or separation between divine and human, Christ's work and gospel are now structurally bound up with his person. Torrance can therefore say, "The Christ who is proclaimed to us in the New Testament . . . is the Christ who is clothed with the *kērygma* of his death and resurrection, for they are *ontologically and structurally bound up with who he is in himself and in his relation to the Father*" (ibid. — italics added). Cf. likewise, "The resurrection is to be regarded not only as the completion of that saving work [atonement and overcoming of death] but as belonging to *the ontological structure of the mediator himself*" (ibid., 212 — italics original). The nature of the incarnation for Torrance means that any work of Christ becomes ontologically part of his person.

hypostatic union is the foundation and the heart of atonement, begun in the incarnation, lived out by Christ in his ministry, steadfastly held firm in the ultimate conflict with evil and final unfathomable hour of atonement, and so brought to completion in resurrection and ascension.

Torrance's concept of Christ's assumption of fallen humanity at incarnation goes beyond any explicit statements of scripture, but is certainly not inconsistent with it, and in fact offers a deeper and more unified and faithful understanding of scripture itself, of the person and work of Christ, and of incarnation and atonement. It remains an article of faith and a matter of theological judgment, but its consistency with scripture, its faithfulness to passages such as Romans 8.3, and the light it provides in theological understanding are compelling arguments in its favor. The fact that alternative positions do not appear to enjoy the same explanatory capacity and range, biblical or theological, and do not provide the same light, simply confirms Torrance's concept and adds to its being more convincing than other possible paths of understanding.<sup>163</sup>

### ***The mystery and the sacraments***

It is only appropriate, in bringing this section of the essay to a close, to reiterate Torrance's emphasis on the sacred mystery of atonement and to cite his words more in full. Torrance in his theology endeavors to think his way *from* the reality and mystery of the cross and to come to such understanding as may be found only *a posteriori* by faithfully following Christ through the gospel account and apostolic witness to him. He endeavors to understand the whole life and mission of Jesus from the mystery of incarnation to the final unfathomable mystery of atonement on the cross for which no human words are adequate:

Here we tread the holy ground of the garden of Gethsemane and Calvary and here we must clap our hand upon our mouth again and again for we have no words adequate to match the infinitely holy import of atonement.

---

163 It must be added that Torrance's theology enjoys an ecumenical breadth not often achieved. He holds together all three aspects of redemption as he calls them: the ontological element (the patristic emphasis on the person of Christ), the cultic-forensic element (the Anselmian and Western emphasis on the sacrificial and substitutionary aspect), and interwoven with both, the dramatic element in redemption. For Torrance's analysis of the place of the three elements in different church traditions and the way in which they all need to be held together, see *Atonement*, 50-60.

It is precisely (in part at least) for that reason that before he suffered Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord's supper, that the broken bread and the poured out wine enacted in solemn *anamnesis*<sup>164</sup> might speak and communicate to us ever again what our poor human words are unable to do. As often then as we go to holy communion and see the celebrant take the bread in hand and break it and utter anew the words of Jesus, "This is my body given for you," and pour out the wine and raise the cup and utter anew, "This is my blood shed for you," we are directed to the fact that here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the saviour.<sup>165</sup> That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.<sup>166</sup>

### 3 Trinitarian understanding of atonement

As faith seeks understanding for the whole reality and mystery of Christ from incarnation to atonement on the cross, it cannot do so without being faced with the mystery of God in Christ and therefore with the mystery of God in his trinity, for to speak of *who* Jesus is in his being and of him as Son of God is to raise the question of his relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. As Torrance says, to speak of Jesus Christ as Son of God means speaking of him in his deity as Son of the Father and in his full trinitarian context.<sup>167</sup> In Torrance's lectures, the inseparable relation of Father and Son, and equally of Son and Spirit in the bond of the Trinity,<sup>168</sup> are throughout fundamental. Everything the Son does in his humanity he does in obedience to the Father and through the power of the Spirit.<sup>169</sup> The acts of the Son are inseparable from those of the Father and the Spirit, so that from beginning to end the whole work of salvation from

---

164 Greek, "remembrance," calling to mind again, re-calling.

165 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

166 *Atonement*, 2-3.

167 *Incarnation*, 164.

168 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1992 (the revised edition of 1992 has an added chapter on "The Atonement and the Holy Trinity"), 111ff.

169 See especially *Incarnation*, 114ff., 135f.

incarnation to atonement, foundation of the church and final redemption, is the work of three divine persons.<sup>170</sup> What Torrance says of the atonement, that “we cannot but think of the atonement as a threefold act grounded in and issuing from the triune being of God,” applies equally to incarnation and all acts of God in salvation. It is God in his triunity who is the ground and agent of redemption, so that for faith to seek understanding of incarnation and atonement means faith seeking understanding (insofar as it may be granted) of God as eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While a full articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity may be the final level in the stratified layers of theological levels of knowledge of God, the Trinity appears at every level of faith and understanding and in every doctrine of theology, as Torrance’s stress on it throughout his career makes unambiguously clear. Although it was only after retirement that Torrance found time to devote himself to articulating systematically the doctrine of the Trinity in his two great monographs on the Trinity,<sup>171</sup> there is a considerable volume of trinitarian material scattered throughout his works, much of it embodied and embedded within his Christology and soteriology lectures, and much of it elsewhere.<sup>172</sup>

In the lectures, Torrance’s trinitarian focus falls particularly on the unbroken solidarity, in being and act, in obedience and prayer, between the Son and the Father,<sup>173</sup> on the mutual inseparability of the work of Son and Spirit,<sup>174</sup> and on the way in which the mystery of Christ in time recedes into the eternal mystery of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and is the actualization in time of the eternal will of God for humanity.<sup>175</sup> It is only as and when we are brought, in and through

---

170 Cf. *Atonement*, 359ff.

171 *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988) and *The Christian Doctrine of God* (1996).

172 See especially, T.F. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, James Clarke, London, 1959, xcv-cxxvi; *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, London, 1965, 192-208 and esp. 209-58; *God and Rationality*, 165-92; *The Mediation of Christ*, 99ff., esp. 109-26; *Trinitarian Perspectives*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994.

173 *Incarnation*, 18f., 105-29, 164-96.

174 *Incarnation*, 124f., 135-37, *Atonement*, 320-29; cf. 177-81, 275-81, 368f., 386f.

175 *Incarnation*, 164-80; cf. *Atonement*, 342, 359f.

atonement,<sup>176</sup> to know God in his triune communion of love<sup>177</sup> that faith seeking understanding finds the “whence” and the “whither,” the ground and goal of incarnation and atonement in the eternal Trinity, for incarnation and atonement have their ground in the triune love of God for humanity<sup>178</sup> and their goal in the exaltation of man in Christ into participation in the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>179</sup> As Torrance puts it,

To repeat, it is through the incarnation and atonement effected by the conjoint activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit that God has opened the door for us to enter into his holy presence and know him as he really is in himself in his triune being. In this two-way movement of atoning propitiation whereby God draws near to us and draws us near to himself, the access to the Father given to us through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the communion of the Holy Spirit is such that we are enabled, quite astonishingly and beyond any worth or capacity of our own, to participate, creaturely beings though we are, in the eternal communion and inner relations of knowing and loving within God himself, and know him there as one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>180</sup>

The reality and mystery of incarnation and atonement are the reality and mystery of Christ himself, the unfathomable mystery and yet reality of his person and work on earth, that through the work of Father, Son, and Spirit we in our humanity are incorporated in him into their own eternal communion of love.

---

176 *Mediation of Christ*, 110.

177 *Mediation*, 110ff., 114f., 116f., 118f.

178 *Mediation*, 112ff., *Atonement*, 359.

179 *Atonement*, 230f.; cf. *Incarnation*, 196, and also *Mediation*, 115-19.

180 *Mediation*, 118-19.

**ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING FLESH:  
ISRAEL AS THE WOMB OF THE INCARNATION  
IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE**

***C. Baxter Kruger, PhD***  
***Perichoresis Ministries***  
*cbkruger@bellsouth.net*

"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true  
God and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John. 17:3)

In Jesus Christ, the Father's eternal Son himself has come to be with fallen Israel, and in Israel with the human race in its alienation from God. In him the rich and abounding and beautiful life of the triune God has intersected the broken, sinful, and shame-riddled existence of fallen humanity. Through his incarnate life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the covenant between God and Israel has been filled with nothing less than the Son's own relationship with his Father, and his own anointing in the Holy Spirit, and his own relationship with humanity, and with all creation. Jesus Christ is "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," and he is "the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit" (John 1:29-34). He is both the one who brings the very life of the Trinity into our fallen existence, making all that he is and has accessible to us in our terrible darkness, *and* the long awaited and faithful servant of the Lord, who, from inside Adam's fall and from Israel's side of the covenant relationship, loves his Father with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. The very sonship of Jesus now fills Israel's side of the covenant. This "new" covenant is the blessed life of the triune God earthed in Jesus within the "old" covenant between God and Israel, and in Israel with the human race, and all creation.

At the heart of this magnificent vision of Professor Thomas F. Torrance is the *incarnation* of Jesus Christ, the Father's eternal Son and the One anointed in

the Holy Spirit. But the incarnation did not happen in a historical vacuum. So to understand Jesus and his covenant-fulfilling work, we must, as Torrance argues, see him both in the actual historical context in which he entered into human history and in the light of the antecedent eternal relationship he has with his Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will explore Torrance's vision of Israel as *the womb of the incarnation*. In and through his long and passionate dialogue with Israel, Torrance argues, God was at work preparing the "womb for the Incarnation,"<sup>2</sup> the "womb for the birth of Jesus,"<sup>3</sup> or "the matrix for the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

This "womb for the incarnation" is an image rich with levels of meaning. On the most general level, it refers simply to Israel as the unique sphere within fallen creation where God reestablishes personal relationship with his fallen creation. More specifically, "the womb" refers to the provisional *way of communion* that God established with fallen humanity within Israel. From a slightly different angle, it refers to a *revolutionary* conceptual matrix of ideas, categories, concepts, and structures of human thought that were hammered out on the anvil of Israel's fallen mind for the reception of the incarnational revelation. Its most precise meaning, however, is far more personal and relational and fiery.

The covenant between God and Israel is a personal relationship of the deepest, most intimate order, in which the Lord is seeking to do the impossible — overcome the contradiction between fallen humanity and himself and establish real communion, union, and oneness. This is a relationship of accommodating love and grace and mercy, to be sure, but it is also one of pain, fear, and enmity. For Israel, like the race at large, is thoroughly fallen, and its way of being is utterly alien to God. So the relationship is one of abiding love and deep conflict. And it is this conflict between the *Lord in person* and *fallen Israel* that forms the

---

1 *The Mediation of Christ* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1983), 13-17. Unless otherwise noted, all citations are to T.F. Torrance.

2 *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford university Press, 1971), 149. See also *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 87.

3 "Salvation is of the Jews," *Evangelical Quarterly* 22 (1950): 166.

4 *Mediation of Christ*, 42.

relational context that becomes the womb of the incarnation. In his incarnation, Jesus will embrace Israel's fallen existence and enter into the contradiction between Israel and God — and he will resolve the conflict in his own experience — thus becoming in himself the one in whom Israel, and the human race, are united with the triune God.

### **Trinity and Covenant, Creation and Israel**

To understand Torrance's vision of Israel as the womb of the incarnation, we must first sketch the overall framework of Torrance's theology within which his thought on Israel is thrown into sharper focus. In a general way Torrance does this for us in several of his characteristically panoramic paragraphs. One such paragraph, from a sermon on the Trinity, will serve as a means of focusing our attention on certain key themes in his thought. While speaking about the communion of the Spirit and sharing in the grace of Jesus Christ, Torrance pauses and sets the gospel of redemption in its wider context.

Behind all that we hear in the Gospel lies the fact that in creating man God willed to share His glory with man and willed man to have communion with Himself; it is the fact of the overflowing love of God that refused, so to speak, to be pent up within God, but insisted in creating a fellowship into which it could pour itself out in unending grace. Far from being rebuffed by the disobedience and rebellion of man, the will of God's love to seek and create fellowship with man established the covenant of grace in which God promised to man in spite of his sin to be His God, and insisted on binding man to Himself as His child and partner in love. God remained true and faithful to His covenant. He established it in the midst of the people of Israel, and all through their history God was patiently at work, preparing a way for the Incarnation of His love at last in Jesus Christ, that in and through him he might bring His covenant to complete fulfillment and gather man back into joyful communion with Himself.<sup>5</sup>

This is a comprehensive statement of Torrance's understanding of the movement not only of redemption but also of creation. Torrance glances back to creation and eternity with God and then forward to Israel and within Israel to the fulfillment of God's purposes in Jesus Christ, through whom God "gathers man back into joyful communion with Himself."

---

5 *When Christ Comes and Comes Again* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 190.

There are three general points of emphasis in Torrance's thought here that need to be isolated. The first is that creation is set in the context of the grace and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Though Torrance does not mention the Trinity explicitly in these comments, they come within a sermon on the Trinity, and the imagery is of the grace and love and communion of the triune God "overflowing" and summoning humanity into existence, so that humanity may have fellowship and communion with God and share in the divine life. Creation is very clearly viewed as the act of the love and grace of God, at the very heart of which is communion and fellowship with humanity.

The second point is that redemption is not separated from the purpose of God in creation. There is a purpose and will behind creation, namely, that humanity should *be* and that we should *live in communion* with God. Torrance sees this "will" and "purpose" as steadfast and unchanging, not rebuffed by disobedience. The creative purpose of the triune God stands. Adam's fall does not change God's heart or will in any way. Thus Torrance says that the one movement of redemption encompassing the Old and New Testament periods "is the movement of God's grace in which he renews the bond between himself and man, broken and perverted at the Fall, and restores man to communion with himself."<sup>6</sup> Redemption is the restoration and renewal of God's original purpose in creation — real communion between God and humanity.

The third point is that Israel is chosen to be the mediator of God's restoration, through whom God is preparing a way for the decisive fulfillment of his creative purpose for humanity in Jesus Christ. The decision of God in creation that humanity should exist and "have communion with Himself" and "share in His life and glory" and God's resolute determination that this should be so in spite of sin and rebellion is always in the background of Torrance's discussion of redemption and God's dealings with Israel. In the context of the fall of Adam, "God's creative purpose became a redemptive purpose" or an "eschatological goal."<sup>7</sup> The whole drama of redemption and the calling and election of Israel are viewed within this

---

6 "The Israel of God," *Interpretation* 10 (1956): 306–7.

7 "The Atoning Obedience of Christ," *Moravian Theological Seminary Bulletin* (1959): 67. See also Torrance, "Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament," in *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 2, *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 120.

context. God elects Israel out of all the races of humanity to be the mediator through whom the restoration and renewal of communion with the human race will be carried out and fulfilled.

While Torrance does not provide us with a lengthy discussion of the fall of humanity in Adam, it is clear that he regards the fall as real and catastrophic. The communion established between God and Adam was utterly shattered, and now fraught with *impossibility*. In this respect, two particular emphases surface throughout Torrance's writings. First, sin is not simply guilt before God but the perversion of our being. Sin has affected "the very fabric of human existence."<sup>8</sup> Second, Torrance is particularly emphatic regarding the devastating effects of sin on the mind. Over against the rise and authority of natural reason, and some strands of Protestant thought that assume the human mind was essentially unaffected by sin, Torrance believed the fall of Adam has so affected the mind of humanity, so marred its capacity for rationality and light, that it is irretrievably lost in its own self-referential judgment and confusion, and thus it is "impossible" for humanity to know God.<sup>9</sup>

It is ultimately the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ that enlightens, for Torrance, the problem of the fall of Adam. The fact that the solution took the death and miraculous resurrection of the incarnate Son of God reveals that the fall was catastrophic, leaving humanity utterly estranged and alienated at the core of its being and thinking. It is against this backdrop that Torrance sees Israel as called by God to begin the long and harrowing movement of reconciliation in which the Lord begins to find a way to do the impossible — reach fallen and alienated humanity in personal relationship.

Torrance expounds God's election of Israel under the twin headings: "Israel was called to be the *Servant of the Lord*" and "Israel was called to be *the bearer of the Messiah*."<sup>10</sup> There is a double emphasis. The first is that Israel was called out to *serve* God in his larger purpose of restoration. From the very beginning,

---

8 *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1976), 47.

9 See "The Place and Function of Reason in Christian Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 14 (1942): 34.

10 *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 195–98.

Torrance suggests, Israel was invested with a “vicarious service,”<sup>11</sup> a “vicarious mission and function in mediating the covenant purposes of reconciliation and redemption for all mankind.”<sup>12</sup>

The second emphasis is on the fact that Israel was called to be the *bearer* of the Messiah. Salvation is of the Jews, but the Jews are not the Savior; Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God, the Jew from Bethlehem, born right in the midst of Israel, is the Savior. Thus Torrance regards Israel’s history as stretching out in expectation of Christ.<sup>13</sup> But the idea of “expectation,” while certainly true, can be misleading. For in Israel the Lord is not only teaching people to expect a savior to come; but he is actually *preparing* the way of his coming.

Torrance speaks of this *preparation* in terms of God’s forming Israel into a “womb” for the incarnation,<sup>14</sup> an organic idea that aligns itself with Israel’s being the “bearer of the Messiah.” For Torrance, Jesus Christ and his work stand in the closest personal relation to the work of God in Israel. There is continuity between Israel and Christ not only in the sense that he was born within Israel and that Israel had the expectation of Christ but also in the sense that he was born within God’s action in “opening up a new and living way” in Israel. Israel was called out from the nations to be the people in whom communion between the Lord and fallen humanity could be reestablished and the revolution of reconciliation could

---

11 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 87.

12 *Mediation of Christ*, 42. See also 17, 19, 42; and Torrance, “Israel of God,” 311ff.

13 See Torrance’s panoramic statement in “Israel of God,” 306: “The whole historico-redemptive movement revealed in the Old and New Testaments is to be regarded as essentially one. The Old Testament speaks of the Coming One, and the Coming Kingdom; the New Testament speaks of the One who has come, and of the Kingdom as having arrived in Jesus Christ himself. The Old Testament is the revelation of the *verbum incarnandum*; the New Testament is the revelation of the *verbum incarnatum*: the center of gravity in both is the Incarnation itself, to which the Old Testament is stretched out in expectation, and the New Testament looks back in fulfillment.”

14 *God and Rationality*, 149. See also *Theology in Reconstruction*, 145, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 87. Evidently this is what is behind Torrance’s enigmatic statement: “At last in the fulness of time when a body had been prepared the Messiah came to do the will of God” (*Theology in Reconstruction*, 198).

begin. This new beginning in Israel forms the womb for the incarnation and work of Christ.

What Torrance envisages here needs to be viewed on two levels. The first concerns the provisional form of communion or the *covenanted way of communion* that God established with Israel. This will give us a general overall picture of the womb for the incarnation and work of Christ. Once this is established, we can then look more specifically at the *mediation of revelation* in Israel. Here we will come to the very heart of what Torrance means by Israel being the “womb” of the incarnation of the Father’s eternal Son.

### **The Covenanted Way of Communion**

For Torrance, the basic feature of the covenant is relational, involving the personal address of the Lord to Israel and the personal response of Israel to the Lord. The whole fact of Israel, Torrance suggests, is a response to the Word of God.<sup>15</sup> Yet God is not naive about the fallen state of humanity or of Israel and thus of the *impossibility of real* relationship. God thus takes responsibility for both sides of the relationship. The covenant includes within it a provision for *human response* to God. This divinely provided response Torrance calls the “covenanted” and “vicarious way of response”.<sup>16</sup> This covenanted way of response was provided “in Israel’s Cult or *leitourgia*,”<sup>17</sup> in which God provided Israel a way of relating to him, within which Israel’s fallen conscience could be cleansed and Israel’s fear of God could be calmed, so that a form of real communion between God and Israel could be sustained. At the very heart of the covenant communion between God and Israel stood the vicarious way of response to God’s law and will, which God himself provided in grace.<sup>18</sup>

---

15 “The fact that *qahal* comes from the same root as *qol*, the word for ‘voice,’ suggests that the Old Testament *qahal* was the community summoned by the Divine Voice, by the Word of God” (“The Israel of God,” 305).

16 *Mediation of Christ*, 37–38, 83.

17 “The Meaning of Order,” in *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, 2:16. For a more detailed exegetical discussion of the cultic liturgy see *Royal Priesthood*, *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Paper No. 3* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), 1–6.

18 See Torrance’s comment: “Hence the very priesthood itself, the sacrifices,

There is here a double emphasis in Torrance's thought. On the one hand, the accent falls on the fact that both sides of the covenant relation were established and maintained by God in grace. Here Torrance contrasts the idea of covenant with that of contract.<sup>19</sup> In a contract, there is a bilateral agreement between two parties, which rests on the fulfillment of certain conditions on the part of each party; whereas, in the biblical covenant, God himself pledges to fulfill *both sides* of the covenant.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Torrance highlights the "judgment" of grace. While the liturgy established that God in his grace provided the way of relationship, that very grace or divine provision also meant "that man may appear before him in worship with nothing in his hands but the offering or sacrifice God has graciously given him"<sup>21</sup> and therefore the gift of God's way invalidated or judged every other way, or every other human offering and sacrifice.

Alongside this stress on the freely provided way of response stands another equally powerful emphasis that runs throughout Torrance's discussion of the covenant relation between God and Israel. It is the fact that this way of response was to be cut or circumcised or translated into the flesh of Israel. That was clearly envisaged in the Biblical story in circumcision, "the great sign of the covenant."<sup>22</sup> Torrance is no extrinsic ritualist. If communion between God and fallen Israel was to be made personally real in the fullest sense, then the covenanted way

---

offerings and oblations which the priests alone were consecrated to take in their hands, together with all the liturgical ordinances, were regarded as constituting the vicarious way of covenant response in faith, obedience and worship which God had freely provided for Israel out of his steadfast love" (*Mediation of Christ*, 84–85).

