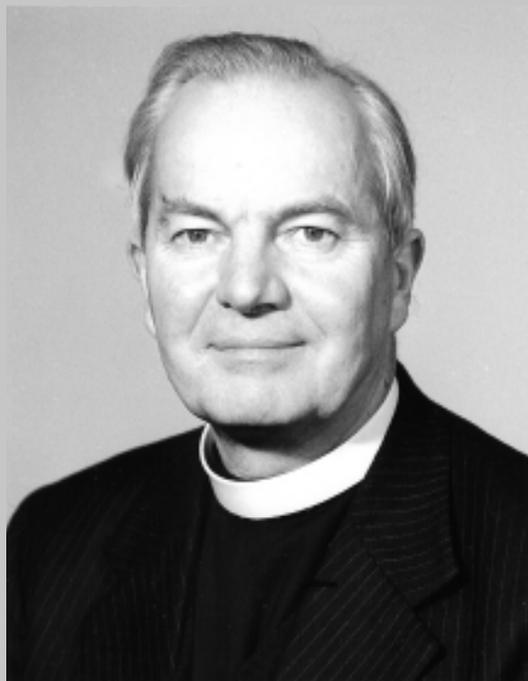


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Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship



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READING GENESIS 1:2

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ABSTRACT: Genesis 1:2 needs to be read and understood as a part of the confession of the "very good," not evil, creation according to the witness of Moses to the Revelation of God with us. As such, the verse participates in the establishment of those primordial and constitutive principles we need to recover in our time, so that we may learn to articulate the justification and sanctification of God's beginning with the cosmologies of our modern sciences. Karl Barth's tryst with the consensus of modern scholarship on the significance of the verse thus requires a new and in-depth interpretation in the light of a cognitive relationship between biblical and scientific theology today, with which Professor Thomas F. Torrance has challenged the Church's proclamation of the Gospel of God in the World.

Genesis 1:2 is to be heard in concert with Moses' confession of the work of the Creator in the whole of his Creation Week. The claims of Moses, the Prophet of Israel, depend upon his dialogue with the Great I-AM the Lord God, according to his revelation for his people among the nations, in the events of the Voice from the flames of a "Burning Bush" speaking with his chosen Servant at Horeb. The days and nights as the Time and times of God's Creation Week are what they are because the Creator is who he is as the Redeemer of Israel in his self-revelation with Moses. Genesis 1:2 is to be heard in resonance with the whole of this Week and especially in the whole of Genesis 1:1-5, the first day of the Week.

From the Beginning of this Time and times to the blessing of God with them, we are with Moses given to know that in the Beginning the whole of the creation, with humankind made in his image and likeness, was made "very good" and "blessed." We understand that any exegesis of Genesis 1:2 must be interpreted as resonating thus with this "very good" creation of God, even from its Beginning with God. I will argue that any abyss posited between Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 1:2 in which they may be interpreted in opposition to one another and the whole of the first day of the Creation Week is to be rejected. Moses' confession of the Week with its doctrines of *creation out of nothing*, *creation out of chaos*, and *creation as light* together provide the ground on which we may understand God's Beginning of his creation. The Voice of the "light" that we are given to hear in the Beginning is not another voice than the Voice that spoke with Moses from the Burning Bush beside the Mountain of God at Horeb. The "*chaos and emptiness, the darkness upon the faces of the deep, the cherishing of the Spirit of God over the (primordial) waters*" are the ground on which "Day One" of the confession is made. The Creation Week which the Prophet of Israel and the Servant of God proclaimed against all the idol and myth making prevalent among the nations of the Ancient Near East then, is entirely "very good" and "blessed" with and for God from beginning to its blessed formation as the creation of God.