19 The difference between covenant and contract is more thoroughly explored by Torrance's brother, James B. Torrance. See, for example, his essay "Covenant or Contract?", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 no. 1 (Feb 1970).

20 *Mediation of Christ*, 37–38. Cf. Torrance's comment in "Israel of God": "The keeping of the covenant did not depend on Israel's worth, but on the contrary, was conditioned by the pure outflowing love of God in the continuous act for grace, of grace for grace" (308).

21 *The Centrality of Christ: Devotions and Addresses* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1976), 17.

22 "Israel of God," 109.

of communion had to be translated into life and being in the actual, not merely ritualistic, removal of sin and guilt, alienation and enmity.

It was this theme of the circumcision or the embodiment of the covenanted way of communion in Israel's life, Torrance says, that "governed the profound Old Testament conception of 'the servant of the Lord.' . . . The servant of the Lord was the hypostatised actualisation within the flesh and blood existence of Israel of the divinely provided way of covenant response set forth in the cult."<sup>23</sup> Torrance envisages the sacrificial system as being bent forward, as it were, to the "Servant of the Lord as the chosen instrument"<sup>24</sup> in whom the covenanted way of communion would become incarnate in the flesh of Israel. But, Torrance suggests, "once the covenant came to be enacted so deeply into the existence of Israel that it was written into the 'inner man,' its whole form would change. It would be a new covenant."<sup>25</sup>

---

23 *Mediation of Christ*, 85. Torrance is thinking here particularly of the Isaianic prophecies, of which he comments: "A messianic role was evidently envisaged for the servant in which mediator and sacrifice, priest and victim were combined in a form that was at once representative and substitutionary, corporate and individual, in its fulfillment. As the prophet struggled to bring his vision into focus something emerged which is rather startling. Time and again he spoke about the *ebed Jahweh*, the servant of the Lord who is identified with Israel, and about the *goel*, the Redeemer who is the Holy One of Israel, in the same breath. Thus, the servant of the Lord and the Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, were brought together in his prophetic utterance, and yet held apart but only by a hair's breadth, so to speak." In another place he says that in the heart of these Isaianic prophecies concerning the suffering Servant, "The Holy One of Israel and the Redeemer are drawn closely together in an enigmatically anonymous figure in whom the suffering ordeal and priestly destiny of Israel are gathered up, personified and infiltrated with universal significance, and made to point ahead to the consummation of God's redemptive purpose of peace in a triumphant Messianic era which will transcend the history of Israel itself" ("Christian/Jewish Dialogue: Report of the Overseas Council of the Church of Scotland," in D.W. Torrance, *The Witness of the Jews to God* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1982), 141.

24 *God and Rationality*, 158.

25 "Israel of God," 309. Elsewhere Torrance comments about the covenant with Israel in the light of the new covenant. "By its very nature this covenant was not meant to be an end in itself, for through it Israel was steadily and painfully moulded by God into being the instrument of his saving purpose, and made to provide in its

This, Torrance argues, is “precisely what took place in Jesus Christ in the whole course of His obedience from His birth to His death on the Cross, for He fulfilled in Himself the Word of God tabernacling among men, the covenanted way of response to God set forth in the ancient cult, and constituted Himself our Temple, our Priest, our Offering and our Worship.”<sup>26</sup> The “total circumcision” was fulfilled at last in the flesh of Christ,” the New Covenant inaugurated, “and the new and living way was opened up in the humanity of the Son of God.”<sup>27</sup> But this new covenant, Torrance says, “is not an abrogation of the old covenant but a fulfilment of it in which its essential pattern, ‘I will be your God, you will be my people,’ is raised to a higher level of intimacy and communion with God through the pouring out of his own Spirit upon his people.”<sup>28</sup>

The personal relationship God established with Israel is the unique “sphere” of God’s personal interaction within fallen creation, with and for the whole human race. This covenant relation hinged on God’s grace in the provision of the vicarious way of response to himself through which alone Israel could draw near to and live in communion with the Lord. The covenanted or vicarious way of response constitutes God’s special preparation for the work of Christ, for it is in Christ that this response will be cut into our flesh and be decisively fulfilled as God’s eternally prevailing vicarious provision for communion.

This is one strand that is woven into Torrance’s whole conception of Israel as the womb of the incarnation. It is necessary now to turn our discussion of Torrance’s discourse on Israel on a different axis — that of the movement of divine revelation in Israel.

### **The Mediation of Revelation**

For Torrance, Israel, like the human race at large, is utterly blind and does not know God. Indeed, the fallen mind of Israel is alien to the truth of God. So the

---

very existence among the nations the basis and provisional form of a new covenantal relationship which would include all nations” (“Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” 140).

26 *God and Rationality*, 158.

27 “Israel of God,” 309.

28 “Christian/Jewish Dialogue,” 141.

Lord takes great measure to accommodate Israel, and meeting Israel where it is in its darkness, God begins to name himself and introduce *new* ideas, such as the Word of God and Spirit of God, the Name of God, covenant, mercy, holiness, grace, messiah and savior, sacrifice and forgiveness, atonement, revelation and reconciliation, prophet, priest, and king, and kingdom of God,<sup>29</sup> all of which, together with the basic patterns of worship introduced by the Lord, Torrance calls “the essential furniture of our knowledge of God.”<sup>30</sup> Herein lies, for Torrance, the epistemological significance of Israel. Without Israel, and Israel’s long and anguished history, the human race would remain in the dark, trapped in its own self-referential confusion and blind to the truth of God.

In the self-revelation of God to Israel there is, for Torrance, a double adaptation, “an adaptation of divine revelation to the human mind *and* an adaptation of articulate forms of human understanding and language to divine revelation.”<sup>31</sup> The Lord stoops, accommodates and meets Israel in its carnality, and begins to transform Israel’s fallen mind and thought to receive God’s self-giving and to know him. Israel was elected by God to be the “sphere” within fallen creation within which God’s self-giving could be accommodated to estranged human capacities and alienated human knowing could be adapted to receive the revelation.

It is in probing more carefully into the movement of the double adaptation of revelation and fallen human understanding that we will see more clearly what Torrance envisages as the womb of the incarnation.

**1. The two-way movement.** Fundamental to this mutual adaptation is a personal fellowship between God and Israel, or a two-way movement from the side of God to fallen Israel and from the side of fallen Israel to God. Torrance refers to this as a “historical dialogue.” This dialogue between God and Israel includes Israel’s human *reception* of God’s self-disclosure, which is given a critical place in the *mediation* of revelation to the fallen human race at large.

---

29 See *Mediation of Christ*, 28. While this list is not comprehensive it is the only such list that can be found in Torrance’s writings. It is very surprising that Torrance does not here include “substitution” or “vicarious substitution,” as that is one of the most decisive concepts in his thought on the mediation of Christ.

30 *Ibid.*, 28.

31 *Ibid.*, 17.

Torrance envisages revelation as being fulfilled and complete when God is truly and faithfully known within humanity. In *Theological Science*, under the subsection titled "The Possibility of Theological Knowledge," Torrance comments: "Our question is evidently two-fold. (a) How does God give Himself to be known? (b) How does man truly receive and know what is given? There is a two-fold movement, from the side of the object known and from the side of the knower, and both have to be fully considered — the way from God to man and the way from man to God."<sup>32</sup> Revelation and reception form, as it were, the obvious sides of our knowledge of God. Torrance is suggesting, however, that the mediation of God's revelation already involves human reception. God mediates knowledge of himself to the fallen race at large through the fulfilling of his self-revelation from the side of humanity toward God. For Torrance, revelation involves not only the unveiling or "uncovering of God" to humanity but also as "the uncovering of the ear and heart of man to receive revelation."<sup>33</sup> It is not that the uncovering of God and the uncovering of the ear and heart of fallen humanity to receive revelation are two different acts. They go together.

F.W. Camfield comments that "a great poem . . . will often have to create the very faculty of understanding and appreciating it."<sup>34</sup> In a similar way, H. R. Mackintosh quotes Wordsworth as observing that "every great or original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen."<sup>35</sup> These ideas are analogous to Torrance's discussion in two ways. On the one hand, he sees that in Israel, God created in humanity a faculty for knowing himself, a taste by which he is not only relished but also known, and an art by which he is seen. On the other hand, these quotations are analogous in that both view the actual creation of the taste or faculty as the work of the writing or poem itself. The poem itself acts critically and creatively upon the mind. Thus, the unveiling

---

32 *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 45.

33 *Mediation of Christ*, 20.

34 F.W. Camfield, *Revelation and the Holy Spirit, An Essay in Barthian Theology* (London: Elliot Stock, 1933), 93. See also H.R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Apprehension of God* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1929), 67.

35 H.R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology, Schleiermacher to Barth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, nd), 263.

of God to Israel not only summoned an answering knowing from Israel but also acted critically and creatively upon Israel's knowing and pressed to achieve its end in true and appropriate human understanding.

**2. The community of reciprocity.** In giving himself to fallen humanity, God called out Israel to be the unique partner of his self-revelation through and in whom his self-communication could be "earthed in human existence."<sup>36</sup> This earthing of divine revelation had as its inner dynamic a reciprocity between God's self-giving and Israel's knowing. In Israel the two-way movement involves the corporate knowing of Israel as a "community of reciprocity."<sup>37</sup> The concept refers both to Israel as a nation in living dialogue with God and to Israel as a corporate body of individuals in reciprocity with one another.<sup>38</sup>

Torrance speaks of this in terms of the intersecting of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the covenant relation such that it forms "a coherent community of reciprocity between God and Israel."<sup>39</sup> Within this vertical and horizontal covenant relation, Torrance envisages the Word of God as "pressing for fuller realisation and obedient expression within the life and mind and literature of Israel."<sup>40</sup>

The revelation of God is personal and relational. He met, accepted, and related to Israel in the midst of its brokenness and misunderstanding. The Lord creatively used the responses that his self-giving provoked as a means of further address to Israel. When Israel proved disobedient, in other words, God used their disobedience as a means of addressing Israel. At the same time, he used

---

36 "Christian/Jewish Dialogue," 140.

37 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 86 and 46. See also *God and Rationality*, 146ff., and *Mediation of Christ*, 22ff.

38 In *Mediation of Christ*, 23, Torrance comments: "The covenant partnership of God with Israel incorporated a brotherly covenant among the members of Israel, and that brotherly covenant was grounded in the covenant relations of God with Israel as a whole. Thus, so to speak, the vertical and the horizontal interrelations of the covenant partnership penetrated each other, constituting a coherent community of reciprocity between God and Israel, and manifesting a community response to the self-revealing and self-giving of God to Israel."

39 *Mediation of Christ*, 23.

40 *Ibid.*, 31-32.

their reactions as a means of deepening his self-communication.<sup>41</sup> The prophet Hosea, for example, spoke of Israel's spiritual adultery, which God used both as a means of revealing the heinousness of sin and the unconditional grace and love of God for his people. In this way Torrance says that "throughout Israel's tradition the Word of God kept creating formal and empirical correlates of its own self-utterance through which it extended its activity in space and time, progressively taking verbal and even written form through the shared understanding and shared response that developed in this people."<sup>42</sup>

This, however, was far from "an easy or painless process" for Israel.<sup>43</sup> God's self-revelation to Israel involved an agonizing struggle. Time and again Torrance speaks of Israel's having "ever to be broken and remade, reshaped, and realigned with the covenant will of God,"<sup>44</sup> of the conflict of revelation with Israel's "in-built bias against it"<sup>45</sup> and deeply ingrained habits of thought and understanding.<sup>46</sup> Revelation means God's self-giving, and reception of God's self-giving means communion with God. But Israel is thoroughly *fallen*. In a lengthy yet moving passage, Torrance comments:

The Jews were chosen to be fashioned by God. But this is the constant marvel of the whole story: all through history, as the Old Testament tells us, the Jews were the most stubborn and stiff-necked people you could imagine. They disobeyed God at every great moment in God's purpose. They knew well they were chosen by God for the special purpose of salvation, yet all through their history they fought against Him. They stoned and abused His messengers. They killed the prophets. They contradicted God to His face, and resisted Him, proving themselves utterly unworthy of His love, and broke themselves again and again upon the Word of God so that they were smitten down in suffering and agony and judgment . . .

*And what did God do in the face of all that?* He took this stubborn and rebellious people, took them with all their recalcitrance and resistance to His love, and subjected them to ordeal by history and judgment. He used their very

---

41 "Israel of God," 308.

42 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 87. See *God and Rationality*, 148.

43 *Mediation of Christ*, 17.

44 "Israel of God," 309.

45 *Mediation of Christ*, 20.

46 *Ibid.*, 18.

stubbornness and the judgment they brought upon themselves in order to train them. By elaborate religious ritual and carefully framed laws, by rivers of blood from millions of animal sacrifices, by the broken hearts of the Psalmists and the profoundest agony of the Prophets, by the tragic story of Israelite politics, and the shattering of their power again and again, God taught the Jews through hundreds and hundreds of years until there was burned into their soul the meaning of holiness and righteousness, of sin and uncleanness, of love and mercy and grace, of faithfulness and forgiveness, justification, reconciliation, atonement, and salvation; the meaning of creation, of the Kingdom of God, of judgment, death, and at last resurrection; the thought of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and yet the Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>47</sup>

It was through this painful and agonizing relationship between God's self-revelation and Israel's corporate response and corporate understanding and corporate reception of his self-revelation that God's self-communication began to achieve its end in human understanding, and the Word of God began to clothe itself with Israel's language.

It is along these lines that Torrance envisages God as acting creatively on corporate Israel and forging a "whole set of spiritual tools, appropriate forms of understanding, worship and expression"<sup>48</sup> and bringing into being "ways of human knowing and obedience to his revelation"<sup>49</sup> that could be used in furthering his self-communication. But Torrance also says that these ways of human knowing and obedience to God's revelation were "assumed into union with it and constituted the human expression in concept and word of that revelation in its communication to man."<sup>50</sup> That is to say, the answering movement from the side of Israel toward God was "taken up into the movement of the Word"<sup>51</sup> or "taken up into the movement

---

47 "Salvation Is of the Jews," *EQ* 22 (1950), pp. 165–66

48 *Mediation of Christ*, 17.

49 *Ibid.*, 31.

50 *Ibid.*, 31. Torrance can speak of this fulfillment of revelation from the side of man toward God as revelation providing "a true and faithful human response as part of its achievement for us, to us and in us" (*Ibid.*, 31). This needs serious qualification. The two-way movement through which there was an organic correlation of revelation and human understanding was only beginning in historic Israel. Strictly speaking, it was only in Christ that the true and faithful response for us, to us, and in us was accomplished.

51 *God and Rationality*, 138.

of revelation"<sup>52</sup> as a "constitutive part of God's revelation to man."<sup>53</sup> While Torrance points out that the Word of God "was encountered in historic Israel as yet only in its 'formable' state (to borrow an old Augustinian expression), for it was still in the process of taking shape in the habits of the human mind and speech,"<sup>54</sup> he nevertheless contends that through the two-way movement involving corporate reciprocity there arose in Israel "appropriate structures of understanding and articulating the Word of God which were of more than transient value, for under divine inspiration they were assimilated to the human form of the Word of God, essential to its communication and apprehension."<sup>55</sup>

**3. Revelation and reconciliation.** It should be clear by this point that Torrance does not think of divine revelation and Israel as being extrinsically related. The fulfilling of revelation from God toward Israel and from Israel toward God involved much more for Torrance than Israel's extrinsic and mechanical reception and passing on of spaceless and timeless transcripts, so to speak.<sup>56</sup> If revelation is to achieve its end in human understanding and communion with God, it must do so through the medium of language, for language is the currency of society. But it is not enough, Torrance suggests, for God to hand Israel statements about himself in Israel's community language, for that would mean Israel would be allowed to read its prior "communal meaning"<sup>57</sup> back into God, which, for Torrance, was

---

52 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 85.

53 *God and Rationality*, 138. See also *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 85. In *Mediation of Christ*, Torrance comments: "Throughout that persistent and progressive reciprocity which God maintained between himself and Israel, the Word of God addressed to Israel did not return to him fruitless without accomplishing his purpose of succeeding in the task he gave it. For it laid hold upon the mind and will of this people in a creative way which called forth from it responses that were taken up, purified and assimilated to the Word of God as the means of its ever-deepening penetration into the understanding, life and service of Israel, so that it could be bearer of divine revelation for all mankind" (87).

54 *God and Rationality*, 148.

55 *Mediation of Christ*, 31.

56 See *ibid.*, 24.

57 *God and Rationality*, 147.

inevitably pagan and carnal. If there is to be a real mediation of revelation in Israel's language, then the thought and life of that language must be converted. That is to say, the mediation of revelation in Israel involved a fundamental deconstruction and transformation of Israel's fallen mind and thought, worship and life — indeed, of its whole existence.

On the one hand, Torrance is emphasizing that this transformation was a phenomenon involving corporate Israel's understanding and knowing. On the other hand, he is emphasizing that this conversion was interrelated with Israel's life and being, soul and history. Knowing and being, for Torrance, are inseparable. Hence, the persistent struggle between the Word of God and the mind and will and heart of Israel, between Israel and its Lord, meant living in a movement of conflict and conformity with the Word of God. Indeed, Torrance contends with startling words that to be the recipient of divine revelation meant being the "prehistory of the crucifixion and resurrection."<sup>58</sup> So Torrance speaks not just of a revolutionary matrix of thought, ideas, concepts, and understanding being forged in Israel but also of Israel's becoming the first form of the incarnation and the kingdom of the Triune God.

We have here three interrelated points of capital importance in Torrance's thought. First, the unveiling of God to Israel was profoundly personal and real. The revelation of God was not just a set of theological facts rippling the surface of Israel's corporate intellect. For Torrance, revelation does not mean the transmission of mere information about God but the personal presence of God himself. To receive the revelation means fellowship and communion — indeed, union with God. The revelation of God thus involved the penetration of the Word of God into Israel's corporate being and soul. Hence, Torrance comments that the Word of God is on the road *to becoming flesh* in Israel or that Israel is, as we saw above, the *prehistory of the incarnation*. The self-giving of God to Israel was so real, so intimate it began to incarnate itself in Israel through communion.

Second, this "first form of the incarnation" necessarily made "Israel stand out as an oddity among the other peoples of the earth."<sup>59</sup> As the presence of the Lord began to be embodied in Israel, Israel's way of being could only

---

58 *Mediation of Christ*, 20.

59 *Ibid.*, 18.

appear absurd to the fallen and alienated race at large. But the real presence of the Lord and his life not only made Israel strange and different from the nations; it also created conflict with them.<sup>60</sup> The very bitterness and enmity that Israel felt in its harrowing relationship with the Lord, the nations around Israel felt because Israel “embodied” the Lord’s presence. Israel became the scapegoat of the world’s rage against God. Herein, for Torrance, lies “the root of anti-Semitism”; for it is “against Israel itself that we vent our resentment.”<sup>61</sup>

Third, the mediation of revelation in Israel necessarily involved *reconciliation*. Here, the critical point is that Israel is fallen, carnal, pagan, and therefore thoroughly alien to God. It is one thing to reflect on the creature’s knowing the Creator or the finite’s receiving the infinite; it is quite another when we add alienation, darkness, and estrangement. How could *alienated* Israel receive the revelation of God? How could God reach fallen Israel, and how could alienated Israel actually know God? For Torrance, it was only through suffering, agony, and the most profound and thorough conversion. The self-giving of God has its counterpart not merely in Israel’s intellectual understanding but in Israel’s communion with God, and communion with God is the fruit of the radical conversion of Israel — reconciliation.

The point of supreme importance here is that for Torrance, the unveiling of God to Israel is a real unveiling of *God himself*, not just of facts about God. God is the content of the unveiling. And it is an unveiling of God himself to real Israel, *carnal* and *fallen* Israel, Israel *estranged* and *alienated* from God and at *enmity* with God. The covenant relationship was one of grace and mercy and life, to be sure, but, given Israel’s alienation, it was also one of pain and agony, for Israel’s fallen existence was thrown into the fiery furnace of God’s presence.

### **The Womb of the Incarnation**

We have seen that for Torrance creation is the act of the overflowing love and grace of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with the determined purpose of sharing

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

this trinitarian life with the human race. With the fall of Adam and the shattering of communion between humanity and God, the “original” purpose of God becomes an “eschatological goal.” God, in other words, elects Israel from out of the mass of fallen humanity to be the mediator of his great purpose of restoration for all.

Torrance’s attention thus falls, first, on the reestablishment of “the one all-embracing covenant of the overflowing love of God” with Israel and God’s provision of a covenanted or vicarious way of response, through which Israel could come freely into the presence of God. But in order to move beyond mere ritual into personal reality, this response needed to be translated into the flesh and blood of Israel’s existence.

Second, Torrance’s attention falls on the mediation of revelation. As a basic concept, revelation involves both the unveiling of God to Israel and the uncovering of the eye and ear of Israel to know God. Torrance sees this as forming a very real yet agonizing fellowship between God and Israel, in which the unveiling of God achieves its end in true and faithful human knowing — communion. It is as the unveiling of God meets Israel’s true human knowing that the mediation of revelation completes the circle of its own movement, and real fellowship with God and his fallen creation is restored.

But the mediation of revelation involves, as we saw above, the unveiling of *God* to *carnal* Israel, and thus revelation achieves its end only in and through real reconciliation. Israel’s history is the first form, as it were, of the Word’s assumption of our fallen flesh and of incarnational atonement.

In his vision of the necessary integration of revelation and reconciliation, Torrance avoids Western extrinsic legalism in favor of a thoroughly relational and incarnational understanding of the work of Christ. Israel’s history prepares for the incarnation of the Lord himself, the Father’s eternal Son. He will enter into Israel’s existence, and into Israel’s side of the covenant relationship, taking Israel’s place before the Father. Unlike Israel and Adam, Jesus will love the Father with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Jesus, the trinitarian life will set up shop, so to speak, in Israel, and as he lives out nothing less than his own sonship, the one all-embracing covenant of grace will be filled — from Israel’s side — with the Son’s own sonship and life and anointing with the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself — in his incarnate life with his Father and as the anointed one — will become the covenanted way of communion — the way, the truth, and

the life (John 14:6), for Israel and for all humanity. The original purpose of God, which birthed creation and called Israel into covenant relationship, will at last be fulfilled from inside Adam's fall.

Representing Israel — and in Israel, the human race — Jesus will be the vicarious man in whom the provisional way of communion with God will be made abidingly and eternally real for all people. The relationship between God and Israel will be filled with the trinitarian life — forever.

In the history of Israel, God prepares a womb for the incarnation of his Son. To this point we have seen that this womb involves the creation of a revolutionary conceptual framework, forged out of Israel's fallen mind, through which the human race can begin to perceive and know God. And we have seen that, for Torrance, it is impossible for revelation to be detached from Israel's soul and corporate being, and indeed from Israel's relationship with creation. This creates a harrowing and painful ordeal for Israel, for the presence of the Lord is profoundly disturbing, creating conflict with everything Israel is in its alienation. The womb of the incarnation, in its deepest sense, involves fallen Israel's wholesale conflict with the Lord himself, as his self-revelation clashes with Israel's alienation.

Two critical questions emerge here. The first concerns the ground or basis of Jesus' becoming the vicarious man, the substitute and representative of Israel and of the human race. The second concerns the relationship between "the covenanted way of communion" and "the mediation of revelation." As we probe into these two questions we will come to the heart of Torrance's vision of Israel as the womb of the incarnation and reconciling work of Christ.

**1. The ground of Jesus' vicarious humanity.** Torrance is critical of the way Western extrinsic legalism makes Jesus' substitution on the cross liable to the accusation of legal fiction.<sup>62</sup> What is the basis of Jesus' suffering in our place? How does what happens to Jesus have any real application to us? What is the connection between Jesus' suffering and guilty sinners? What is the ground of his substitution? While these are difficult questions for the legal tradition, Torrance faces the same questions. What is the ground of Jesus' becoming the vicarious man? Again and again Torrance speaks of Israel's "vicarious mission,"

---

62 See *God and Rationality*, 63ff; *Mediation of Christ*, 50ff.; and *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 63.

and of the “provisional form of communion” in Israel for all peoples. But what is the basis for positing Israel’s vicarious role? What is the real connection between Israel and the nations? Similarly, what qualifies Jesus, so to speak, to be our representative and substitute, and how real is his substitution? Is his vicarious humanity simply the fruit of God’s command, the product of an arbitrary divine decision that this is the way things should be structured? If so, how far is this position from the fiction of the legal model?

Torrance, following John and Paul and the author of Hebrews (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:115–20; Heb. 1:1–3), believes Jesus to be the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are constantly upheld. While the incarnation means that the Father’s Son became a real human being, it is not to be overlooked that the one who became human was no ordinary person, but the Creator and sustainer of all things. As the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained, Jesus already has a connection with everyone in history and indeed with all creation — prior to the incarnation. His coming means the coming of the Lord, the connected one, the one in whom all creation exists, lives, moves, and has its being. This is the proper theological ground for the vicarious humanity of Christ.<sup>63</sup> When the Father’s Son himself steps personally into human existence, he does so not as an isolated, radical individual but as the one who is already connected to all creation, already the source and sustainer of creation’s existence and life — including the human race. The question is not, on what ground could Jesus be our substitute and representative? The question is, on what ground could it be any other way?

Given who he is, what becomes of him has immediate and profound implications for the human race and all creation. If he dies, we die. If he rises again, we rise again. If he ascends to the Father, humanity and all creation ascends to the Father in him. Jesus’ existence as the Son incarnate is vicarious. His incarnate relationships with the Father and with the Holy Spirit are inclusive.

It is one thing, however, to clarify the ground of Jesus’ vicarious life and solidarity with us in the fact that he is the one in and through and for and by

---

63 For more on the ground of the vicarious humanity of Christ, see my essays, “The Truth of All Truths,” and “The Cosmic Christ.” These essays are available at [www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org).

whom all things were created and are sustained; but that still leaves Jesus too removed from us in our fallen state. He is our representative and our substitute, and we are included in him and what becomes of him, but how does our inclusion actually reach us in our alienation? While Jesus is not merely an external divine gift that is credited to our account in heaven, neither is he merely the one in whom we live and move and have our being. He is the one who crosses all worlds and meets us in our alienation.

One of the most powerful themes throughout Torrance's writings is his unrelenting insistence that Jesus Christ assumed our fallen flesh, without sin. Given that Jesus Christ is the Creator — the one in and through and by and for whom all things came into being and are sustained — we can see the connection that he has with the human race. But though we live and move and have our being in him, we are thoroughly fallen and alien to his life. For Torrance, the vicarious humanity of Christ is of no value at all unless it actually reaches us in our sin and shame. Hence he insists, with the early church, that "the unassumed is the unhealed." Jesus not only became a true human being; he became *flesh*.<sup>64</sup>

This affirmation of the Son's assumption of our fallen flesh is not relegated to obscure footnotes. It appears in explicit form at least sixty-six times in Torrance's writings, and in at least nineteen different publications.<sup>65</sup> Torrance does not sweep it under the carpet of vague allusion, and neither does he mention it in

---

64 *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, 73.

65 See *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 47-50, 53f, 75, 79; *Mediation of Christ*, 48-53, 75f, 81, 92, 98; *Theology in Reconstruction*, 156f, 198, 241; SF, lxxxv; *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, 20, 41, 73, 74, 106, 107, 165; *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, 1:240-41, 244-45, 253, 2:90, 130; *God and Rationality*, 143; *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelation of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1984), 341; *Theology in Reconstruction*, 167-69; *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988): 4, 133, 157, 162f, 168, 183-88, 267; *Centrality of Christ*, 17ff.; "Atoning Obedience of Christ," 66ff., 75; "The Arnoldshain Theses on Holy Communion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15 (1962), 12; "Reconciliation in Christ and in His Church," *Biblical Theology* 11:2 (1961), 30-31; "The Mission of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966), 129; "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986), pp. 473-76; "Christ's Human Nature," Letter to the Editor, *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* (May 1984), 114.

passing in some kind of hurried and embarrassed reservation. He brings it right to the unavoidable center of his writing and sees that the whole mediation of Christ hinges on the Son's taking to himself our fallen humanity, to deny which, he contends, "is to deny the very foundation of our redemption in Christ."<sup>66</sup>

The assumption of our fallen humanity, without sin, means that the one in and through and by and for whom all things were created and are sustained has now reached not only our humanness, but our humanness in its carnal, alienated, and broken form.

**2. *The intensification of Israel's conflict with God.*** Such a vision is as beautiful as it is shocking. The Father's Son himself became what we are, assuming not a pristine, prefallen form of our humanity, but our fallen flesh itself. In living out his sonship within Adam's flesh, he brought the trinitarian life within Adam's hell and Israel's agony. There remains, however, a real question as to the relevance of Jesus' triumph for us. The problem lies in the fact that the trinitarian life earthed in Adam's fall in Jesus Christ remains contained, so to speak, in him. He knows the Father and life in his embrace, and he experiences the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and has brought his life within our fallen humanity. But in what way does all that Jesus is and has reach us personally?

In turning to our second question, we can see the way forward. What is the relationship between the "covenanted way of communion" and "the mediation of revelation"? Are these two lines of thought in Torrance's discussion of Israel different or unrelated, or are they interrelated? While Torrance himself does not explicitly relate or interrelate the two different aspects of his discussion of Israel, he clearly assumes a profound interrelation. The "covenanted way of communion" had to be "translated into the flesh and blood of Israel." The "mediation of revelation" involved "reconciliation" as its counterpart. When Torrance sets out his discussion of the mediation of revelation, in which the unveiling of God is pressing to achieve its end in human knowing through reconciliation, he is essentially reinterpreting the history of Israel as the covenanted way of communion already being translated into reality in fallen Israel. The ritual is already on the road to becoming flesh. The kingdom is

---

66 *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, 1:175.

already coming. The mediation of revelation, with all of its fiery conflict and gut-wrenching struggle, is the covenanted way of communion being translated into the flesh and blood of Israel's existence.

The two-way movement, the unveiling of God and the knowing response of Israel, the giving and receiving of revelation, forms, as it were, *the way of salvation*, the way real communion between God and fallen creation is being restored. What Torrance is actually saying is that in Israel the incarnation of the Son of God is already beginning to happen. This extraordinary relationship is so real, so intensely personal that it produces a fourfold fruit.

First, the relationship between God and carnal Israel means that Israel's fallen mind is thrown into the fiery furnace of divine revelation and a new and revolutionary world of thought, a matrix of unparalleled concepts and ideas about God, about divine-human relationship, about covenant, salvation, and kingdom, which is thoroughly "human" but no less "appropriate" to God, begins to form in Israel's corporate life. This new world of thought is the human conceptual correlate to God's self-giving — the new eyes through which humanity can begin to see and know God.

Second, insofar as Israel is able to receive the self-giving of God, the kingdom emerges in her corporate existence. "This is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God" (John 17:3). To fellowship with God is to know God and to share in God's life, which is shalom. Thus, in Israel's real fellowship with the Lord, the Lord's abounding life begins to express itself in Israel's corporate existence. The kingdom of the Triune God is beginning to emerge in Israel's family relationships and in Israel's relationship with creation.

Third, the extraordinary relationship between Israel and God makes Israel stand out as an oddity among the nations. The covenant was not between God and a perfect people, but between God and a broken people. But as Israel walked with God, her language and way of being, her culture and vision began to embody and express the divine fellowship and life, which not only made Israel different but also called forth hostility from the nations. As the presence of God's life in Israel exposed Israel's own bankruptcy, Israel's presence exposed the bankruptcy of the nations around her. For Torrance, Israel became the international scapegoat on whom alienated humanity poured out its wrath against God.

Fourth, insofar as fallen Israel was unable to walk with the Lord or to receive his self-revelation, there is painful conflict and rebellion. How could fallen, alien, carnal Israel possibly bear the Lord's real presence? It was too much.

It is here that Torrance's thought on Israel leads us beyond Western extrinsic legalism into a truly incarnational vision of reconciliation.<sup>67</sup> We return here to reflect more carefully on Torrance's insistence that the Israel involved in covenant relationship with the Lord is thoroughly *fallen*. Thus, as we have seen, for Torrance the revelation of God necessarily has its counterpart in the *reconciliation* of Israel's being and thought. And Torrance can, at points, write as though the reconciliation of Israel was all but complete. That, however, is not his main point at all. In Israel we are dealing only with the *preparation* of the womb of the incarnation (or of the womb of reconciliation, salvation, or the kingdom). And this preparation involves not only the beginnings of revelation and reconciliation, and the consequent revolutionary theological categories and ideas that emerged in Israel, and not only the restructuring of Israel's very way of being and the emergence of the kingdom of God, but the preparation also involves *the deliberate intensification of Israel's conflict with God*.<sup>68</sup>

To be the recipient of divine revelation means to walk with God himself, and that means both seeing the light of life and finding hope, and feeling the pain of being stripped naked with all of your illusions laid bare. The presence of the Lord meant there was nowhere for fallen Israel to hide. But who wants to be exposed? Who wants to have their dirty laundry aired, so to speak, before the world? Who can bear the light of life? Adam hid. Israel couldn't, for the Lord would not go away. And his presence meant that the raw nerve of Israel's death and dying and sadness were inevitably jabbed, sending Israel into rebellion, "for the more deeply revelation pierces into the roots of human being the more it intensifies the enmity of the human heart against God."<sup>69</sup>

That intensification, however, is not to be regarded simply as an accidental result of the covenant but rather as something that God deliberately took into the full design of his reconciling activity, for it was the will and the way of God's

---

67 See my essay, "Bearing Our Scorn: Jesus and the Way of Trinitarian Love." This essay is available on my website [www.perichoresis.org](http://www.perichoresis.org).

68 Parts of this section come from my essay, "Bearing Our Scorn."

69 *Mediation of Christ*, 21.

grace to effect reconciliation with man at his very worst, precisely in his state of rebellion against God. That is to say, in his marvelous wisdom and love God worked out in Israel a way of reconciliation that does not depend on the worth of men and women but makes their very sin in rebellion against him the means by which he binds them forever to himself and through which he reconstitutes their relations with him in such a way that their true end is fully and perfectly realized in unsullied communion with himself.<sup>70</sup>

The astonishing point here is that Israel's rebellion was actually anticipated and strategically included in the way of reconciliation. The Lord knew that Israel would not be able to cope with his presence, and would rebel, rejecting not simply its calling but the Lord himself. It is this conflict — indeed, this rebellion of Israel and Israel's rejection of the Lord, all of which was deliberately stirred up by God — that Torrance sees at the heart of reconciliation.

"Reconciliation means sharing in all that the other is."<sup>71</sup> But how could the Lord share in Israel's estrangement and alienation? How could the Lord bridge the gap and truly meet fallen Israel? To be sure, as we have seen, the Lord reaches out in accommodating love and patience with Israel, but such accommodation could only take the relationship so far. If real reconciliation is to take shape in Israel, all the alienation of Adam's fall has to come to the surface. But how? How will the Lord possibly get to the bottom of Adam's fall and so bring about ultimate reconciliation?

Inconceivable as it may sound, the answer is by the Lord himself suffering Israel's wrath and rejection. "If the covenant partnership of Israel with God meant not only that the conflict of Israel with God became intensified but was carried to its supreme point in the fulfilment of the Covenant, then Israel under God could do no other but refuse the Messiah."<sup>72</sup> And here, Torrance says, "we must clap our hands upon our mouth and speak only in fear and trembling within the forgiving love of God — Israel was elected also to reject the Messiah."<sup>73</sup> The deepest meaning of the "womb of the incarnation" is the rebellion of Israel against God — and indeed, Israel's bitter rejection of the

---

70 *Ibid.*, 38. See also, "Israel and the Incarnation," 6ff.

71 "Reconciliation in Christ and in His Church," 31.

72 *Mediation of Christ*, 43.

73 *Ibid.*, 43.

Lord himself. And it is this rejection that the Lord will suffer in person in the incarnate Son.

In Jesus Christ, the Lord comes in person into Israel's fallen existence. As throughout the covenant relationship, his presence stirred up Israel's fallen animosity and enmity, but in his incarnate presence, that animosity and enmity reaches a boiling point. Israel's response, our response — the response of the human race — to the personal presence of the Lord was intense and simple — *Crucify Him!* And we did.

Pouring our wrath and resentment, our bitterness and pain, out on Jesus, he refused to retaliate or call on legions of angels, deliberately and willfully becoming the scapegoat for our enmity against God. We cursed the Father's Son and damned him. As he bowed before our scorn, suffering personally from our wrath, he met and embraced Israel and humanity in the trenches of our fallen, broken, traumatic existence.

For Torrance, revelation inevitably means reconciliation, and reconciliation means incarnation. Incarnation means becoming what we are. Becoming what we are means suffering from our darkness and wrath. Suffering our wrath means the Lord himself meets us and embraces us as we are at our very worst. In becoming human, submitting himself to our wrongheaded darkness, and allowing Israel and humanity to reject and crucify him, the Father's Son cut the covenanted way of communion into the very core of human alienation from God. In bowing to suffer our curse, the Father's Son earthed his own life with his Father and his own anointing with the Holy Spirit in the cesspool of Adam's pathological world. The trinitarian life of God has now reached and dwells in the darkest hell of human existence. The covenanted way of communion has become human, and not just human, but flesh, and not just flesh, but abiding reality in our rejection of God. "Thus the Covenant will of God for fellowship with man was translated into eternal actuality."<sup>74</sup> The covenant promise "I will be your God, and you will be my people" has been filled with "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom my soul delights," and "Abba, Father." The blessed Trinity has met the human race as it really is in its terrible darkness, embraced us and drawn us within the trinitarian life and light and love. Through suffering our

---

74 "Atoning Obedience of Christ," 71.

## MAIN ARTICLES

scorn and curse, Jesus has filled the fall of Adam, and the old covenant with Israel, with his own relationship with his Father and the Holy Spirit — just as it was planned before the foundation of the world.

## **THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE<sup>1</sup>**

***David Fergusson, D.Phil., F.R.S.E.***

***University of Edinburgh***

*David.Fergusson@ed.ac.uk*

It has sometimes been remarked that the two most formidable personalities of British theology in the twentieth century were Donald MacKinnon and Tom Torrance. In an obituary notice, John Webster spoke of the theological intensity of Torrance being matched only by the bleak genius of MacKinnon.<sup>2</sup> They displayed many similarities — the rigor of their scholarship, wide-ranging erudition, a commitment to the traditions of the church, and theological seriousness. In other respects, however, MacKinnon and Torrance functioned quite differently. MacKinnon's influence was probably most keenly felt through the example of his teaching. He shaped a generation of theologians, especially during his Cambridge years, through the questions he tackled, the commitments he displayed, and a searching interrogative method that resisted any easy or bland closure to intractable problems. Torrance was no less demanding, but I would judge that his longer-term influence on the discipline has been facilitated more by his publications than his teaching. Having been somewhat eclipsed in the years after his retirement, his work in the last decade has attracted renewed attention from a younger generation of scholars, particularly in North America and Asia. The success of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship and its electronic journal are indicators of the growth of interest. This has been further facilitated by the posthumous publication of two large volumes

---

1 Lecture delivered to the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship at the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, November, 2010.

2 John Webster, "Editorial," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 4 (2008): 369–71 (371).

of his New College lectures at a surprisingly affordable price, and for this we are heavily indebted to the years of labor invested by Bob Walker, Torrance's nephew. In the meantime, the Torrance archive has now been cataloged and opened for study in Princeton, a substantial resource that future students of his work will no doubt wish to explore.

My subject is Torrance's theology of the ascension. It is one to which he returned in various places and about which he had more to say than most modern theologians. His devotion to this topic is indicative of several features of his theology: it registers the impact of both local and ecumenical influences on his work; it expresses his commitment both to Christian dogmatics and theological science; and finally it enables us to identify not only his indebtedness to Karl Barth but also one of his two most critical departures from Barth's theology.

The ascension has been a minor if persistent note in the church's Christology, often closely linked with the theology of the resurrection. In modern times, it has suffered neglect owing to several factors. The assimilation of earlier accounts of the ascension to a Ptolemaic worldview led to some skepticism in a post-Copernican age. The heaven of Scripture could no longer be understood as spatially related to this world by virtue of its position at the outer reaches of the cosmos. This generated a problem for any notion of the body of Jesus going somewhere along a spatial trajectory at a time subsequent to the resurrection. For Schleiermacher, to cite one example, this required a deflated account of the ascension as adding nothing significant to the doctrines of the person and work of Jesus. His disciples experienced his significance independently of their awareness of the ascension.<sup>3</sup> Later, in the nineteenth century, this skeptical reading of the ascension would be compounded by historical criticism of the New Testament with a recognition that resurrection, ascension, and exaltation are generally conflated in the New Testament, except for the later formulaic history of Luke-Acts with its more stylized forty-day interval between the two events (at least in those narratives that link the Gospel and its sequel). Only here is the ascended event foregrounded and with a reticence and sobriety that make this quite unlike later apocryphal descriptions and artistic depictions of Christ's rising from the dead and soaring through the air. Rudolf Bultmann had

---

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 2:417–18.

little hesitation in assigning New Testament accounts of the ascension to his capacious category of "myth."<sup>1</sup>

Other writers, however, adopt a more cautious and positive approach, recognizing both that we are here at the very limits of human speech and knowledge but that nevertheless substantive claims about the identity of the risen Christ in relation to God and the church are at stake in the creedal affirmation that "he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Most recently, Robert Jenson has posed the question, "What happened to the body?" If we affirm that the tomb was empty and that an embodied Christ appeared to his followers, we have the residual problem of what we should say about where that body went. Jenson's subtle but recognizably Lutheran response is that the risen Christ as God had the capacity to be available everywhere and that it is in the body of the church and especially its eucharistic elements that his bodily presence is now to be found.<sup>2</sup> The ascension, therefore, although closed to speculative enquiry, is vital to the shape of Christian faith and to the role of Christ as an active subject in the life of the church and the world. We will return to this account later.

Karl Barth of course stands at the forefront of this recent constructive reception of the ascension. It is a necessary article, which brings to completion the movement of Christ's earthly ministry while also providing a proper account of its relationship to the life of the church. This is particularly apparent in the language of Ephesians. The work of Christ having been perfected, he is exalted to the heavenly places. Yet this is not merely the conclusion to a story and the signaling of the absence of his bodily presence in its previous form. His ascension is also the enabling condition for his presence to his followers across time and space. He ascended on high that he might fill all things.

Although one cannot specify the event of the ascension or the position of the ascended subject without recourse to highly symbolic language, it occupies a vital place in thinking about the eternal location of the risen Christ and his

---

1 Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Testament and Mythology," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.

2 Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:205.

significance for the life of the church in the world until the parousia. In this respect, the ascension connects Christology with ecclesiology, the Christian life and eschatology, although the manner in which this connection is understood varies. Barth notes that while the resurrection as a narrated event draws us backward and downward into the story of Jesus, so the ascension directs us upward and forward. Like the empty tomb, the ascension is a sign, albeit one that is contested and ambiguous, perhaps even more than the empty grave. However, by this sign we apprehend something of what it mysteriously signifies. Jesus does not embark on a journey into outer space but enters a side of the created world that is for the moment inaccessible to us. From there, he lives and acts in the mode of God, so that the side of created reality that we call heaven is not forever closed to us.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I shall argue that Torrance's theology of the ascension is one of the richest treatments of the subject in modern theology and that while it shares much with Barth, Torrance develops it in ways that take his theology decisively beyond and away from some convictions of his Basel teacher. Here more than anywhere else, we are faced with significant adjustments to Barth's theology, despite the many similarities. While Torrance ventured the hope that Barth might just have approved of his reintegration of natural theology within the parameters set by divine self-revelation, he seems to harbor no such illusion about a final rapprochement on the doctrines of church, sacraments, and ministry, all of which are crucially related to his account of the ascension.