The great Swiss theologian, Karl Barth, has commented on Genesis 1:2 with his interpretation of the text: "This verse has always constituted a particular *crux interpretum* — one of the most difficult in the whole Bible — and it is no small comfort to learn from Gunkel that it is a 'veritable mythological treasure chamber.'¹

1 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 102. In 1946, the American scholar, Jack Finnegan, could compare Genesis 1 to Babylon's *Enumah Elish* and refer the terms of Genesis 1:2 as belonging to the *Tiamat* of the mythological world of Babylonian cosmogony. While recognizing the differences of Moses' confession, the similarities have become more the focus of attention (*Light From The Ancient Past*, Princeton, 53). Thus, the difficulties are introduced into the interpretation of the verse as problems of borrowing and assimilating terms while setting them in some new context. This view is taught in our universities with dogmatic force today. An opposite view has been proposed by Paul L. Seely in his article "The First Days of Genesis in Concordist Theory and in Biblical Context," *PSCF*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (June 1997), 85-95. My article in the same publication on "Natural Theology," 96-104, represents my early struggles to understand Barth and the problem of the relationship of the terms and their meanings in the various contexts we may read among the ancient

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After a thorough examination and analysis of the history of the exegesis of this verse, Barth concludes, in one of the fine print sections of his *Church Dogmatics*,

“Our only option is to consider v.2 as a portrait, deliberately taken from myth, of the world which according to his revelation was negated, rejected, ignored and left behind in his actual creation.”²

The verse is thus thought to express that which opposes God’s “perfect” and “good” beginning of his creation. Barth will thus proceed to develop his understanding of *Das Nichtige* (the “nothingness” of the verse’s implications) as belonging to the mystery of Evil in this world. This is the world in which the “impossible possibility” would be realized against the “very good” and “blessed” intentions of the will of God as the Creator of the creation. The *chaos* (ΤΟΧΥ) and *emptiness* (ΒΟΧΥ), *darkness* (ΧΟΣΗΚΗ) and *deep* (ΤΕΗΟΜ) of the *waters* (ΜΑΥΙΜ) *brooded over* (ΜΕΡΑΧΕΡΗΕΘΗ) by the Spirit of God is often thought of as impotent in the face of Evil in God’s creation. The words of Genesis 1:2 are terms whose origins may be found rooted in the cosmogonies of the myths and animated idols of the ancient peoples and made comparable with the intention of the writer in Genesis 1. As the Prophet of Israel and the Servant of God, as the Confessor of the Creator of the creation, we are made to seek to contradict the contradiction of the idol and myth makers against God and his “very good” or ‘perfect’ creation of God in the Beginning, a far cry from the Voice of the ‘burning bush’ or the Voice of “light” in this Beginning. The world of Genesis 1:2 is made in this interpretation to belong to terms whose significance is not God’s creation but an evil world against him. Similarities and comparisons between the ancient cosmogonies and Moses’ cosmology have rendered the terms of Genesis 1:2 as unfit for God’s intention and purpose in a world that is his creation. Perhaps it is the very uniqueness of this “very good” and “blessed” creation of God that is being despised here. It is, perhaps, the very uniqueness of the confession of the

cosmogonies and cosmologies. Modern analytical interpretation of texts suffers generally from a lack of understanding of a truly modern scientific methodology.

2 Ibid., 102-110. Barth surprisingly, with American scholarship at this point, attempts to read the “rudimentary” conditions laid down in v.2 as those which deny the will of the Creator. He then seeks to contradict the contradiction the verse signifies against the whole of the confession of the Week of the Creator.

cosmos of the creation, according to Moses, that gives his interpreters so many problems in the history of the interpretation of his prophecy about the creation.³

Barth's grasp of Genesis 1:2 and his assertion that *Das Nichtige* or the "nothingness" of Israel's "creation theory" is a contradiction of the Creation Week, the contradiction of Evil to be contradicted by the Creator, and is thoroughly explored in its form and content in the history of its exegesis. The relationship between the creation and the covenant with Israel thus forms the basis of his arguments in his volumes on the theology of his concept of the Word of God in this world.⁴ I believe that his understanding of the meaning of Genesis 1:2 suffers from the fashionable and general consensus of modern or post-modern methods of historical-critical-analytical methods of biblical interpretation in our times. I now think that Barth's grasp of the verse suffers from a partial understanding of the purpose of Moses' confession and testimony to the revelation of the Word of God. Certainly, he is justified to seek to understand Moses' God in opposition to what is against the Creator's will, with the "very good" creation, but is he justified in claiming the dark as Evil, without any Good, as the first day of that