The doctrine of the ascension has featured prominently in the Scottish Reformed tradition. Torrance notes its significance in the theology of John Knox, particularly in a eucharistic context, and in Robert Bruce's sermons on the Lord's Supper, which he edited. One effect of this stress on the ascension is to provide a strong sense of the work of Christ and its eucharistic reception as a bright rather than a dark mystery. The work of Christ neither begins nor ends on the cross; rather, it is a function of his person as the living and active Word of God. In his ascended existence, therefore, it continues, although his relative absence from our midst requires a constant reference to the Gospel record and the eternal significance of that once-for-all work. Torrance particularly stresses the liturgical

---

<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 453–54.

and sacramental significance of the ascension, a view that is adumbrated in William Milligan's late-nineteenth-century study on the priestly ministry of the exalted Christ.

Torrance was a longstanding member of the Scottish Church Society, founded in the late Victorian period by leading figures such as Milligan, John McLeod, and James Cooper.<sup>4</sup> The goals of the society included a more Catholic reading of the Reformed tradition that sought liturgical renewal, frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, and a Calvinist (as opposed to a Zwinglian) account of sacramental grace and the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements. It is this configuration of influences that enabled Torrance to move beyond Karl Barth in some important respects. In particular, his commitment to the ministry of the ascended Christ made present by the Holy Spirit led to a stronger ecclesiology, sacramentalism, and eschatology than we find in Barth himself. This is apparent in works such as *Royal Priesthood* and also in those mild criticisms he ventures of Barth. In recalling their last conversation, he wrote,

I then ventured to express my qualms about his account of the ascended Jesus Christ in CD IV/3, in which Christ seemed to be swallowed up in the transcendent Light and Spirit of God, so that the humanity of the risen Jesus appeared to be displaced by what he had called "the humanity of God" in his turning toward us. I had confessed to being astonished not to find at that point in Barth's exposition a careful account of the priestly ministry of the ascended Jesus in accordance with the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews about the heavenly intercession of the ascended Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Torrance's theology of the ascension is set out in chapter 9 of *Atonement* and chapters 5–6 of *Space, Time and Resurrection*. These texts are almost identical,

---

4 See William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1894).

5 T.F. Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 62. Torrance's theology of the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ informs his treatment of ordination in *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955). The book is dedicated "To the Church of England, the church of my mother and my wife, and to the Church of Scotland, the church of my father, in the earnest prayer that they may soon be one." A second edition was published in 1993.

save for the more extensive footnoting in the latter. We can conclude from this that the latter volume, published in 1976, was based on New College lectures that he had developed over many years. Here the ascension is treated as a discrete event to be distinguished from the resurrection, although closely related to it. Torrance speaks of “the ascension event” — this is the title of chapter 6 in *Space, Time and Resurrection*, although elsewhere he refers to “the fusion of resurrection with the ascension in one indivisible exaltation.”<sup>6</sup> The ascension is not the conclusion of Christ’s ministry, a resting place from which his completed work can be viewed passively. While the ascent completes a pattern or movement that began with the descent of the Son of God, it does not signal the ending of the work of Christ. Instead, we should view the ascension as the commencement of his kingly ministry, which now moves forward in anticipation of his parousia. This kingly ministry does not exclude priestly and prophetic elements, but in setting the context in which these are exercised it consequently assumes a priority in the order of exposition.<sup>7</sup>

The one who ascends is not the disincarnate Son of God but the one who is also called Son of Man and Lamb of God.<sup>8</sup> So the ascension, for all that we must speak of its mystery in language heavily laden with symbolism, is not the ascension of one whose humanity is shed like an outworn garment. The spiritualizing of the event that we find in Origen is to be avoided at all costs. The exalted Christ is one who has a human identity that continues to be determined by his saving work. Expounding the Epistle to the Hebrews, Torrance argues that Christ exercises a priesthood that transcends Old Testament types both in offering his life as a perfect sacrifice to God and in becoming as true God a priest for us. This dual aspect of his priesthood is “hypostatically united in his own person.”<sup>9</sup>

It is of course quite difficult to present this notion of heavenly priesthood without appearing to lapse into an anthropomorphic or even Arian account of the

---

6 T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 270.

7 *Ibid.*, 265.

8 *Ibid.*, 270.

9 *Ibid.*, 273.

Father-Son relationship, as if the ascended Christ were a unique member of the heavenly council, a kind of chief executive whose function was to plead celestially on our behalf with the chairman of the board.<sup>10</sup> The imagery is risky here, but Torrance is quite adamant that if we properly integrate the person and work of Christ, then we have to commit to expressing such notions, hazardous though they are and prone to misinterpretation. His point is that the ascended Christ is the same acting subject who is with us and for us in all that he does. He does not cease to be our advocate upon his ascension, but he must be understood as exercising this function in a different mode. His work is never detachable from descriptions of his person, and therefore with the ascension of his person we must continue to think of his action as continuing, albeit in the enactment of the eternal significance of his once-for-all work in history. Elsewhere Torrance speaks more elusively about there now being space and time within the life of God for our human condition. In God's eternal life, God is always and only for us, as we have found God to be revealed in the life of Jesus. The human face of God is real and eternal — there is no God behind God, nothing inscrutable, passive and remote in the divine life.

In a similar manner, just as Christ's priestly ministry must be presented as a continuing ministry enabled by his ascension and royal enthronement, so too his prophetic ministry continues in a different mode. Now, as Christ is absent from his disciples, they proclaim him as Lord. This proclamation, however, is one in which Christ is not only object but also subject. The church speaks of him, but in this action *he* speaks through the church to the world. In other words, through the Spirit, Christ himself is present and active in the church's kerygma. In the ministry of proclamation, Christ, as the true Word of God, is again heard. Similarly, in the Eucharist, Christ as our incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord becomes sacramentally visible and tangible. Torrance speaks of those "pledges of his body and blood which he puts into our hands that with them we might appear before the Father."<sup>11</sup>

Torrance presents the ascension both as an event subsequent to the resurrection and also as a state of the exalted Christ. In describing this, Torrance

---

10 Torrance himself uses this image of the chief executive. *Ibid.*, 273.

11 *Ibid.*, 276.

is insistent that we cannot think of an immaterial or disembodied subject. The ascension is not an exercise in learning to think of Christ apart from his incarnate condition, although in avoiding this we are taken into difficult conceptual territory. Here he commits himself to the *extra Calvinisticum*, arguing that it is the settled view of patristic and Reformed theology that the Word of God through whom all things were created became a human creature while never ceasing to be the Creator Word by whom all things continue to have their being. The Lutheran view, despite its legitimate intention to safeguard the incarnation, is committed to a receptacle view of space as a container of bodies. This led both to a kenotic view of the self-emptying of divine omnipresence on the part of the incarnate Word, or else in the case of the risen Christ, to an extension of the receptacle containing his body to include all space. Hence there emerges the idea of the ubiquity of Christ's body with its attendant danger of monophysitism. In modern Lutheranism, these metaphysical problems are resolved by recourse to a strategy of demythologizing. Here Torrance appears to draw a dotted line from Luther to Bultmann.

In order to think adequately of the person of Jesus Christ, we have to hold together his identity as the eternal Son of God and as a human creature of space and time. This twinning of eternal transcendence and particular location becomes especially difficult with respect to thinking of the ascended Christ. It is the converse of the problem of the incarnation. Instead of thinking of how the human Jesus of Nazareth could simultaneously have been the eternal Son, we must now conceive of this Jesus primarily as the transcendent Son but without ceasing to regard him as a human being. This can best be achieved, Torrance suggests, by a relational view of space and time. Here he draws on relativity theory, although he uses this only analogically to describe the relation of God to space-time. Time and space are not absolute containers, independent of the objects they happen to contain. Instead, they are functions of those principles or forces that by their actions define their form. Although space-time in a four-dimensional continuum does not determine the identity and activity of God, nevertheless we should speak of "the 'place' and 'time' of God in terms of his own eternal life and his eternal purpose in the divine love, where he wills his life and love to overflow to us whom he has made to share with him his life and love."<sup>12</sup> The divine life itself provides

---

12 *Ibid.*, 290.

the coordinates or framework that can situate God's actions in eternity, just as the space-time continuum of the created world is a framework relative to creaturely events and forces. In the latter, we can assign a historical date and place to the life of Jesus. In the former, we must think of the place and activity of the ascended Christ. (Torrance also distinguishes here between fallen and unfallen space-time, although it is not clear how far this really takes us.)

This has two important theological consequences, which lie at the heart of Torrance's doctrine of the ascension and which are vital to the Christian life. On the one side, we must think of there always being room for humanity in the life of God. This is one important way of understanding the symbolism of the ascended Christ seated at the right hand of the Father. Our humanity is accommodated in the life of God — it is neither too remote nor mysterious nor self-sufficient to lack a place there. This space for humanity in the life of God is accomplished and announced by the work of Jesus. An interesting feature of this is the way in which Torrance handles the concept of heaven. For Torrance, heaven is not an empty or partially inhabited space into which the ascended Jesus is admitted. Instead, the shape or form that heaven takes is itself determined by the action of the ascended Lord. Again the language is apocalyptic and baffling, but it signals the intention to think of heaven as Christ-shaped, as ensuring a place in the eternal life of God for creatures. Torrance commends the article on the ascension of Christ in *Sacramentum Mundi* written by Joseph Ratzinger. "What the 'Ascension' tells us about heaven is that it is the dimension of divine and human fellowship which is based on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Henceforth it designates the 'place' (in the strictly ontological sense) in which man can have eternal life."<sup>13</sup> Torrance cites Ratzinger with approval perhaps also because of his criticism of Bultmann's demythologizing of the ascension.

On the other side, we must also think of God's activity toward the world as that of the ascended Christ. This is a ubiquitous action (even though we cannot think of the ubiquity of a body) since Christ is now the presence of God for the world. The ascension represents the withdrawal of one mode of presence for the enabling of another one. It is now a differentiated sign of absence and presence. And since this is the action of the incarnate Son of God now ascended,

---

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 1, 110, cited in Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 130.

we are referred always to his once-for-all historical work as the enactment of his identity and mission. This is a further implication of the refusal to immaterialize the ascension of Christ. The Son of God is not now detached from a rootedness in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, the ongoing action of the ascended Christ carries a constant reference to the Gospels. "All contact with the majesty of God as of the glorified Lord is in and through the crucified one."<sup>14</sup> To speak further of this, we have recourse to the language of Word and Spirit. It is the outpouring of the Spirit that links the ascended Christ to his people and also binds us to the Word, by which his presence is ever thereafter mediated.<sup>15</sup> The ascended Christ is thus indispensably related to history by virtue of his person and work. His eternal humanity prevents any abstracting of his identity from that of the Gospel record of his earthly life, death, and resurrection. We cannot, in other words, think of God without reference to Jesus.

Together the resurrection and ascension also have an eschatological reference. This is clear from the New Testament, in which the appearance of the risen Jesus is an eschatological sign, foretaste, and down payment of the general resurrection of the dead. His exaltation is part of a movement that will culminate in his final reign over all things in heaven and on earth. Jesus' resurrection is not a private event for himself alone. It has a corporate character that heralds a new age in which his kingship will be universally acknowledged and accomplished. However, the ascension not only signifies this coming reign of Christ with the parousia, but it also generates a kind of hiatus in which Christ's full reign is deferred for the time being. Torrance speaks about the ascension's introducing "an eschatological pause,"<sup>16</sup> a prolonged time of waiting and hoping in anticipation of the fully manifested reign of Christ. In the meantime, the mission of the church in history is to be carried out. The space in which this is to be undertaken is made possible by the ascension, in particular with the interruption that it introduces between the first and the second advents of Christ.

Nevertheless, this "space" created by the eschatological pause in our time is not a vacuum. It is not that Christ has emptied the world of his presence, leaving

---

14 Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 293.

15 *Ibid.*, 294.

16 *Ibid.*, 303.

us alone for the time being, as if creating a hollow in the landscape that is to be filled instead by the action of the church. The ministry of Christ continues in ascended mode, particularly in the set of relations that are established in church, sacraments, and ministry. So we now have three set of relations that are established by the ascension: the historical relation to Jesus of Nazareth as he is attested in Scripture; the eschatological relation to the final, perfected reality of Christ; and the sacramental relation of the church to the crucified and risen Christ in the time between the ascension and the parousia.

Torrance's treatment of the ascension is replete with doxological and sacramental references. Indeed, a theology of church, sacraments, and ministry emerges from this rendition of the ascension that might fairly be described as both Reformed and catholic, affirming a sacramental relation between the church as the body of Christ and Christ as the head of that body. "As king and head of the church, Christ has instituted the ministry of word and sacrament within history, whereby he continually nourishes, sustains, orders and governs his people on earth."<sup>17</sup> Within the royal priesthood of the whole church, some are set apart for a distinctive ministry of word and sacrament. They are ministers, not priests, but the office they hold is necessary to the life and well-being of Christ's church. It is here that Christ's own ministry continues. In this respect, the church is a divine institution always pointing not to its own significance but to that of Christ. The ascension is not a resting place for the Son of God but is rather the locus of God's continuing and unceasing activity.

As we have already noted, Torrance makes extensive reference in this context to the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is vital to an understanding of the doxological and sacramental life of the church, which is continuous with the work of Christ, yet in a relationship that is marked both by distinction and dependence. Here Torrance treads a careful path between those views that detach the work of Christ from the life of the church (attributed to sectarian traditions on the evangelical wing of the church) and other views that fail to distinguish with sufficient clarity between the work of Christ and that of his church. Roman Catholicism is here his main target with its notion of the church as the extension of the incarnation or as part of the *totus Christus*.

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

Torrance's commitment to a strong christological view of worship and the sacraments determines his doctrine of the ascension. Worship is an action in which the ascended Christ is not only the object but also the subject. It is a performative event in which the exalted Lord is present in and with our glorifying of God. Writing in *Scottish Theology*, he observes that the ascension and advent of Christ is a distinctive feature of John Knox's thought in the sixteenth century and that Knox restored them to a central place in the eucharistic liturgy. "Ascension introduced the 'distance' between the symbols of bread and wine on earth and the ascended Christ, but nevertheless a 'distance' bridged by the real presence of the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit. Hence the place of the *sursum corda* in the heart of the Reformed Eucharistic Rite — the ascension with Christ became of primary importance again: we are made to sit with Christ in the heavenly places."<sup>18</sup>

This high sacramental theology is a pervasive theme in Torrance's writings, and it is generally associated with his doctrine of the ascension. Baptism is the sacrament of our once-for-all participation in Christ, whereas the Lord's Supper is that of our continuous participation, these two corresponding to our justification and sanctification and expressing our relationship with the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.<sup>19</sup> In maintaining the sacramental nature of our participation in Christ, Torrance typically appeals not so much to early church tradition, although he is able to draw on this, but to the ministry of Jesus and the practice of ancient Israel. In his revision of Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick's *Manual of Church Doctrine*, he introduces a new section on the sacraments of the Old Testament, in which he characterizes the "sacraments" of circumcision and Passover as marking out the "covenanted sphere of union and communion with God," and as constituting divinely appointed ordinances that extend to the people of God a promise of blessing and salvation for all nations.<sup>20</sup> Within the ministry of Jesus, table fellowship, the eschatological

---

18 T.F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From Knox to McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 40.

19 *Ibid.*, 307–8.

20 H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 13.

imagery of the banquet, the feeding of the multitude, the Last Supper, and the breaking of bread at Emmaus all point to a sacramental continuation of his ministry in the life of the church. Hence that historical work of Christ, to which the ascension refers us, also carries the promise of the ongoing presence and action of Jesus among his people.<sup>21</sup>

Torrance here carefully maps the relations between the actions of Christ and those of the church. While positioning himself within the Reformed tradition, Torrance is at pains to stress the ecumenical and catholic dimension of that tradition. This is evident, for example, in *Royal Priesthood*, where, in relating the ministry of the church to that of Christ, he sets down two governing principles.<sup>22</sup> (1) There can be no relation of identity between the actions of Christ and the church. A distinction has to be maintained that prioritizes the once-for-all work of Christ. (2) The ministry of the Church is not another ministry different from that of Christ and separable from it. The church engages in the ministry of Christ in a manner that is appropriate to its derivative status as his body. Conversely, Christ continues his ministry in the church but in a manner that is appropriate to his identity as its head and Lord, as the one who was baptized in the Jordan for us and who gave his life as a ransom for many. The ascension thus signifies an ongoing ministry, but one that has a constant reference to the historical *eph hapax*.

George Hunsinger has helpfully written about Torrance's mapping of these relations in his recent study of the Eucharist. There is one priestly sacrifice of Christ in two temporal forms. He writes that the "Eucharistic form here and now participates in, manifests, and attests the incarnational form of the sacrifice there and then."<sup>23</sup> What takes place is neither a repetition nor a wholly different type of activity, but something that must be understood in terms of participation, manifestation, and witness to that upon which it is dependent and to which it constantly returns.

---

21 See T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 2:135.

22 T.F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), 38.

23 George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151–52.

From what has been set out here, it is clear that Torrance's theology of the ascension is somewhat different from that of Barth, even though much of the thrust of his teacher's theology is apparent — for example, the positive appropriation of ascension language over against strategies of demythologizing, the prioritizing of the once-for-all work of Christ, the integration of his person and work, and the enabling condition of the ascension for church proclamation. Where the difference resides is in the stress on the doxological and sacramental significance of the eternal ministry of the ascended Christ. It is evident that Torrance sees himself as filling a lacuna in Barth's thought or perhaps adjusting its trajectory in some significant ways. In a short essay in the *Expository Times* in 1955, Torrance offers a very positive appropriation of Barth's theology but concludes with some interesting comments.<sup>24</sup> He states that if he were asked to venture his main criticism of Barth he would say that he requires a more adequate doctrine of the Spirit alongside a clearer exposition of our living union with Jesus Christ. This weakness informs his "strange view of Baptism"<sup>25</sup> and reflects a gap in much Continental thought between scientific theology and worship. What we are offered in Torrance's doctrine of the ascension is therefore an important work of repair. While maintaining a characteristically Reformed stress on the once-for-all work of Christ, he seeks to offer an account of worship, church, and sacraments that recovers the best insights of the ecumenical traditions of the church.

Recent critics such as Nicholas Healy and Reinhard Hütter have complained that Barth's ecclesiology creates too much of a disjunction between the completed work of Christ and the actual life of the church. Torrance's work, it seems to me, is not vulnerable to this criticism yet prevents any dissolution or spiritualizing of the risen identity of Jesus, or a blurring of the lines between Christ and the church. Here his dogmatic instincts remain essentially correct. A Lutheran critic might see his relational account of space and time as obscuring rather than resolving the fundamental problem of what we can say happened to the body of Jesus. In this respect, Jenson's proposal is cleaner and neater in some respects. Nevertheless, while positioning himself in territory that is difficult to describe

---

24 T.F. Torrance, "Karl Barth," *Expository Times* 66 (1955): 205–9.

25 *Ibid.*, 209.

satisfactorily, Torrance is right to resist any assimilation of the body of Christ to that of the church or the Eucharist. Such a view generates further (Hegelian) problems at the expense of resolving a metaphysical conundrum. Better perhaps to admit that our language and imagination break down at this juncture than to seek a premature closure on grounds of epistemological simplicity that will destabilize other elements of theological discourse.

Nevertheless, despite issuing occasional warnings, Torrance perhaps underplays the extent to which our discourse is inevitably tentative, broken, and provisional in this area of dogmatic thought. The apparent resolution of problems may be too premature in places. This may largely be a matter of style or temperament, or conversely the perception of someone who today occupies the less self-confident setting of Christian theology in a more plural context. Yet it is instructive to follow the more measured tone of Hans Frei when writing of the ascended humanity in a commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles. "It is well to understand this powerful assertion religiously rather than metaphysically, for metaphysical schemes, like myths, change but the Word of God abides. In his eternal rule Jesus Christ maintains that solidarity with us that he established in the days of his flesh. That is the point of this matter."<sup>26</sup> There is a simplicity and caution here that may not always be apparent in Torrance.

More troubling is the relative absence of the ethical and political significance of the ascension, not least given its greater prominence in Barth. For Torrance, the divine-human relation tends to be largely a private one, although his strong sense of the corporate nature of worship might have taken him in a different direction. Only occasionally does he give hints about the wider sociopolitical significance of the ascension — for example, we are told that we cannot be pessimistic about the world since it is loved by Christ. Yet the important relations and movements in Torrance are, as it were, vertical rather than horizontal. His occasional excursions into Christian ethics tend to be confined to areas of private rather than social morality — for example, marriage and abortion. There is little about social justice, human equality, or the peaceable kingdom. The focus is generally doxological rather than ethical, whereas the royal Psalms and Jesus' teaching of the kingdom point to ways in which these can be integrated. In this

---

<sup>26</sup> Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 205–6.

## MAIN ARTICLES

respect, Nicholas Wolterstorff's writings on the ethical and political dimensions of the Reformed liturgy and Oliver O'Donovan's political theology provide an important complement to Torrance's doxological treatment of the ascension.

This last note is not intended to be carping — the final word should be one of appreciation. For all its semantic and technical detail, Torrance's theology of the ascension offers some significant existential and pastoral gains by offering a strong reading of a classical article from Scripture and the creeds. Here we are given the theological space within which to make sense of quite simple but powerful notions: God is with us; we are not left alone; our future is guaranteed by God's love; our surest proxy for the life to come is the risen Christ, who continues to be present and active in the church. These are secured by a theology of the ascension that is unrivaled in recent theology and that continues to repay our study. In this rich account, Torrance displays the ways in which church and academy, prayer and study, and the heart and the intellect are united in the vocation of the theologian.

**THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE  
HOMOOUSION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

**Victor A. Shepherd, Th.D., S.T.D.**  
**Prof. of Theology, Tyndale University College & Seminary**  
**Toronto, Ontario, Canada**  
*vshepherd@tyndale.ca*

Thomas F. Torrance has become notorious for his insistence on the *homoousion* (of the Son) as essential to any sound doctrine of the Trinity, arguing that the *homoousion* safeguards the incarnation against Arianism and any of its ingredients (e.g., docetism and ebionitism), the Trinity against any form of Sabellianism or modalism, and the doctrine of God against any form of unitarianism or polytheism.<sup>1</sup> This insistence can be found, however fleetingly, in virtually everything Torrance published (not least his sermons), but his major discussions of the *homoousion* appear in three overlapping books on the Trinity; namely, *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988), *Trinitarian Perspectives* (1994), and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (1996).

Torrance has unrelentingly shown that without the *homoousion* of the Father and the Son the gospel is forfeited. While the difference between *homoousion* and *homoiousion* is nothing more than an iota subscript, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet, this is precisely the difference between asking someone to run your business and asking her to ruin it; namely, the smallest letter of the English alphabet, with catastrophic outcomes in the balance. The *homoousion* stops any suggestion that the being of the Son is like the being of the Father, however elevated the degree of likeness. As Torrance made plain over and over, it matters not whether the being of the Father and that of the Son are a lot like

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship's annual conference in 2006 and has previously appeared in *Canadian Evangelical Review* 32, no. 22 (Fall 2006–Spring 2007): 3–18.

or only a little bit like; no degree of similarity can substitute for identity. Absent identity of being of the Father and the Son, the gospel disappears, leaving behind no more than religious mythology (tales spun by humans in order to try to make sense of their existence) or a human construct (such as those pertaining to the never-ending “quest for the historical Jesus”). Either of these leaves us doing what the apostles never urge us to do; namely, infer a deity lying behind Jesus as the latter is reduced to a “window” by which we may apprehend the deity that he himself is not. In other words, if all docetic Christologies leave us mythologizing in the pursuit of truth, all ebionite Christologies leave us deducing truth; meanwhile, the gospel announces itself as truth, as reality, since it is God’s incursion, self-bestowal, self-communication, and self-interpretation. Therein the gospel eclipses all mythological speculation and all inferential processes. (Incidentally, with respect to the lattermost — the process whereby the nature of God is inferred from a Son who isn’t quite God — present-day ebionites such as the questers of the historical Jesus seem not to understand that *the* characteristic of the biblical God, the Holy One of Israel, is that he *speaks*. When he speaks, those addressed know that they have been addressed by an “other,” by *the* Other; they know *what* has been spoken and therein know as well *who* has spoken. According to the logic of Scripture, any deity who is inferred or deduced or concluded is ipso facto an idol. In other words, the quest for the historical Jesus appears to be able to yield no more than an idol.)

All that Torrance has brought forward concerning the *homoousion* of the Father and the Son is pregnant concerning the *homoousion* of the Son and the Spirit. Torrance has admitted this in many places, not least in his book *The Christian Doctrine of God*. Here, for instance, he has written, “We must think of our being *in the Spirit* in the incarnate economy of God’s saving acts in Jesus Christ as deriving from and grounded objectively in the homoousial Communion of the eternal Spirit and the eternal Son in the Holy Trinity.”<sup>2</sup> Plainly the *homoousion* of the Spirit is as crucial as that of the Son in any Christian understanding of God and the participation in God’s own life that constitutes the salvation of God’s people. The *homoousion* of the Spirit protects God’s infinite transcendence against any assumption that because such terms as “father” or

---

2 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 149.

“generate” are used of God, humans can co-opt or domesticate God or even comprehend God. In this vein Torrance writes, “Let us recall further here the fact that classical Christian theology placed the *homoousion* of the Spirit alongside the *homoousion* of the incarnate Son. While the *homoousion* of the Son expresses the truth that what God is in Christ Jesus he is antecedently and eternally in himself, the bracketing of it with the *homoousion* of the Spirit has the effect of excising from our thought any projection into God of the creaturely, corporeal or sexist ingredients in the terms ‘father,’ ‘son,’ ‘offspring’ or ‘generation’ into God.”<sup>3</sup> Educating yet another implication of the *homoousion* of the Spirit, Torrance writes, “If the ontological bond between the historical Jesus Christ and God the Father is cut, then the substance falls out of the Gospel, but if the ontological bond between the Holy Spirit and incarnate Son of the Father is cut, so that there is a discrepancy between the economic Trinity and the ontological Trinity, or between the saving activity of the love of God in history and the transcendent activity of God in eternity, then we human beings are left without hope and can have no part or lot in *God’s* saving activity in Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

While Torrance and others have given no little attention to the *homoousion* with respect to the Son, little work appears to have been done with respect to *homoousion* of the Spirit. The result is that while the deity of the Son has been highlighted in such a way as to forestall christological speculation, projection, and nonbiblical deduction, neglect of the deity of the Spirit has allowed a notion of the Spirit to arise that is not normed, formed, or informed by a sound Christology. It should be no surprise, then, that the Spirit is invoked to legitimize pantheism, panentheism, the salvific significance of “the world’s great religions” (whose greatness seems to be defined by no more than the number of adherents), the salvific significance of religiosity-in-general (as suggested by much of the current preoccupation with “spirituality”), or the salvific significance of irreligion (if humans can ever be irreligious, the fallen human heart and mind remaining a ceaseless factory of idolatry).

The question, then, “Do the Son and the Spirit possess the same nature or merely similar natures?” is no less urgent than the same question concerning

---

3 *Ibid.*, 158.

4 *Ibid.*, 197

the Son and the Father. Torrance alludes to this briefly in several places in *The Doctrine of God* (e.g., pp. 61, 72, 148). I wish now to propose several considerations concerning the *homoousion* of Son and Spirit that parallel, where possible, the points that Torrance has made *passim* concerning the cruciality of the *homoousion* of Son and Father.

1. If Son and Spirit are only ontically similar, then there is no protection against that rationalism which appears to be the Achilles heel of the Reformed tradition. The Christo-logic of the Reformation (which Christo-logic, we should note, always entailed a Pneumato-logic) maintained that as Jesus Christ surges over people in the power of the Spirit, this one action of God forges within them the capacity to understand God's incursion, the categories by which to understand it, and the vocabulary with which to speak of it. The Reformation understanding of the nature of God's action on people rendered unnecessary, even counterproductive, any rationalist precursor that qualified the beneficiaries of God's salvific action to understand it and speak of it. Herein the classic sixteenth-century Reformers differed from what Calvin called the "schoolmen" and their rationalist apparatus. Quickly, however, the logic of the Reformation gave way to the logic of Protestant scholasticism. Aristotelianism returned and occupied the place in Reformed theology that it had occupied in late Medieval scholasticism. We need only recall the aftermath of Calvin wherein post-Calvinism, Arminianism, and Roman Catholic thought appeared incommensurable on the surface while at a deeper level all were aspects of a shared Aristotelianism. Arminius, for instance, was execrated by post-Calvin Calvinists, few of the latter understanding that the thinker Arminius most frequently quoted was the indubitably Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas. Post-Calvin scholasticism recrudesced in several manifestations: Roman Catholic and predestinarian (de Baie and Bañez), Roman Catholic and nonpredestinarian (Suarez and Molina), Protestant and predestinarian (Beza, Gomarus, and Junius), Protestant and nonpredestinarian (Arminius, Episcopus and Limborch). Regardless of apparent theological divergences or even incommensurables, all of the aforementioned presupposed an Aristotelian substratum in their theology.

As the classic sixteenth-century Reformers were aware, however, the logic of the substratum alters the logic of the stratum. Despite the theological differences between Arminius and his Calvinist neighbors (e.g., the doctrine

of election and the reading of Romans 7), they were one in the foundation of their thought.

Rationalism remains the default position of the Reformed tradition (though not of the Reformed tradition only). Rationalism in some form arises when the *homoousion* of the Spirit is overlooked. While Jesus Christ is acknowledged to be the Son incarnate without qualification, so that the nature of the Father is not inferred or deduced from Scripture's portrait of the Son, now to be inferred is the *effectual presence* of this deity. What is inferred now is not a deity lying behind Jesus of Nazareth but the activity of a spirit lying behind him. As this activity is not one with the activity of the Son, the spirit in question is less than holy. At this point, speculation or mythologizing pertains not to the Son (as happened in the Arian controversy) but instead to the Spirit. There is an "orthodox" acknowledgment of the Son accompanied by a human projection of the Spirit's work. One frequently finds in the church an uncompromised acknowledgment of the Son — without qualification or hesitation — even as this acknowledgment is co-opted for a purpose that diverges from the purpose of Scripture. The Son incarnate is conscripted to support aspects of liberation theology, feminist (or patriarchal) theology, ecological theology, religious pluralism, or psychospiritual theses that fall short of Scripture's portrayal of the Spirit.

The Spirit then becomes the principle whereby the incarnate Son is deemed to energize or empower an agenda of transformation not entirely congruent with Scripture's depiction of the definitive, eschatological transformation wrought by the Spirit as the effectual presence of God. A formally correct acknowledgment of the *homoousion* of the Son now fuels social or religious programs that bear *some* relation to that "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13), but absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, what Wesley called "the general tenor" of Scripture is truncated. Church members who resist such agendas are often subtly or frontally disdained as lacking theological sophistication, when in fact (as Torrance never tired of saying, thanks to his reading of Michael Polanyi) these "simple" church members know vastly more than they can articulate; without being able to state it precisely or defend it cogently, they have "scented" a newer unrighteousness proffered as the redress of an older one. A properly articulated *homoousion* of the Spirit, needless to say,

would strengthen immeasurably those who possess such theological “instinct,” as Torrance called it, however little they are able to articulate it at present.

Where the *homoousion* of the Spirit is not recognized, effectiveness in the church’s teaching, preaching, and evangelism is sought elsewhere, to the detriment of church and world alike. Frequently my students in Introductory Systematic Theology, rightly zealous for the gospel, protest, “But shouldn’t the church be concerned with converting people, with seeing them converted?” Proclaiming the gospel, however, is not identical with converting people. Witness, proclamation, evangelism — this is always the church’s business. Throughout the book of Acts no one comes to faith apart from the mission and ministry of the Christian community. Equally true is that in the book of Acts no one comes to faith apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that activity of God whereby he alone renders the church’s ministry effective just because he alone can.

Throughout its history, the church, lacking both the patience of God and an agenda-free grasp of the purpose of God, has tended to overreach itself and attempt to do God’s work in the face of God’s unendurable slowness, even negligence. The result, as the world is aware even when the church is not, is that the church persecutes. Whenever it upholds the *homoousion* of the Son but fails to uphold the *homoousion* of the Spirit, the church turns its unexceptionable recognition of the Son into a weapon against people whose recalcitrance has imperiled them spiritually, as if such coercion were able to move them to a saving confession. The coercion can be physical, social, or psychological; but it remains coercion, and it arises through a defective understanding of the relation of the Spirit to the Son, as the vulnerability of the crucified Son is contradicted by the invulnerability of a coercive church.

Tragically, pathetically, in the name of its Lord, the church advertises its unbelief, for plainly its resort to coercion announces that it does not trust God to do what God insists God alone can do; namely, quicken faith in the sin-ravaged heart by means of the Holy Spirit. In other words, nonrecognition of the *homoousion* of the Spirit issues in a seeming christological zeal that merely publicizes the church’s atheism. To be sure, in his dispute with Erasmus on the bondage of the will, Luther said that apart from Jesus (i.e., apart from the cross), God is indistinguishable from the devil. Luther was aware, without mentioning it in this one instance, that it is only as the Spirit renders us beneficiaries of the

cross, only as the Spirit quickens faith in the crucified, that we *know* the God who is forever distinguished from the devil.

While much has been said about Luther's *theologia crucis* and his disavowal of *theologia gloriae*, little attention has been paid to the critical importance of the identity of the crucified and the Spirit. Briefly, a theology of glory arises whenever it is thought that God can be derived from metaphysical speculation, whenever it is thought that the truth and nature of God can be read off nature or the face of history, and whenever the church becomes triumphalistic. Enough has been said already concerning the church's confusion between its triumphalism and the true triumph of the crucified who, raised from the dead as the church correctly notes, is nevertheless raised wounded, suffering still, and vulnerable still in the suffering of the world. As for the derivation of God from metaphysical speculation, Luther, eschewing all forms of rationalism, was always aware that only that Spirit, whose activity is the action of God, and therefore the action of God the Son, could bring humans to a knowledge of God through the crucified. Once having become beneficiaries of the mercy of the crucified God, they can recognize assorted theologies of glory for what they are. Apart from Spirit-wrought living faith in the crucified God, however, biblically orthodox theology remains an ideational construct and therein akin to philosophical speculation from which one must infer or deduce God. Biblically orthodox theology may involve more accurate content than philosophical speculation, but its miss in the absence of the Holy Spirit is as good as a mile.

In a somewhat "softer" form of rationalism, no conclusion or inference is to be drawn entirely naturalistically; instead, the Spirit is said to facilitate illumination. The Spirit operates at the level of mind, but without reference to the heart, so that the truth of God can be known without the knower being rendered a new creature within the new creation. The Spirit is little more than the influence of a deistic deity who provides the conditions for a humanly engendered knowledge of God; there is an outer structure of "grace" (soft and dilute compared to Scripture's understanding of grace as the living God's uncompromisable faithfulness to his covenant) complemented by an inner content of human possibility and human achievement. The Spirit, then, is the divinely supplied condition under which human achievement occurs. This notion, of course, is epistemic semi-Pelagianism.

Under such Spirit-facilitated illuminationism, “knowing” is closer to the outlook of the Enlightenment than to that of Scripture. In Scripture, to know God is to participate in the reality of God and so to be rendered forever different. Our knowledge of God is precisely the *difference* our engagement with this “Other” has made to us when we meet this “Other” *as Person*. Only if the Spirit is God (i.e., homoously identical with Father and Son) is the activity of the Spirit that act of God whereby the God who knows himself includes us in his self-knowing.

2. In what follows, I trace, item by item, some of the points Torrance has emphasized with respect to the *homoousion* of the Son with respect to the *homoousion* of the Spirit.

a. Whatever we say of the Son we can say of the Spirit except “Son.” To deny this is to deny the deity of the Spirit and therefore to deny the eternal triunity of God. To deny the *eternal* triunity of God is to deny the immanent or ontological Trinity. The result is that there remains only an economic Trinity, an economic Trinity ungrounded in an immanent Trinity. The problems that arise here are legion. Whereas the nonidentity of being between Father and Son means that we can no longer be certain that the “face” of God we know by revelation is one with the heart of God in God’s innermost, intratriune life, the parallel nonidentity of being between Son and Spirit means that the “face” of God we see in the Son might not be one with the act of God whereby the Spirit supposedly brings us to Christ and Christ to us. What, then, is the work of the Spirit? Where might the Spirit be taking us? To what end? And how shall we be able to “discern” or test the spirits if the nature or being of the Holy Spirit is that which is most in question? Plainly the denial of the *homoousion* of the Spirit is no less catastrophic than the denial of the *homoousion* of the Son. (Noncongruence between economic and immanent Trinities *for any reason*, i.e., whether on account of the Son or the Spirit, lands theology in all the problems Paul Molnar has discussed in his *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Trinity* and David Lauber in his *Descent into Hell*.)<sup>5</sup>

b. Torrance earlier pointed out that any detraction from the Son detracts from the Father; that is, whatever the Father as giver might give, he does not give

---

5 See Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002); David Lauber, *Descent into Hell* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004).

himself. The consequence of this has to be that while God gives, he withholds himself. The apostle's cry, "He didn't spare his own Son," which otherwise has the force of "God didn't spare himself," is now denied.

In the same way, detraction from the Spirit detracts from the Son, since the gift (the Son) is willed by the Father yet fails to accomplish the purpose for which the Father gives it and that the Son longs to fulfill. (See John 12:27: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.") In short, where the *homoousion* of the Son is upheld but that of the Spirit is denied, giver and gift are one, but they remain ineffectual. God can be said to be alive, and even merciful (he spares not his own Son), but is ultimately ineffectual in that his Word goes forth from his mouth yet returns to him empty, since it does not accomplish the thing for which he sent it (see Isa. 55:11). Only as the disobedient sinner is *brought to faith* by God the Spirit, and rendered a new creature, is the purpose of incarnation and crucifixion accomplished.

c. Torrance points out that the fatherhood of the Father does not lie in his being the Father of believers (thus requiring creatures to be who he is) but rather in his being Father of the Son and therefore eternally, intrinsically Father. In the same way, the *homoousion* of the Spirit means that God is eternally, intrinsically the ceaseless *activity*, the "doing," of the Father loving the Son and the Son reciprocating that love in the bond of the Spirit. In other words, the *homoousion* of the Spirit is essential if love as act (rather than mere attitude) is to be eternally operative.

This truth is freighted concerning Christian discipleship. For instance, Leviticus 19:2 can be defended as the "root" commandment of Scripture (in contrast to the "great" commandment): "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." On the one hand, God's holiness is his unique Godness and therefore he alone is holy. On the other hand, God's people are commanded to be holy, the root commandment of Scripture gathering up all others. Since God is love eternally in the sense of ceaseless activity, God's people are holy inasmuch as the root commandment is seen to be related to the great commandment: we are to love the Lord our God, together with our neighbor. We love God and neighbor alike, however, not through adopting an attitude or assuming a posture, but by being "doers of the Word" (James 1:22). We are not to "love in word or speech but in

deed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). What is real is not merely to be apprehended; what is real (ultimately, God and his claim upon us and our concrete obedience in the sphere of his love and in fellowship with him) is to be *done* (John 3:21). Love as ceaseless activity expressing one's nature characterizes God's people inasmuch as it first characterizes God himself.

d. The *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against all forms of unitarianism. Absent the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Father arises wherein the God who is infinitely transcendent is inaccessible — and unknowable, since if God were *only* infinitely transcendent, humans couldn't even know this much. Absent the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Son arises wherein Jesus is rendered our "chum," lending himself to all our agendas, never challenging or correcting us. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Spirit arises wherein God is indistinguishable from a subjectivism that has surrendered all appreciation of truth and has elevated religious "inwardness" uncritically. The *homoousion* of the Spirit means that the Spirit is *Holy* Spirit only in conjunction with the Father and the Son. A profounder grasp of this point would do much to spare the church charismatic distortions that arise from a unitarianism of the Spirit, even as the charismatic dimension of the church has highlighted the frigid unitarianism of the Father and the naturalistic unitarianism of the Son.

Similarly, the *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against polytheism, for the Spirit is not a second deity, a different sort of deity, or a subordinate deity. The Holy Spirit is simply *God*.

And, of course, the *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against dependency on the church. As noted above, the Father needs nothing creaturely in order to be Father. In the same way, the Spirit, whose activity is related much more closely to the church than to the creation, needs nothing ecclesial in order to be Spirit. (This point is to be noted with respect to those theologies in which the Spirit is tied to the church, inheres in the church, or is anything other than Lord of the church.)

3. In his discussion of the *homoousion* of Father and Son, Torrance has highlighted its gospel significance by asking, "What is implied if Father and Son are *not* of one being?" The same question must be asked concerning the *homoousion* of Son and Spirit: What is implied if this latter truth ceases to remain embedded in the church's consciousness?

a. God is utterly unknowable. Arius had said that no creature (e.g., the Son) can mediate knowledge of God. If the Spirit is not God, without qualification, then God is not known in the biblical sense, where knowledge is not the mastery of information but transformation through engagement with, and surrender to, an "other" who is person. If the Spirit is not God, our knowledge of God is no more than a matter of "reading off" facts about God from the face of Jesus, confusing knowledge as the accumulation of information with that biblical "knowing," which is transmutation. Human knowledge of God, it must be remembered, is precisely the difference, the transformation, arising in the knower through her self-abandonment to the person of God. Where the *homoousion* of the Spirit is neglected, knowledge of God (so-called) is a one-sided cerebralism or "informationism" in which orthodox truths (abstractions by definition) are assimilated while the heart remains unaltered by the concrete Truth that is reality.

It can reasonably be proffered that an operative denial of the *homoousion* of the Spirit underlies evangelicalism's preoccupation with apologetics. Few Christians would object to the heuristic apologetics that helps doubters past obstacles to the gospel by, for example, exposing the lack of cogency of naturalistic, reductionist arguments against faith. However, the apologetics that establishes, and maintains the need to establish, the conditions for the possibility of God, then for the possibility of incarnation (for instance), then for the possibility of faith, the actuality of faith, and finally the assurance of faith, is entirely different. In its commitment to apologetics, has not much contemporary evangelicalism tacitly denied the *homoousion* of the Spirit, assuming that philosophical demonstration can do what the Spirit ought to do but seemingly fails to do? In the same vein, does the preoccupation with apologetics deny the truth that the integrity (albeit not the structure) of reason is compromised in the fall?

All of this is undercut by the efficacy of that Spirit who is God; specifically, God's working to bring the putative human knower into the sphere of God's self-knowing. Insistence on this work of the Spirit is not to turn faith into an exercise in irrationality; faith reasons as surely as faith trusts. It is, however, to admit that while the structure of reasoning survives the fall, the integrity of reasoning concerning God and humankind's relationship to God is compromised by the fall. Such compromised integrity can be restored only by means of grace, in faith. Hans Urs von Balthasar's articulation here is a salutary reminder:

The word of God is not of this world and hence can never be discovered in the categories and accepted patterns of human reason . . .

. . . I was appointed by God from all eternity to be the recipient of this . . . eternal word of love, a word, which, pure grace though it be, is . . . more rational than my reason, with the result that this act of obedience in faith is in truth the most reasonable of acts.<sup>6</sup>

b. Torrance has pointed out that absent the *homoousion* of the Son no unity can be posited between God himself and what the gospel presents as the revelation of God. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, no unity can be posited between what the gospel presents as the revelation of God and that appropriation without which "revelation" as such has not occurred. Revelation is revelation only if there is a human participant. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, "revelation" would be no more than rationalistic ideation or nonrationalistic emotion stimulated by human proximity to a depiction of the Son, however orthodox. The apostolic portrayal of Jesus Christ then becomes the stimulus to concepts and affects aroused naturalistically, to which the Holy Spirit is subsequently applied in order to sanctify them, all without any apprehension of Christ as the one who bears and bestows that Spirit who magnifies *him*. In short, it appears that to overlook the *homoousion* of the Spirit is to find even Scripture, and specifically its depiction of Jesus, advancing a religious paganism within the church.

c. Torrance has stated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son the gospel cannot be God's *self*-bestowal or *self*-communication; that is, God may be said to bestow and communicate, but now necessarily something less than, other than, *himself* — and all of this on account of a deficiency in the Son. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, the gospel cannot be God's *self*-bestowal, God's *self*-communication, because it never reaches us. Here there is a frustration on the part of God in that what he wills in himself and accomplishes in the Son he cannot effect in us. Such divine "frustration" leaves the church looking elsewhere for effectiveness.

The Protestant Reformation, aware of the deity of the Spirit, did not undervalue the experiential dimension of faith; indeed, the magisterial Reformers, concerned with doctrinal correction and rearticulation to be sure, nonetheless gave far

---

6 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986), 61, 62.

greater place to “the Word *in the heart*” than they are commonly thought to have done. One need only read Luther, who speaks of “hearing the voice” together with grasping the doctrine, of the bridegroom saying “you are mine” and the bride saying “you are mine”; or read Calvin and notice his frequent use of words such as “feel” in the *Institutes* and commentaries. The Reformation’s concern for assurance, the assurance of faith (i.e., of one’s salvation) is attestation enough. For this reason, the Reformers acknowledged the experiential aspect of crucial biblical texts such as Galatians 3:2: “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit [an unambiguous reference to an event in their lives whose vividness was undeniable and therefore could serve as the foundation of Paul’s point] by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” In other words, was the startling vividness of their Spirit-wrought immersion in Christ the result of their appropriating the gospel in faith or the result of having endeavored to conform to a lifeless code? What they could never deny or forget was the vividness of the Spirit within them.

In light of the normative place of Scripture in the thought of the magisterial Reformers, there is no stepping around the force of Paul’s *experience*: the Damascus Road arrest, and subsequent visions, voices, and trances. And then there are his “revelations.” On the one hand, he does not preach them, content to preach only Christ crucified. On the other hand, apart from his revelations he would not be an apostle at all and therefore would have nothing to say. The apostle candidly admits the “abundance of revelations” (2 Cor. 12:1, 7; cf. Gal. 1:12; 2:2); they have all left him as one of those who “love our Lord with love undying” (Eph. 6:24).

In the history of the church, Roman Catholics appear to have visions while Protestants do not. Does a tacit neglect (to say the least) of a *homoousion* of the Spirit result in large areas of Scripture remaining closed to Protestants? Abraham is the prototype of faith in older and newer testaments. We are told that “the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision” (Gen. 15:1). To be sure, the vision was given to convey the word, but the vision cannot be discounted. Yet Protestants, rightly Word-oriented, do little with other scriptural depictions of God’s approach and self-impartation. Why? Jean Brebeuf, Jesuit missionary to the Huron aboriginal people of Georgian Bay, was privileged to “see,” one night amid his comfortable life in France, a flaming cross suspended above the Huron encampment in the New World. Thereafter he never doubted what he was

to do or why. How is his vision or dream different from mere fantasy or wishful thinking?

Jonathan Edwards spoke much of “religious affections”: a felt response to an object grounded in an understanding of the nature of that object. Edwards distanced all such affection from emotion or passion, for emotion presupposes no understanding of what has aroused it, while passion, said Edwards, is problematic in that its passivity contradicts the act and event that faith and obedience are; in addition, passion entails loss of self-control, whereas the fruit of the Holy Spirit includes self-control. Nonetheless, while religious affection presupposes an understanding of the nature of God, it ever remains *affective*, as Edwards never tired of pointing out in his exploration of Spirit-wrought faith.

Similarly, John Wesley, in his landmark tract “The Almost Christian,”<sup>7</sup> maintained that unbelievers are characterized by lack of faith in God, while believers are characterized by — faith in God? No. By love for God, insists Wesley, even as he immediately goes on to speak of their faith. Wesley, who never ceased to insist on justification by faith, makes the point that faith in Christ and love for Christ presuppose and imply each other. Without love for Christ, faith in Christ degenerates into “beliefism,” where the assimilation of doctrine is substituted for living engagement with the living Lord. Without faith in Christ, love for Christ denies the necessity of the atonement and hinges justification on the quality of the believer’s love.

Protestants customarily look to the Pauline corpus first; certainly it is where the magisterial Reformers looked first — even as their descendants, post-Reformation Protestant scholastics, overlooked a major dimension of Paul himself. What can be vouchsafed to the apostle can be vouchsafed to anyone. The question the church must ask is, how are genuine revelations to be distinguished from religious “boil-overs”? In truth, the Spirit-formed, Spirit-informed, Spirit-normed affective or experiential aspect to faith is a matter the church neglects only at its peril, for deficits in the church spawn the cults.

As a pastor for thirty-six years, I have come to see that people suffer enormous affective deprivation; specifically, Christians suffer from affective deficits related to faith. It is little wonder that needy, vulnerable people are thereby exposed

---

<sup>7</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 137.

to the blandishments of psycho-religious nostrums that don't deliver what they hold out. We must always keep two facts in mind: human affective need, both natural and spiritual, and the affective, experiential dimension of genuine gospel faith.

d. Torrance had intimated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son, God has not condescended to us in Jesus Christ, and his love (so-called) has stopped short of becoming one with us. Torrance's point is incontrovertible. The Father would have given us something to fix us, even done so out of love, but it would have remained a fix from arm's length.

Given the *homoousion* of the Son, none of the foregoing would apply, in that God would have loved us defenselessly; but absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, his love would have stopped short of saving us, as his self-giving remained finally ineffective. Self-giving to the point of self-immolation would have remained self-inhibiting, even self-defying, as it failed to result in a people that lives for the praise of God's glory (Eph. 1:12).

e. Once again, Torrance insisted that absent the *homoousion* of the Son, there is no ontological and therefore no epistemological connection between the love of Jesus and the love of God. God could be said to love us in Jesus even though God were not actually that love in himself. This being the case, there might be a dark, unknown God behind the back of Jesus Christ. In other words, while God could be said to love us, his love would not necessarily *exhaust* his will and way and work concerning us. God could be loving us as *an* act of his even though there might remain some other attitude/act wherewith God visits us, whose nature or purpose we do not or cannot know.

Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, there is no ontological and therefore no epistemological connection between the Son and that "spirit" that may infuse us and inspire us to lofty human heights. Moreover, that spirit has to be less than holy, since such a spirit has to be less than God, creaturely by definition. While giver and gift may remain one, the "giving" of grace is not one with giver and gift. Then who or what effects the giving, and what are the implications of this for giver and gift? Plainly "another spirit" has to be operative. Then what is ultimately the nature and purpose of such a spirit? Spirits abound, to be sure, yet absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit we can only regard them as self-defined rather than as the power that Jesus Christ bears and bestows and therefore the

power in which Jesus Christ acts; we can only be ignorant of what such spirits intend or what they achieve.

It must never be forgotten that spirits abound not only in the world but also in the church — perhaps especially in the church, given the church’s chronic difficulty in distinguishing faith from the idolatry of religion. Yet absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, the discernment needed in the church is inherently impossible — a circumstance that is not only tragic but also puzzling in that the book of Acts depicts discernment as the principal manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the nascent church.

f. Torrance has indicated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son the acts of Jesus Christ are not the acts of God, and there is no final authority for anything he said or did. Absent the *homoousion* of the Son, “spirituality” can’t be distinguished from self-indulgence. Faith always presupposes Jesus Christ as *author*, as he acts in the power of the Spirit; faith also always presupposes Jesus Christ as *object*, as he effects in the spiritually inert both the capacity and the desire to embrace the one who has first embraced them. Apart from the *homoousion* of the Spirit, faith is reduced to a natural, intrapsychic capability that we “choose” to vest here or there. Such a notion renders the Holy Spirit entirely superfluous. (The church today, intoxicated with “spirituality” and its inherent naturalism, has not yet seen that the contemporary church’s deity is bi-une and its soteriology Pelagian.) The result of viewing faith as a natural, human capability is to render it a human virtue, to render faith in Christ a subset of “faith-in-general,” and to say that it is faith as contribution, albeit faith correctly vested, that saves.

Stung by the world’s accusation regarding its putative narrowness, the church attempts to redress its reputation by means of a non-Christic Spirit. It forgets that the effectiveness of a knife depends on the narrowness of its cutting edge, and therefore only a precisely delineated Christology and pneumatology add up to an effective theology. Surgery required for the most profound heart transplant (Ezekiel 36) cannot be performed with something as broad and as blunt as a crowbar. In addition, the church today appears in danger of forgetting that only a christological exclusivity is pneumatologically comprehensive and therefore salvific. If it ceases to be the case that faith is quickened only as the risen, victorious crucified one acts on people in the power of the Spirit, and if faith

is thereby reduced to a natural talent or virtue, then the predicament of those lacking such a talent is hopeless. To say the same differently: if Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, brings with him a renewed cosmos and therefore a renewed humanity, and if this is ours only as we are rendered participants in it through the power of the Holy Spirit, then only the exclusivity of incarnation, cross, and Pentecost are salvifically inclusive.

g. Torrance maintains that absent the *homoousion* of the Son we shall be judged by a God who is arbitrary in that he bears no relation to Jesus Christ and all that the latter stood for.

Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, we shall be judged by a God who made provision for us, admittedly, but merely made provision for us, in the course of which he made himself proximate to us in our fallen humanness, but *merely* proximate. By whom, then, are we to be judged? Plainly by someone who left it to creaturely spirits, left it to us to “make the connection.” Instead of being judged by a God who is arbitrary in that he bears no relation to Christ, we will now be judged by a God who tantalized us with the sufficient provision he made and placed before us while leaving us to flounder as fallen creatures in our “freedom of choice” — which is, of course, no freedom at all but simply the randomness of indeterminism.

The last word must be given to Thomas F. Torrance himself: “Unless the Being and Activity of the Spirit are identical with the Being and Activity of the Father and the Son, we are not saved.”<sup>8</sup>

---

8 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 169.

**ARTICLE REVIEW of THOMAS F. TORRANCE'S  
INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT**

***Paul D. Molnar***

***Professor of Systematic Theology***

***Department of Theology and Religious Studies  
St. John's University, Queens, New York 11439***

*molnarp@stjohns.edu*

These companion volumes,<sup>1</sup> ably and skillfully edited with helpful introductions by Robert T. Walker, contain lectures delivered by Thomas F. Torrance while professor at the University of Edinburgh from 1952–1978. Posthumously published, they offer a Christology and soteriology that are at once distinctive, powerful, revolutionary, and theologically captivating. In my estimation both volumes should be required reading for anyone pursuing serious theology today. A careful reading of these learned volumes will ensure a thorough theological education for anyone approaching them with an open mind.

### **Christology from Below**

What makes Torrance's thinking distinctive is that he does not begin by attempting some sort of Christology either from below or above. Torrance believed that because of the incarnation one could only begin Christology and soteriology with Jesus as he really was, that is, as one who forevermore was and will be truly divine and truly human as the Savior who was crucified and yet rose from the dead and exercises his eternal high priestly mediation as the advent Lord even

---

1 Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008); Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

now through the power of his Holy Spirit. Torrance thus begins “from below and from above at the same time.”<sup>2</sup> Because Torrance took the incarnation seriously, he held that any approach from below would always open the door to some form of adoptionism, which could be seen as a form of Ebionite Christology that undermines the reality of the incarnation.<sup>3</sup> This meant that “if you start off on a purely historical level, then the only honest inference is a purely historical one, made on a purely historical level. If you ask only historical questions, you will only get historical answers” (*Incarnation*, 263). Any attempt to begin Christology from below — the dominant trend in Christology for at least the last fifty years or so — would have to mean that faith then would be seen merely as some type of “moral appreciation of historical facts” (*Incarnation*, 263). If the object of faith is a mere fact of history, then faith itself can be nothing more than our “historical inspection” of those facts. Yet, if we go further and argue that this historical fact must be appreciated in terms of moral values, then “these moral values are only your appreciation of the historical fact which is historically perceived.” This opens faith to “rationalist criticism,” so that faith’s validity would “depend on the amount of validity human reason can adduce for the historical facts in question” (*Incarnation*, 263). Such criticism would mean that without historical demonstration, faith could not exist. The temptation would be to separate theology from history so that theology might be immune to such criticisms.

But for Torrance a theology that is not grounded in history at all would be mythology or human projection onto history and thus could not be scientific, that is, it could not be a knowledge that takes place in accordance with the nature of the reality that it is attempting to know. It was just such a theology that, in Torrance’s estimation, Rudolf Bultmann proposed in his attempt to

---

2 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 114.

3 See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 112; and *Christian Doctrine of God*, 114–15. The virgin birth excluded any sort of “Ebionism, that is . . . the idea that the Son of God united himself with one who was already man, or that a human being, either in embryo or as already born, was at some point adopted to be the Son of God” (*Incarnation*, 98–99).

advance a theology that could not be undermined by historical criticism. Torrance opposed Bultmann's approach precisely because he refused to ground the truth of Christology in anyone or anything other than Jesus himself as he really was according to the kerygma (which itself could not be separated from him as the one who gives it its true meaning). While Torrance freely admits that the Jesus of the New Testament is indeed "presented from the point of view of forgiven sinners, from the point of view of the gospel of salvation," and indeed from the point of view of his resurrection, he strongly denies "that it was the piety or religious experience of the first Christians that was determinative in this presentation of Christ" (*Incarnation*, 265). He believed that historians can understand Jesus only horizontally on the plane of history but that they "cannot deal at all with the vertical movement in and through which Jesus came into being in history" since it is "in this movement from God to man, from above to below, [that] Jesus presents himself as a fact of revelation, as Word of God — yet this movement of his cannot be represented simply and purely on the horizontal plane or in merely historical terms" (*Incarnation*, 27). This insistence that Christology and soteriology must find their meaning in Jesus himself as one who is truly divine and truly human led Torrance to a powerful, revolutionary, and theologically captivating view of how we know Jesus and Jesus' significance for faith. From start to finish, as we shall see, Torrance's epistemology is shaped by a Christology that is intimately tied to pneumatology.

### **The Fact of Christ**

For Torrance, the fact of Christ is ultimate since the only authority for believing in Jesus and knowing him as God become man is Jesus himself. What we meet in Jesus is "a new and unique fact without analogy anywhere in human experience or knowledge" (*Incarnation*, 1). This has epistemological implications that are seldom taken into account in contemporary Christology and soteriology. Thus "we cannot earn knowledge of Christ, we cannot achieve it, or build up to it" (*Incarnation*, 2). When we know him as he truly is, the power of knowing him comes only from him as he gives himself to us "by his own power and agency, by his Holy Spirit" so that we must "ascribe all the possibility of our knowing him to Christ alone, and none of it to ourselves. . . . In knowing Christ we acknowledge

the fact that confronts us as a lordly act from above and beyond us, which we can only acknowledge" (*Incarnation*, 2).<sup>4</sup>

Torrance regularly insists that we cannot say *how* we know Christ but must instead always begin our reflections by *acknowledging* the mystery of Jesus Christ as the Word and Savior who atoned for our sins, not as a man placating God so that God might love us, but as God become man and loving us while we were incapable of truly loving God on account of our self-will (*Atonement*, 439). Also, we cannot say *how* God can be present to us *as* this man without surrendering his deity because any rationalistic attempt to do so would always end in false forms of "kenotic theories" (*Incarnation*, 76). This is a mystery, Torrance insists, that the New Testament never attempts to explain — a mystery that the Council of Chalcedon never attempted to explain; it is a mystery that is placed before us as "*the miracle of the Holy Spirit*," and "as the direct act of the eternal God" (*Incarnation*, 76). For Torrance, then, the fact of Christ, which is "embedded in history and in the historical witness of the New Testament, is the mysterious duality in unity of Jesus Christ, God without reserve, man without reserve, the eternal truth in time, the Word of God made flesh" (*Incarnation*, 3). But again, this fact cannot be known from an analysis of history because it includes the entrance of the eternal God into time in Jesus' history for our sakes, yet without ceasing to be God. This ultimately is a mystery so new and so baffling that it can only be known in faith, which allows Christ to reveal himself to us through the scriptural witness (*Incarnation*, 8, 83, 108, 164, 174–76, 233–34).

Since the fact of Christ is not simply a historical reality, "the reception of Christ's self-presentation requires a divine transcendent act within man corresponding to the divine transcendent act by which the Son of God became man. In other words, it requires the *Holy Spirit*. No one says that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (*Incarnation*, 27). Yet, because the doctrine of the Holy Spirit "is ousted and supplanted by Bultmann's notion of existential decision," Bultmann

---

4 This view stands in stark contrast to Karl Rahner's transcendental theology, which "must develop in a general ontology and anthropology an a priori doctrine of the God-Man, and in this way try to construct the conditions which make possible a genuine capacity to hear the historical message of Jesus Christ" (Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction To The Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych [New York: Seabury, 1978], 176–77).

speaks of encountering “the eschatological event in Christ and [appropriating] it . . . in such a way that the historical fact of Christ is left behind” (*Incarnation*, 268). In opposition, Torrance stressed the incarnation and atonement as acts of God within history both from the divine and the human side, insisting that Christ’s death on the cross was not simply the death of one man for others, but the act of God *as* man, without which atonement would be utterly immoral.<sup>5</sup> Holding together Christ’s divinity and humanity in his Christology and soteriology by insisting upon the unity of his person and work through the doctrine of the *hypostatic union* meant that Torrance could assert that any merely human consideration of Jesus would turn “the cross into the bottomless pit of darkness.” Unless Jesus is God acting for us in atoning reconciliation on the cross, we would have in Jesus only a man abandoned by a “distant god,” a “god who is monstrously unconcerned with our life. . . . But put God on the cross, and the cross becomes the world’s salvation” (*Incarnation*, 190). Because “the death of Jesus was an outworking of the incarnation of the judge in our humanity . . . it was in our human nature that the judge bore his own judgement. It was the full realisation of the holy will of God in our human nature, the full meting out of the divine condemnation against sin, the full outpouring of the divine love into and upon human nature” (*Atonement*, 125). Jesus could not be isolated from God even by God’s final judgment because “Jesus as man was God himself come as man” (*Atonement*, 125).

---

5 From the point of view of the law, as Paul saw it in Romans 5, “It is immoral for one person to die for another, or to allow oneself to be put to death for another, thereby at the same time making that person guilty of another’s blood” (*Atonement*, 125). This is why Torrance will not espouse only a forensic doctrine of justification; that could give the impression that this substitution of Christ for us is “make-believe” and is opposed to the biblical revelation that “speaks in the most astonishing terms of this substitutionary act of Christ” (*Atonement*, 125). In this sense, Torrance’s view of atonement as accomplished within the person of the mediator means that God established our human relation with himself apart from the law, in Christ’s entire life of obedience. Therefore, “Had Christ succumbed to the death of the cross, its substitutionary sacrifice would have been the most immoral deed in all the universe, and the only doctrine that could be got out of it would be the pagan idea of humanity placating an angry god by human sacrifice. That is partly why Paul lays such stress upon *the resurrection as the ground of justification*” (*Atonement*, 127).

This is truly a powerful insight which enables Torrance in both volumes to think his way through and beyond problematic rationalistic theological positions: deterministic views of election; views that reduce the eternal Word to Jesus' human history; views that do not take Jesus' message and action together with full seriousness; legalistic views of justification, together with various dualistic attempts to separate Jesus' humanity and divinity and thus present problematic understandings of atonement such as those that espouse some sort of conditional salvation, Pelagian views of grace, or moral-influence theories of atonement. It also enables him to avoid problematic explanations of revelation and of eschatology that fail to distinguish reconciliation and redemption (*Atonement*, 171–200), as well as rationalistic notions that lead to doctrines of universalism and limited atonement and what he called the "hyper-Calvinist" idea that Jesus "suffered only in his humanity" (*Atonement*, 184).<sup>6</sup>

Torrance always presents his positive positions with extensive biblical support, as when, for instance, he discusses the church and baptism and then redemption as a completed event in Christ that is "yet to be manifested" (*Atonement*, 193). He proceeds to discuss the biblical meaning of redemption referring to what he calls the "little apocalypse" (Luke 21:5-36 and also Matt. 24 and Mark 13). It is striking that in this section every footnote except one is a reference to a biblical text to illustrate his point. This is not an isolated situation in either book. One can see the same evidence in connection with his discussion of the resurrection, the ascension, and the biblical witness to Christ, as well as his further discussion of the church (*Atonement*, 315-400). Further examples can be found in his book on the incarnation as well.

Torrance's positions also display clear analysis and convincing explanations as when he opposed any attempt to make universalism a doctrine because he argued that its possibility as a future act of God meant that we could not know what would happen until the second coming so that any attempt to make this a doctrine really represented a form of rationalism that projected a logical necessity into God instead of respecting the fact that God is the one who judged everyone in his Son. Thus, Christ died for all so that God does not withhold himself from anyone, "even if they will not have him" (*Atonement*, 189). That

---

<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion of Torrance's view that God himself experiences suffering in Christ see Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, 146–55.

means that even those who inexplicably will not accept Christ's self-giving, experience the judgment of God's love and grace. Hence Torrance argues that atonement is both "sufficient and efficacious . . . for every human being" and that "it is the rock of offence, the rock of judgement upon which the sinner who refuses the divine love shatters himself or herself and is damned eternally" (*Atonement*, 189). This means that an eschatological reserve is needed to avoid substituting our judgments for God's. And this reserve is required because the risen and ascended Christ is coming again to complete what the Holy Spirit has begun since "the pouring out of the Spirit belongs to atonement. It is atonement actualising itself, really and subjectively within the personal lives of men and women, within their decisions and living actions, and upholding them creatively in their real relation with God" (*Atonement*, 189). Torrance does not restrict the efficacious work of atonement only to those who accept it but insists that such people are simply those who do "accept the decision God has already made on their behalf in Christ's atoning life and death" (*Atonement*, 190). Yet, this atoning death was undertaken for all; no one is excluded. Still, Torrance was equally emphatic that because God came among us *as man* we must also reject any idea of limited atonement since that would divide God from Christ and lead to ideas that Christ only suffered humanly (in which case atonement would not have been a completed event both from the divine and human side in the Person of the mediator); such erroneous thinking rests upon the "Nestorian heresy" (*Atonement*, 185). He illustrates beautifully how such thinking destroys the whole concept of atonement and suggests "that outside of Christ there is still a God of wrath who will judge humanity apart from the cross and who apart from the cross is a wrathful God. But that is to divide God from Christ in the most impossible way and to eliminate the whole teaching of the 'wrath of the lamb,' namely that God has committed all judgement to the Son" (*Atonement*, 185).