3 Barth's exegesis of Genesis 1 did take seriously, with many of the fathers of the early Church, the assumption that it was in the light of the Incarnation that we may seek to understand the sense the "good" and "very good" we read in the confession of Moses. In this light, he can argue, that the "nothingness" of the creation is to be identified with evil and sin as the dark opposing God's intention and purpose in his creation. But this understanding then sees the cosmos of the creation as the "*strange and alien world of the Bible,*" a world in which theology needs to be delivered from any influence of any of the various particular cosmologies laid down in the history of our "Western" civilization. In this way the great theologian avoids any confrontation with "natural theologies," including the claims of modern physics upon his exegetical efforts, and this frees him to develop his theology. (For Torrance's meeting with Barth on this issue see *Space, Time, & Resurrection*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1976, ix-xiii.) Torrance goes on to argue that the epistemological claims of modern physicists upon the relationship between the revelation of God and a "natural theology" ought to be accepted in our times. The fact that Barth never read Einstein or the 'Quantum people' of our times needs to be overcome.

4 See my article entitled "God and the Nothingness," in *Quodlibet Journal* Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 2000), for my early understanding of Barth and the problem between the meaning of the "nothingness" and the *nature* of the creation. We may not identify the "*nihilo*" with modern views of the "void" in our Big Bang cosmology today!

creation? I will argue that Evil appears nowhere in Genesis 1:1–2:3, and is only introduced in the account of the covenanted relationship between God and Adam as read later in chapter 2 and in chapter 3. The terms of Genesis 1–2:3 are all significantly a part of the “very good” creation whose vitality across the ages has given Moses’ confession an appropriate correspondence with our efforts to understand the nature of the universe.

Today, we tend to disregard the harmony implicated in the concert between the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, our understanding of *chaos*, *emptiness*, *darkness*, and *the deep of the faces of the waters* of the primordial world, embraced by the Spirit of God, and the speaking of the Voice of God we are given to hear as the source of the positing of “light” in Day One of the Beginning.⁵ Our willingness to divorce the power of God in the Beginning (*creation out of nothing*) and the Spirit of God (*brooding over or cherishing or sustaining*) the unformed earth under the heavens and the earth, and the Voice of the Creator as the source of “light” in the cosmos of the creation obviates our natural unease with the real converse between the “nothingness,” and the “*something-ness*,” that is the formless emptiness of the earth and the deep darkness that is the creation before God’s speaking of “light” into existence in his “very good” creation, and the actuality of the “light” giving form and content to the cosmos. We are more comfortable today with the concept of “creation out of chaos, and so forth,” than we are with “*creatio ex nihilo*” as God’s “good” and “very good” creation. Our comfort belongs to a pre-suppositional framework of thought able to interpret “things” out of something or other but at a loss to understand the real “nothingness” of God’s cosmos as his creation from the Beginning and until the Ending of created time and times, where humankind is to known as his image and likeness, blessed with his rest upon his “very good”

5 See, for instance, John Goldingay’s *Genesis for Everyone* (John Knox Press, Louisville: 2010), 5-9. The author claims there is no “absolute beginning” in mind, no philosophy in mind, and that the author is interested in the ‘transformation’ of ‘empty wastes’ into “formed cosmos,” “creation out of chaos,” rather than in the doctrine of “creation out of nothing.” But it was common in the way the early Church understood Moses, to believe in a strong resonance between the acts of God and his Being in the beginning when light came into being, and the “new Beginning” established by the Incarnation of his Word. The significance of this harmony appears to be quite lost upon many today.

creation. With such frameworks of thought, we have developed another kind of battle between Good and Evil in our times and in the deep split between Church dogma and biblical theology with which so many work even today. There is little enough real regard shown for the role of the doctrine of the *creatio ex nihilo*, as implicated with v. 1, and as laid down by Israel and the early fathers of the Church in concert with the actions of God in v.2 and v.3.⁶

The modern preference for reading the concept of "creation out of *something*," — "chaos," "void," "formless," "waste," etc. — without any appreciation for the significance of the doctrine of "creation out of *nothing*" and its concert in the Beginning of God's creation, has resulted in much of the reductionism we may trace in human thought, either in abstract, timeless categories or positivistic autonomous empirical sciences, from Ptolemy (200 AD-1500 AD) to Newton (1670-1915 AD) to the universe of light of Einstein's revolution in our times.