### **Christ's Continued Mediation and the Role of the Holy Spirit**

Torrance also explains our relations with Christ in ways that demonstrate just how essential Christ's continued mediation of himself is to any serious Christology or soteriology. Hence, since our faith and obedience are controlled by Christ's, we are not saved by our own acts but only by Christ's, who "through his Spirit gives

me a share in his obedience" (*Incarnation*, 28). This is possible because God is present and active in history *as* man. Such a view counters an instrumental understanding that would suggest we could speak of God's actions *in* and *through* Jesus and could know God's eternal being without knowing God through the risen and ascended Lord himself. In this regard, Torrance criticizes Bultmann's idea that "we cannot speak of God as he is in himself, but only of what he is doing to us and with us" because for Bultmann we could not make general statements about God such as that God is the creator of the world, but "only existential statements about our relation to him" (*Incarnation*, 287). For Torrance, unless we can speak about God objectively by way of analogy, we cannot speak meaningfully about God's actions in relation to us at all (*Incarnation*, 287–88). Bultmann's thinking undermined the possibility of true knowledge of God and damaged any real understanding of the significance of the cross. Elsewhere Torrance spoke against Bultmann's view of Christ's atoning death by asserting that for Bultmann God's presence and activity in Jesus' death are no different than in a fatal accident in the street,<sup>7</sup> while for the New Testament, it is an act of God that involves his judgment and grace, the grace of justification; Torrance was here criticizing what amounted to a separation of Christ's divine and human actions for us and thus constructing a God behind the back of Christ himself by undermining the significance of the *hypostatic union*. This explains why Torrance argued for the importance both of the empty tomb and Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead. Without these historical events in the life of Jesus that give meaning to Christian faith, our faith becomes self-enclosed and develops without the Holy Spirit's actually uniting us to the risen and ascended Lord. Hence, "The relation between faith and the Christ received by faith is the Holy Spirit: *conceptus de Spiritu Sancto*. Just as Jesus was conceived by the Spirit so we cannot say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (*Incarnation*, 102).<sup>8</sup> These are crucial insights that shape both Torrance's reading of Scripture and his view of scientific theology.

---

7 See Thomas F. Torrance, epilogue to *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 277.

8 For Torrance, faith "is the mode of the human reason adapted to divine revelation" (*Atonement*, 300).

In connection with Scripture, Torrance insists that the words of the risen Lord recorded in Matthew 28:19, to go into the whole world and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, were authentically Jesus' own words.<sup>9</sup> However, he believes that if one follows the thinking of Strauss and Bultmann,

that the gospel as we know it is not the creation of Jesus Christ but the creation of the first Christians, which they then projected back to the historical Jesus in order to invest him with it and put its message into his mouth, then we make the incredible assumption that the original church was the true originator of the gospel. . . . Such a conclusion is fantastic in the extreme, but it does set before us in very stark fashion the ultimate alternative — *either* the gospel was the product of the creative spirituality of the first Christians, *or* it derives from Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God. (*Incarnation*, 265–66)

This understanding of Scripture leads to a theology that cannot be scientific because it is nothing more than the symbolic or mythological projection of people's creative imagination. Such a theology regarding Jesus' person and work undermines the fact that scientific theology must recognize that words are subject to realities and that realities therefore are not subject to the words we use.<sup>10</sup>

### **Christology from Above**

The power of Torrance's Christology and soteriology resides precisely in his consistent repentant rethinking of all doctrinal issues in light of who Jesus really was and is as the incarnate, risen, and ascended Lord. Because of the *hypostatic union*, we must think about God from within the structures of space and time as God acted and acts in his Word and Spirit. Yet, as Torrance would later say, knowledge of God would be impossible without the bodily resurrection of Jesus himself: "The whole epistemic function of the incarnation . . . comes to its complete fruition in the resurrection of Christ in the fullness of his humanity. . . . The resurrection is therefore our pledge that statements about God in Jesus

---

9 See Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 2: 115–16; and Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 7.

10 See Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 34–35.

Christ have an objective reference in God, and are not just projections out of the human heart and imagination."<sup>11</sup>

To begin Christology from above, in Torrance's estimation, would run the risk of allowing Jesus' divinity to obliterate his true humanity as the humanity of the Word and thus open the door to docetism or Apollinarianism, which would undermine the fact that God actually became man in Jesus Christ and thus united divinity and humanity inseparably in his person so that all his works were the works of God acting *as man*; once again such an approach would mistakenly think of God acting instrumentally in a man for our benefit.<sup>12</sup> For Torrance, "docetic Christology . . . tended to transmute itself into human speculations or mythological constructs projected into God from below. . . . The Divinity of Christ was finally no more than a divinized human idea."<sup>13</sup> Even though docetic Christologies formally affirm Jesus' divinity, Torrance contends that they do not recognize his true and eternal deity as the only begotten Son of the Father known through the action of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Torrance bases his understanding of Jesus' human history in the inner relations of the Father and Son made known to us by Jesus himself in his ministry and after his death, resurrection, and ascension through the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> Hence,

The perfect human life of Jesus in all his words and acts reposes entirely upon the mutual relation of the Son to the Father and the Father to the Son. . . . The act of Jesus in laying down his life is grounded upon the entire solidarity and mutuality between the Father and the Son [so that] nothing is done in his human life except what issues out of the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. (*Incarnation*, 127)

---

11 Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 72–73.

12 Because Christ's humanity was *enhypostatic*, that is, it had its genuine human existence in the Word and only in the Word, "Christ's humanity was no docetic humanity, nor was his humanity merely instrumental in the hands of God. If this [atoning expiation] were a pure divine act it would not touch us in our humanity but pass over our head completely." Atonement was indeed a divine act but "wrought out of man's life as man's act" (*Atonement*, 122), even though it was done so only on the basis of the divine act — or better — it was God acting *as man* by virtue of the incarnation.

13 Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 113.

14 His biblical warrant for this is found in Matt. 11:27, Luke 10:22, and John 10:14–15.

While the mutual relationship of the Father and Son is “a closed relation,” we can enter it “through the incarnation of the Son, for in the perfect human life of Jesus the love and truth of God are addressed to man” in his historical relations with us (*Incarnation*, 128). Human beings are confronted with the very revelation and reconciliation of God himself in this man.

### **Analogy and the Fact of Christ**

This explains why Torrance began his lectures on the incarnation insisting that we “cannot compare the fact of Christ with other facts, nor can we deduce the fact of Christ from our knowledge of other facts” (*Incarnation*, 1). Like Barth, Torrance’s thinking was revolutionary because he believed that what was disclosed in Jesus’ life history was without analogy. His theology offers explanations of Jesus’ person and work that are sensible but that also unhesitatingly go their own way with positive results. For instance, in connection with the ascension, Torrance works out an interesting eschatology with positive insights for a proper understanding of the church and the sacraments. Rejecting the container or receptacle view of space, Torrance argues that Christ’s ascension teaches us that he intended a lengthy interval between his first and second coming so we can experience the new creation through faith until the redemption when Christ comes again (*Atonement*, 304–14 and 180–81; *Incarnation*, 319, 334). That is no mere mythical expectation but the expectation of a redemptive act that will be wrought by the same Jesus Christ who rose from the dead as the one who experienced God’s wrath and judgment for us. This is an insight filled with meaning because it operates on the assumption that the church was not left to itself in constructing the canon but is the historical form of Christ’s continued presence as the risen and ascended Lord grounded in the apostles’ teaching. Hence, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper actually are the historical forms of our present participation in the new creation. This realistic thinking avoids what Torrance calls “totalitarian” or idealist eschatologies that confuse the kingdom with present realities or future ideals instead of seeing that our lives are hidden with Christ in God (*Incarnation*, 326, 333).

In his work on atonement, Torrance also begins by acknowledging the mystery of God’s reconciling action in Christ, insisting that there is “no logical relation,

no formal rational continuity" between Christ's death and the forgiveness of our sins today (*Atonement*, 4). Thus, we cannot offer a merely rational explanation for what it means to speak of "the descent of the Son of God into our hell and the bearing by the Son of God of divine judgement on our behalf." Any such explanation "must presuppose a basic continuity . . . between man and God"; yet that is precisely what the atonement reveals to us is impossible. The very fact that "God himself had to descend into our bottomless pit . . . in order to construct continuity between us and God" demonstrates that the only continuity between Christ's death and our forgiveness is the one that "God himself achieves and makes through his atoning *act* and the intervention of his own *being*." This is why St. Paul said that preaching the cross "is foolishness, sheer unreason to 'the Greeks' [Gentiles]" (1 Cor. 1:22-25); in other words, "The cross provides a wisdom that 'the Greeks' or humankind in general know nothing of" (*Atonement*, 4). Hence, just as with the incarnation, so with the atonement, "We cannot think our way into the death of Christ because the continuity of our thinking and striving has been interrupted by it, but we may think our way from it if we follow the new and living way opened up to us in the crucifixion" (*Atonement*, 3). Torrance demonstrates exactly why both the meaning of sin and salvation can only be known through knowing God's grace and mercy revealed in Jesus' death and resurrection (*Incarnation*, 244-45, 255).

### **Bultmann and Tillich**

Torrance consistently opposed all attempts to understand Jesus along Bultmannian or Tillichian lines. Against Bultmann's thinking, there is no hearing of God's Word that can bypass the historical events of incarnation, resurrection, atoning death on the cross, ascension, and second coming. As we have seen, these are not mythical ways of thinking. Each event has a meaning that, in different ways, discloses God's love of us as his grace; and it is only in light of that grace that the depth of human sin can be seen at all and then seen as overcome in Christ from the divine and human side. Against Tillich's view that Jesus would not be the Christ without the community's belief in him,<sup>15</sup> Torrance insists that Jesus is

---

<sup>15</sup> Tillich wrote: "The believing reception of Jesus as the Christ, calls for equal emphasis. Without this reception the Christ would not have been the Christ, namely,

the Christ because he is the preexistent eternal Son who became man for us and for our salvation and does not surrender his eternal deity but exercises it under the conditions of human sin and alienation for our benefit: "It is not because Christ brings us benefits, that he is the Son of God, but the reverse. He is the Son, and it is because he is the Son who reveals God to us in and of himself that he heals us, gives us his benefits, and we know ourselves to be sheltered and healed in him" (*Incarnation*, 35). This perspective stands in marked contrast to Bultmann's statement that "the saving efficacy of the cross is not derived from the fact that it is the cross of Christ: it is the cross of Christ because it has this saving efficacy. Without that efficacy it is the tragic end of a great man."<sup>16</sup>

Against these perspectives, Torrance's analysis in both volumes takes seriously Jesus' human history as mystery and miracle, as in his emphasis on the virgin birth and the empty tomb. The virgin birth signifies that "Jesus was really and genuinely the son of a human mother, that he was born as other men are, of woman, and yet in a *unique way* which corresponds to his *unique person* as the

---

the manifestation of the New Being. . . . The receptive side of the Christian event is as important as the factual side. And only their unity creates the event upon which Christianity is based," (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], 2:99). Of course Torrance also insists upon the importance of our subjective appropriation of revelation. But he does not think that appropriation constitutes the event upon which Christianity is based!

16 Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: SPCK, 1954), 41. Bultmann here reverses the act of God for us with our experience of the benefits of the incarnation and atonement. Contrary to those who have attempted to rehabilitate Bultmann's view of faith in face of criticisms such as those of Torrance, it is important to see why this happens in his thinking. It is because, for all his insistence that faith lives by hearing the word of preaching, such faith is not empowered by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Jesus, who continues to mediate himself to us as the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord. For Bultmann, "The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection" (*ibid.*, 42). And that is why, for Bultmann, the event of Easter day "is nothing else than the rise of faith in the risen Lord" (*ibid.*, 42). This reasoning is the antithesis of scientific theology because it reduces Jesus' significance for faith to a historical event that receives meaning *from* faith and indeed is indistinguishable from faith.

Son of the eternal God who has entered into our humanity" (*Incarnation*, 98). This doctrine opposes both docetism and Ebionitism. What took place in Jesus' birth was an act of the sovereign Lord. But it was not an act of God "without man. On the contrary, man is fully involved, but he is the predicate and not the subject, not the lord of the event." This preeminent event of grace is the movement of God toward us in the incarnation; it is "one directional" and "cannot be reversed." What God does here as man in overcoming sin and reconciling us to himself is not grounded at all in human powers and capacities: there is a "real disqualification of human powers as capable of producing Jesus" (*Incarnation*, 99). By an act of the Holy Spirit, God re-creates our human existence in Mary; the Spirit is not "Mary's partner" but the creator God acting to bring about something entirely new from the virgin Mary. The birth of the Son of God was the birth into our sinful flesh of one who sanctified it by uniting it to God himself. "Grace takes a form in the birth of Jesus which we may take as a pattern or norm for all our understanding of grace" (*Incarnation*, 101). Hence, God takes the initiative, and Mary responds in faith — not in her own strength "but in the strength given her by the Lord, and she is blessed because of that, not because of her virginity" (*Incarnation*, 101).

### **Christ Is the Atonement**

The empty tomb is no mere legend but the essential empirical correlate of the historical fact that Jesus actually rose bodily from the dead (*Atonement*, 299–300). Everything hinges on this fact. Had Jesus not risen bodily from the dead, then "that would have indicated that the atonement had not been achieved, that he had not actually been able to stand in for us and take our place. . . . The atonement would have been a fiasco" (*Atonement*, 217). Torrance's stress upon the fact that "*Christ Jesus IS the atonement*" (*Atonement*, 94) pivots on the reality of the hypostatic union, from which we know that all of his human acts have no independent significance because they are *anhypostatic*: his humanity only exists as the humanity of the Word, which assumed our sinful flesh in order to destroy sin by bringing his eternal power and holiness to bear in living a sinless life of obedience in our place (*Atonement*, 216–18).<sup>17</sup> We are,

---

<sup>17</sup> Torrance repeatedly insists that in the incarnation God the Son assumed our

as Torrance says, "completely one with God in Christ" (*Atonement*, 94). This is indicated by the fact that the hypostatic union withstood all strains, including Jesus' real temptations and finally his experience of God-forsakenness on the cross so that the union of God and humanity in Christ now is and remains an eternal reality.

That is the reality of the new creation in which we participate now through the Spirit. Torrance thus can say that "Jesus Christ is in himself the hypostatic union of the judge and the man judged" (*Atonement*, 148). He was God who judged human sin and at the same time "the sin-bearer who bore our judgement and the penalty for our sin in his own life and death." He is thus "not only the turning of God to humanity, but the turning of humanity to God. It is in his own life that Jesus Christ achieves that reconciliation" (*Atonement*, 148). For this reason Torrance rejects all forms of self-justification in order to affirm that our true righteousness comes only in and through a gracious act of God in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus himself. We experience our justification and sanctification as we live from and in Christ himself, who is our atonement. This entails a "teleological suspension of ethics" (*Atonement*, 118), which means justification and sanctification are "not demonstrable from any ground in the moral order as such" and can only be "acknowledged and believed" as a genuine event that "has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us" (*Atonement*, 118). While we, as fallen creatures, use the law to hide from God, to avoid having to hand ourselves over totally to God in Christ in order to become what the law demands, we cannot become righteous through ethical behavior any more than we could through the law. Ethics and the law are not abrogated but are seen to be fulfilled only in the life of obedience lived by Christ.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Perhaps the best way to conclude this article review of these two superb books is by returning once again to Torrance's eschatology to see the power

---

sinful flesh and not some ideal prefallen humanity. Any undermining of this fact would destroy both the incarnation and atonement by opening the door to Apollinarianism, monophysitism, and Nestorianism. See, e.g., *Incarnation*, 61-5, 198-206 and *Atonement*, 366-70 and 438-47.

of his dogmatic insights. On more than one occasion Torrance rejected the idea that the church should be understood as the *extension* of the incarnation (*Atonement*, 369, 423, 407–9; *Incarnation*, 326–27, 330) because such a view always confuses the church with Christ, who empowers its existence but in no way depends on the church. Moreover, for Torrance, there are three forms of the church, in Israel, in Christ, and when Christ comes again. Israel, too, is part of Christ's resurrected body, Torrance maintained (*Atonement*, 348), so that the church does not replace Israel and did not come into being with the resurrection and Pentecost. That was its new birth (*Atonement*, 353). One therefore could say that for Torrance both Israel and the church need to learn the mind of Christ so that together they may think from a center in God and not from a center in themselves (*Atonement*, 373). The church cannot act as if it were the salvation of humanity because it has its oneness, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity not in itself but only in the one who comes as its redeemer. The church's existence, in other words, is grounded in the Trinity (*Atonement*, 381–84, 391).

Faith itself is rooted in Christ who comes again, and therefore "faith exists not only in hope in the epiphany of Christ; it is bound up with the veiling of Christ, with the ascension. . . . Faith can exist only where there is a gap, an eschatological reserve, between the present and the future, between actual participation in the kingdom here and now and the future manifestation of its glory." What this means is that if Jesus had manifested his full divine glory on earth "so that men and women were confronted with the ultimate majesty of God, then they would have been damned on the spot" since they would have been in direct confrontation with the final judgment (*Atonement*, 434). By veiling his "ultimate glory" Jesus was giving people room for decision. Faith therefore is ultimately eschatological in nature. The ascension means that Christ is leaving room for the gospel to be preached so that all might have the opportunity "for repentance and faith" (*Atonement*, 435). In Torrance's view the mission of the church is itself part of God's grace, "for it is God's grace alone that keeps back the dissolution of this age" (*Atonement*, 435). The very center of eschatology then concerns the fact that the church now participates in the "new creation" by virtue of its participation in the resurrection. To that extent the church must remain detached from patterns of this world that are still marked by sin and evil. The church must live by being renewed in Christ again and again. But that

means there is a constant tension in the church between its essential nature as it participates in the resurrection and as it exists in the world, which is not yet fully redeemed. "The form of this present world is law, but the essential character of the church's life is freedom in the Spirit" (*Atonement*, 435). In other words, "God's grace has set our life on a wholly new basis in which love and gratitude operate on the ground of what Christ has completed in his death and resurrection on our behalf [our justification by grace]" (*Atonement*, 435). Yet we are not left up in the air, so to speak, at this point. To be called by Christ to faith means allowing him to transform our minds so that we have the mind of Christ and thus obey the Father in freedom and not as a work of the law (*Atonement*, 443ff.).

Torrance contends that revelation "conflicts sharply with the structure of our natural reason, with the secular patterns of thought that have already become established in our minds through the twist of our ingrained mental alienation from God. We cannot become true theologians without the agonising experience of profound change in the mental structure of our innermost being" (*Atonement*, 443). That is what faithful theology is: "the assimilation of the mind of the church to the self-revelation of the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit" (*Atonement*, 444). For Torrance, this was the one key point of all theological inquiry: will we think "spontaneously and naturally" by allowing our minds to be "governed by the mind of Christ?" Will we thus think from a center in God rather than from a center in our own alienated minds (*Atonement*, 445–46)? Torrance ends his book on atonement with a call to allow the mind of Christ to shape our thinking and our behavior instead of allowing our minds and behavior to be shaped by the secular society in which we live. When that happens, he believes we will have a truly evangelical church, where people engage in "repentant rethinking," taking up their cross and following Christ, allowing his truth to heal their alienated minds, which are "inwardly hostile to the truth incarnate in the Lord Jesus" (*Atonement*, 446).

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **THE GOD WHO BELIEVES: FAITH, DOUBT, AND THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST**

and

### **THE GOD WHO REJOICES: JOY, DESPAIR, AND THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST**

**Kettler, Christian D. 2005**

Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010. 205pp and 328 pp.

The history of invention encompasses countless Aha! moments, those unpredictable and uncanny heuristic experiences in which the familiar comes to life in a fresh way or the inscrutable is unscrambled. Previously unimagined implications and possibilities emerge. Consider water, for example. Over the centuries the uses for this simple chemical compound have evolved from floating and transporting objects to conducting electricity to the creation of ice sculptures. In every case, someone identified a new use that was based on properties inherent in water all along.

In analogous fashion, God's revelation includes features that have long lay underexplored, or at least not fully articulated, until some combination of need and gifting converges to bring them to light. Some will resist this notion, suspecting mere theological novelty. However, under closer scrutiny and testing we find that a theological resource we desperately need was there all along. This occurred in the first few centuries of the church's life as various teachers brought forth theological proposals (e.g., Arius, Apollinaris) that forced the church to reach further into God's revelation, find what was really there, and put it in a form that would secure the church against threats that had previously not been encountered.

Though of course not at the same level of theological magnitude as the early councils, Christian Kettler practices this type of exploratory process as he probes a theme embedded both in early Christian thought, most notably that of St. Athanasius, in the fourth century, and much later, in the twentieth century, by Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, and Ray S. Anderson. In *The God Who Believes* (2005) and *The God Who Rejoices* (2010), Kettler takes up this theme — namely, the “vicarious humanity of Christ” (included in the subtitle of each book) — and wrestles with its implications for human existence, particularly the complex phenomena of faith and doubt, then joy and despair, respectively. His contributions in these two books find their place among other works in which he pursues that same motif, for example, in *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Cascade, 2011). All along the way Kettler reflects the profound impact this theme has had on his own life and thought, particularly through the writings of Barth, Torrance, and Anderson.

As Kettler is quick to admit, the combination of “vicarious” and “Christ” is not foreign to Christians (at least in the Western theological tradition). What some may find puzzling, however, is the use of “humanity” instead of “death” to link “vicarious” and “Christ.” In *The God Who Believes* (hereafter *GWB*), he draws on T. F. Torrance to explain this move.

In an older theology, it was common to speak of the vicarious *death* of Christ, in the sense that Christ died in our place, was our substitute, on the cross. While not meaning to dilute the importance of the death of Christ, Torrance urges that the vicarious death must be seen in terms of the wider context of both the entire humanity of Christ and our entire humanity. His humanity involves a vicarious act. The nature of Christ’s vicarious work is not simply one moment on the cross, but his entire life, so that the entirety of our lives might be affected (5-6).

Thus the substitution of “humanity” for “death” does not negate or ignore the affirmation that Christ’s death is vicarious for us. Rather, it broadens the concept of vicariousness by recognizing that the effects of sin include, but extend beyond, guilt, resulting in the need for Christ to take upon himself the full extent of our broken human experience in order to fully redeem us.

Though Torrance gave extensive attention to this theme, Kettler takes up the question afresh with courage and insight, vividly presenting aspects of human brokenness that are often difficult to articulate, yet resonate deeply with all. For

example, he opens *GWB* with a clear summary of how this theme applies to the complex relationship of doubt and faith.

Here is what this book is about: the relationship of the humanity of Christ to our doubt and how that humanity includes a genuine faith that should be the basis for our faith. Can we say that *Jesus believes*, not just as an example of a believer, but *believes for me and in my place, vicariously*, so that I can be helped in my unbelief (Mark 9:24)? Can we say, “*Jesus believes . . . help me with my unbelief*”? Does Jesus believe even when it is difficult, if not impossible, for me to believe (*GWB*, xii)?

Throughout the book, Kettler insists that this does not negate the call or need for our own faith. Rather, it liberates our faith from bearing the ultimate burden of believing acceptably (a subtle and insidious form of legalism!). We are called to believe and are free to believe, even with our weak and halting and vacillating faith, by participating in the faith of the One who has believed for us.

In both books, Kettler seeks to locate a deeper and broader layer to the bedrock premise of the incarnation. The deeper layer to that premise is that in Jesus Christ, God has personally stepped into all the places of desolation and brokenness that constitute human life on this side of the fall; that the extent of God’s experiential solidarity with us is bounded only by the extent of sin’s impact. For some, the theological implication may seem strange — that is, through the incarnation God has entered our struggles of faith and the mysteries of our joy and despair. Yet therein lies the potency of Kettler’s claim, that as fully human and fully God, Jesus has reconciled *all* our failings, inadequacies, and ambivalence *vicariously*. In keeping with Torrance’s own theological paradigm, we find here the soteriological significance of the *hypostatic union*, the purpose of the incarnation being far more than utilitarian and actually constituting a material aspect of God’s saving act.

Kettler argues that christocentric theology must not be limited to particular metaphysical concerns about Christ’s nature but must move further.

A christocentric theology demands that we take existential issues in humanity seriously. Too often the concern of theology has been about the precise relationship between the deity and the humanity of Christ without delving deeply into the radical implications of the Word that became flesh for the world of despair, guilt, shame, weakness, loneliness, anxiety, and doubt (*GWB*, 9).

While he is clear that Christ's hypostatic union constitutes the essential ground of efficacy for Christ's vicarious humanity, Kettler insists that we draw on the vast implications of that divine-human nature. Those implications stretch far beyond comfortable and conventional affirmations, offering rich resources for life *coram Deo* and for ministry to others.

In *GWB* Kettler develops this case in relationship to the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of faith. Scripture in general and Jesus in particular clearly call for faith and even make faith a determinative adjudicating factor for our lives. Yet faith is often subject to forces seemingly outside the control of the one who believes. Human living involves countless experiences in which faith is abused or distorted; even one's capacities for reliable, healthy believing can be crippled. Despite the fact that for some people faith seems simple, the reality of the journey for others is that faith mysteriously vacillates despite their own desires or efforts. Kettler draws on the vicarious nature of Christ's humanity to argue that Christ's exercise of faith on our behalf constitutes a first-order act in which our stumbling attempts at faith find acceptance with God as acts of a second order.

In order for Christ's faith to be genuinely vicarious, he must not only trust God perfectly, as God is to be trusted, but he also must take upon himself our doubts. Thus, through the hypostatic union our doubts find a reconciled place in the heart of the Father. Kettler observes regarding Christ's cry of dereliction in Mark 15:34 that "if one views this cry in a *vicarious* sense, it is a cry not just of Jesus but also on behalf of and in place of all humanity. . . . In a vicarious sense . . . Jesus is crying out for all of us, making our questions his own" (*GWB*, 50). The practical, personal result is that "there is certainty in the faith of Jesus in that we can lean on his faith, not our own, for that certainty. We can have a 'paradoxical certainty' because of the certainty of the faith of the Crucified One. The foundation of that faith is the love of the Son for the Father through the Spirit" (53). God actually becomes our advocate rather than our adversary (54) in matters of faith!

The significance of Christ's vicarious humanity for our faith extends beyond the act of believing to the conditions and content of belief. Not only does he believe acceptably on our behalf, but he also knows the Father truly and provides for our knowledge of God to be substantive and genuine, even though partial and flawed. Kettler illustrates this point by contrasting it with a familiar paradigm

of knowing God: according to this paradigm, knowledge of God is the result of a biblical calculus in which the propositions of Scripture are validated through various efforts at reconciling and harmonizing the technicalities of the text. This understanding reduces the knowledge of God to abstraction. However, Kettler contends, in the actual knowledge of God provided vicariously by Christ, "revelation is not just information about God, provided by the instrumentation of Jesus, but Jesus himself in his own knowledge, worship, and faith in the Father is the substance of revelation" (*GWB*, 74). Such knowledge, as the content of our faith, is relational knowledge, encompassing the ambiguities and mysteries that characterize any genuine relationship that involves contingent beings.

To apply this theological paradigm specifically to faith and doubt, Kettler devotes a chapter of *GWB* to the nature of doubt. He argues that doubt is intrinsically problematic when it constitutes a questioning of God akin to that which took place in the garden of Eden. Yet, "doubt springs forth when faith ties itself to outside criteria, making itself liable to be criticized by reason, tradition, etc." (*GWB*, 48). Thus he argues for the possibility of certainty of faith, but only as faith is "grounded on the external Word of God" (*GWB*, 48). By this he means faith in Jesus' faith in God, Jesus having taken upon himself our doubting condition without himself being unfaithful. So, doubt is drained of its potency as an unavoidable intellectual struggle, not as various lines of evidence are accumulated and marshaled against the corrosive forces of doubt, but as faith rests on the One who believes on our behalf. In this circumvention of conventional apologetic approaches to doubt, Kettler recognizes and accepts the paradoxical character of both doubt and faith. Faith, Kettler indicates (appealing to both Kierkegaard and Barth), may coexist as angst and certainty. The certainty derives from "the faith of the Crucified One" and "the love of the Son for the Father through the Spirit" (*GWB*, 53). Certainty of faith, then, is not to be defined or sought as a particular state of mind (a subtle but deadly form of anthropocentrism) but as constant reference to and reliance on the faith of Jesus.

From consideration of the nature of doubt, Kettler moves into deeper consideration of the nature of Jesus' vicarious work as it relates to our faith. He asks, "How does the atonement of Christ affect our doubting selves? How does the atonement affect our very knowledge of God?" (*GWB*, 59). In framing the question thus, Kettler relocates the theological resource for faith. Whereas

theologians often appeal to the ministry of the Holy Spirit rather discretely as our resource for faith and against doubt (cf. Calvin), for Kettler, the atonement provides for our faith — our genuine personal knowledge of God — thus *partially* establishing a more fully trinitarian solution to doubt and resource for faith. Kettler insists that “the knowledge of the Son reminds us of a knowledge from within God, within the triune relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (*GWB*, 67). However, this is only *partially* more trinitarian, in the sense that Kettler acknowledges but does not develop or fully integrate the role of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s atoning work for our faith. If other approaches risk treating God’s saving acts as a “tag-team” effort with the Spirit picking up where Jesus leaves off, Kettler’s exposition may risk treating the vicarious work of Christ in isolation, recognizing the Spirit on the roster but without making it clear when and how the Spirit ever actually leaves the bench and enters the game.

Kettler leaves no doubt, however, that through this “sweet exchange’ . . . between our limited minds of reason and the mind of Christ, a mind of faith in God the Father” (*GWB*, 67), we are provided a place of rest for our faith. While we must risk ourselves on Jesus to find this rest, “as a divine burden, not ours, it [this exchange] is meant to bring an end to doubt” (*GWB*, 76). Faith, then, is no longer contingent on our ability to resolve the torturous questions or reconcile the conundrums that impede faith. Those questions and conundrums are reconciled in Jesus’ vicarious humanity, and we can rest in him. We are relieved of the burden of knowing God directly on our own, which is a crushingly unattainable responsibility in light of the inescapable irregularities and limitations of our epistemological capacities. Rather, we can rest our feeble faith on Jesus’ knowledge of God; to know him is to know God.

In Kettler’s subsequent, companion volume, *The God Who Rejoices* (*GWR*), he extends this line of argument into the realms of joy and despair, noted in the subtitle, probing the significance of Christ’s vicarious humanity for those potent and elusive existential themes. Early in his presentation he acknowledges the vital role of the Holy Spirit in “bringing us into the relationship between the Father and the Son” (*GWR*, xviii). That work of the Spirit is to be recognized in its effect: “The result of the work of the Spirit . . . is a new humanity” (*GWR*, xviii). “There is not,” Kettler insists, “a causal or mechanical relation between our humanity and the Spirit but always a mystery (John 3:8)” (*GWR*, xviii).

Despair, Kettler observes, “is the personality of doubt” (*GWR*, 14), awakened by the very nature of existing as persons who are built for love in community. The capacity for genuine relatedness as those made in God’s image inevitably involves the vulnerability to despair when and if the character of that relatedness is violated. And it has been violated! Kettler deftly points out that while despair is sometimes viewed as a spiritual deficit, it actually indicates the richly textured and finely nuanced nature of our humanness. Two implications follow. First, “the solution is not” (as some spiritual formation movements emphasize) “to empty ourselves of our humanity, but to seek an intentionality of community that is a participation in the intentionality of community sought by the Son with the Father” (*GWR*, 15). Second, “the relationship of the Son to the Father is very instructive . . . and perhaps helpful in understanding how the Son can suffer, and despair, and still trust the Father, even still have joy. . . . The despair he feels in the garden of Gethsemane and on the cross is because of a relationship of trust and dependence” (*GWR*, 15). Thus the vicarious humanity of Christ declaws despair as a spiritual vice, recognizes its roots in the dignity and nature of our humanity, and points us to the source of relationship in which it can find a healing context.

Returning to the role of the Holy Spirit (to which he devotes more attention in *GWR*), Kettler challenges the popular notion that the Spirit’s ministry eliminates despair. Rather, through the incarnation God identifies as closely as possible with the brokenness of our human experience (in this case, the experience of despair) so that God meets us there through the Spirit. This meeting is what allows the Spirit to “groan’ on our behalf (Rom 8:23)” and “be ‘grieved’ in Eph 4:30” (*GWR*, 52). The implications are gripping. He states, “When it comes down to it, only Christ and faith can dare accept despair from God — the despair of a Holocaust, or other innocent and needless suffering . . . if we really believe in a God of love” (*GWR*, 54–55). The vicarious humanity of Christ, meeting us in the most unimaginable depths of human despair through the Holy Spirit, constitutes a potent and largely untapped theodicy.

But what of joy? Is joy a phenomenon that needs any reconciliation? In his chapter titled “The Problem of Joy,” Kettler points out that joy is not as simple as it seems. Joy takes many forms, sometimes overlapping with the concept we call “happiness” but also deriving a profound and complex character from God’s grace in the gift of creation. That is to say, we are made for joy and made with

capacities for joy such that we intrinsically long for it. Yet we sense and long for more than we can grasp. The paradox of joy is that the more heightened our sensitivities for joy, the more painful is our awareness of the gap between what we sense and what we experience. Thus joy and despair are siblings; one cannot be authentically considered, understood, or experienced without the other. So joy also stands in need of reconciliation and healing.

The arts, Kettler points out, provide vivid windows into this paradoxical phenomenon called joy. Through the realm of the aesthetic we find expressions of joy and despair poignantly intensified. Scripture captures this with references to how the full range of human emotions is expressed to God in the emotive language of the arts. Joy and despair, for Kettler, constitute much more than a thin layer of "experience" that Christians can easily trivialize and dismiss in favor of supposedly more substantive realms. Nor should these be treated with suspicion, as if they were epistemologically unreliable. We cannot understand our humanness apart from joy and despair. And if our humanness is fundamentally alienated, the need for Christ's reconciling, atoning work is nowhere more poignant than in these realms.

What then is the incarnational answer to joy? Kettler asks rhetorically whether exhortations to joy such as the apostle Paul offers in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 are artificial and self-defeating in light of life's disappointments and losses. The answer is no, he contends, highlighting "Christ's vicarious joy" as "the foundation of all such rejoicing" (*GWR*, 126). Only joy as Christ experienced it on our behalf can adequately account for what is lacking and broken in our lives and still allow us to find authentic joy. So joy and despair always go together, and "living with both joy and despair does not mean trying for a 'synthesis' that does not take joy or despair seriously enough" (*GWR*, 144). Rather, "the problem of joy is not how to get rid of despair in order to be joyful but how to accept the sorrow and the joy together (without sorrow demanding equal billing with joy). We need Christ's vicarious sorrow and joy for this" (*GWR*, 144).

Throughout both books Kettler makes illustrative use of Wendell Berry's fictional character Jayber Crow from Berry's novel by the same name. In Berry's tale, Crow is a never-married, small-town barber whose simple but deeply reflective life emerged from disillusionment and unanswered questions while in seminary. Crow's deeply spiritual life does not follow the contours of

the conventional churchly religion that marked his upbringing and seminary experience. He is in love with a married woman named Mattie, yet he chooses never to express that love, choosing instead to protect the integrity of all by living with his unexpressed and unrequited affections in the sanctity of his own heart. Crow's spiritual wrestlings and affections for Mattie provide for Kettler an image of the inextricable relationship of joy, despair, belief, and doubt as they unfold in human experience.

Jayber knows that his love for Mattie may never find expression, yet he also knows it has its own sacredness in both the joy and the despair. He suffers but demands no resolution of that angst. Kettler asks, "Is there a problem of joy because of the presence of despair? Yes, but in the presence of Jesus, the one who embodies the kingdom of God, is a presence that can say Yes for us, even if we are unable; Yes in affirming the goodness and mercy of God" (*GWR*, 177). Here Kettler offers eschatological perspective by pointing to a theodicy that qualitatively relativizes the conundrum rather than attempting a quantitative rationalization of those inequities. All attempts at rationalizing or making sense of our joy and despair come up short. However, God's decisive "Yes" to us through Jesus Christ circumvents the dilemma and permits us to traverse the inscrutability of joy and despair with integrity.

At the heart of Kettler's case is the virtue of gratitude. Gratitude to God becomes the wellspring of our ability to receive suffering, to live with our anxieties and misgivings without enslavement to them on the one hand or a superficial dismissal and denial of them on the other. Gratitude is response, response to the One whose vicarious person and work have relativized all our brokenness without the false expectation of immediate deliverance. Gratitude liberates us from the unbearable and unattainable burden of a wrinkle-free faith and liberates us for lives of rejoicing in the middle of all circumstances. Herein lies the possibility of responding to the numerous biblical commands to rejoice.

It might be a stretch to say that Kettler has broken new ground in these works. After all, he is plowing along contours identified long ago, then tended by luminaries such as Barth and Torrance. Yet, sadly, this fertile field is little known and certainly has not been developed to its potential. So, the fresh work he has done, rather, shows us what the soil in this undertended field is capable

of producing. And in the end, that's just about as good as truly breaking new ground.

Kettler develops his case courageously, with a pastor's heart, and from the vantage point of his own journey as a follower — a believer in — Jesus, with the detours, obstacles, and potholes that any thoughtful, serious believer can expect. This lends a refreshing dose of realism — earthy sanity — to his expositions. It's difficult not to be captivated and touched in some deep recesses of our lives, whether those be terrifying or merely puzzling.

If criticisms or questions are to be posed to Kettler regarding these works, they could begin with the particular way in which he appeals (or at some obvious points, does not appeal) to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Though it was not his primary purpose to deal with pneumatology, and he does repeatedly deal with the role of the Spirit, the actual efficacy of Christ's vicarious humanity seems rather underdeveloped. The emphasis on Christ's believing as the counterweight to our own believing sometimes seems to overlook the importance Scripture places on the Spirit's role in our believing.

Perhaps it would help if his statement of the problem was adjusted — for example, when citing J. B. Torrance, Kettler rightly pushes against the danger of emphasizing faith in a way that throws us back on the resources of our own believing. Yet, he may mislocate the problem, or at least he may identify only part of the problem. The problem is not only that too much emphasis or an improper emphasis is placed on the human act of faith but also that the human act of faith is so often treated apart from the Spirit's role (illumination and enablement) in that faith.

The solution is not to overdevelop the efficacy of Christ's vicarious humanity in standalone fashion but to place that comprehensive vicarious humanity in a more robustly pneumatological framework so that we have a better place to put the importance and act of human believing, rather than rest it all on Christ's faith. The role of the Spirit can be emphasized and the human act of believing still be recognized as relative to the defining work of Christ on our behalf. This would give more substance to the insistence that our faith is still important, a claim that Kettler makes but without ever offering a satisfactory answer for why or how that is the case. Our faith is possible because it is enabled by the Spirit, and to that end we should appeal to God for the Spirit.

Second, Kettler needs to deal more thoroughly with the nature and significance of Jesus' rebukes about doubt and lack of faith. It's puzzling that Kettler admits, "The dependence of the Son on the Father does not exclude the responses of the disciples. The disciples are exhorted to acknowledge Jesus and not deny him so that he will acknowledge and not deny them before 'my Father.'" (*GWB*, 31). But he does not address how this could be the case. Nor does he explain how this does not call his premise into question. If Kettler thinks we must live with tension here, it would be helpful for him to note that.

Third, there are times when Kettler seems to make novel or curious claims, such as, "If there is a vicarious humanity of Christ there is also a vicarious deity of Christ. Christ represents and stands in for us before the Father. So he also represents and stands in for the Father [citing Matt 11:27]" (*GWB*, 32). Likewise he states, "Jesus predicts that his disciples will be handed over to be tortured, put to death, and hated 'because of my name' (Matt 24:10 cf. v.22). The follower of Jesus will now act vicariously for Jesus ('because of my name')" (*GWB*, 34). Using the language of vicariousness in this manner may be a theological interpretation of (or inference from) the biblical texts that are cited, but is hardly substantiated by any notable commentary on those texts (either "conservative" or "liberal"). Theological musings such as these give the impression of trying to stretch the theological paradigm around biblical texts that do not easily support the point, serving only to obscure or even undermine the credibility of the case for a more comprehensive vicariousness. Overall, some of the biblical arguments Kettler makes are more convincing than others.

Fourth, Kettler's case rests heavily, though not exclusively, on the interpretation of  $\epsilon\nu \pi\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota \zeta\omega \tau\eta \tau\omicron\upsilon \upsilon\iota\omicron\upsilon \tau\omicron\upsilon \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$  in Galatians 2:20 as an objective rather than a subjective genitive. He highlights this as "a favorite verse of T. F. Torrance's" (*GWR*, xvi) and recognizes that there is scholarly debate about this point. While there is certainly substantial support (though by no means consensus) for the objective interpretive option among biblical scholars, it would have been helpful for Kettler to develop a bit further the case for the objective interpretation, since so much theological weight in this case rests on that grammatical point.

One final, personal note that may seem rather unconventional. My completion of this review was interrupted and delayed by the suicide of my younger brother. Prior to that time Chris Kettler's two fine books had found a nook in my heart as

he gave language, validation, and theological resources for vicissitudes of my own faith and life. His books were already on my list of recommendations for my students because he extended the voice and impact of a tradition (especially the Torrance/Anderson edition of it) that has been powerfully formative and sustaining in my life and ministry for years. I eagerly gobbled and promoted them as much-needed voices in evangelical circles where Christ's vicariousness is generally limited to his death and linked to a largely forensic atonement.

After the jarring impact of my brother's death and in the tangled web of questions that will linger unanswered for my family, Chris's case proved to be an even deeper well than I knew. When one faces crushing loss and unanswerable questions and unfixable damage, the central issue shifts from "What can I do about this?" (because there is nothing) to "Where do I put this?" While this shift may make us feel more helpless, I now believe that it is a good move. It's good because our helplessness is so often the case anyway, despite our illusions that we both can and must "do something" about the forces and factors that press in on our lives. Chris has done us an enormous service by taking this tragically underattended and underdeveloped, though theologically rich, theme of Christ's vicarious humanity and holding up in its light some of the most deeply broken, yet deeply human aspects of our lives before God: faith and doubt, joy and despair. Whatever the circumstances in which we might experience those phenomena, they constitute currents that run throughout every life. Whether for our own lives or those we serve in various ministry capacities, we need a much deeper theological well to draw from for the brutal, glorious, inscrutable realities of this journey. Chris Kettler has dug that well a little deeper, perhaps at a different angle, one where we did not even realize there was water. But he knew it was there all along and he got us to more of it. And his work makes us realize there's more where that came from.

***Don J. Payne, PhD***

***Associate Dean/Assistant Professor***

***of Theology and Ministry***

***Denver Seminary***

*don.payne@denverseminary.edu*