6 I do not believe that the many, who think the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was only taught as a result of the entanglement of Moses' world with Greek philosophy, are the source of the fruitfulness of the doctrine with our Western Civilization. The doctrine signifies that God's action (BARA') in the Beginning of the biblical world is unique. Later readers of the confession struggled to understand this significance, especially with reference to the problems Greek philosophers had with *creatio ex nihilo*, who claimed that nothing can come out of nothing. The doctrine possesses a meaning the interpretation of which cannot seek to prove its truth on a logical basis conceived outside of Moses' prophetic testimony to the revelation of God. Thus, there exists a long tradition of struggle about the doctrine, even among the early fathers of the Church. The doctrine finds one of its fullest exegetes in the works of John Philoponus (490-570 AD) in Alexandria. He attempted in his time to take the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* seriously for the physics of the cosmos of God's creation. Of Philoponus, Professor Torrance has written: "*Never in all the history of science has Christian theology had such a transforming impact on science as through John Philoponus of Alexandria in the sixth century. His was a biblical and Christocentric theology in which he sought to give an adequate account of its contingent rational order*" (in *Theology and Natural Science*, Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 2002, 107). The doctrine of "creation out of *nothing*" is fundamental to the confession of Moses and to the physics and cosmology of Philoponus, against the arguments of the Master Aristotle from the 4th century BC. With his "thought experiments" the Grammarian was able to develop his "impetus" and his "light" theories, which became justified with the works of Copernicus (1543 AD), Galileo (1643), Newton (1687), and finally with Einstein (1905/15) and his revolution of how we understand space and time in the history of science in our own day.

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Much biblical commentary today seeks to understand Genesis 1:2 as out of something or another and out of the evil that opposes God's "perfect" Beginning. I would argue that the formation of "Day One" from the Beginning of the "very good" Creation Week is bound up with both the doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo*, the creation "out of chaos," and the creation as "light" in a symphony of actions taken by God in the Beginning which is the object of Moses' confession and knowledge of the Creator, knowledge that depends upon his knowledge of the Lord as the Redeemer of Israel from Egypt and the Deliverer of the people of God among the nations in God's "very good" creation. To know the Creator is to know the Redeemer, and knowledge of the Redeemer has priority over knowing the Creator — this is the significance of the divine call of the Great I-AM the Lord God in his appearance in the events of the burning bush with Moses at Horeb.⁷

I believe that we need to recover the interpretive insights of Israel and the early fathers of the Church into the revelation of God, if we are going to obtain a fresh understanding of the all that is implicated with the *saga* that is the background for the prophet's account of the renewal of the covenanted relationship between God and Israel, a relationship whose *nature* ought not to escape our attentions, a relationship given to be read in the Five Books of Moses at the foundation of the canon of biblical faith. We need to gain a truly dynamic apprehension of this relational reality in our time, one that exists between the theology of the revelation of God and the history of Israel among the nations in God's creation, one we have named as "The Pentateuch" today. Without this foundation, and the understanding of how God as Creator and God as Redeemer are linked, "history" in our generation has become reduced to the evolution of our kind in the universe.

⁷ The verbs of Genesis 1:1-5 in the formation of Day One, *BARA'*, *MERACHEPHET*, *'AMAR*, *R'AH*, *BADAL*, and *QARA*, with *HAYAH*, are acts of God to be heard resonating strongly with one another as a part of a symphony to be heard with the confession and its prophetic thrust. The Time-space being defined from the Beginning and being sustained as nights and days of the Creation Week are "good." Karl Barth has characterized this confession as *saga* about the history of the creation, story we are unable to hear as history. But it is this "story" that bears the command of the Great I-AM (Exodus 3:14-15) in the light of the "story" of the Exodus, as the origin of the knowledge Moses is given as the Prophet of Israel and the Servant of God in his times, tuned into the events of the Creation Week as background to the veracity of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

Divorced from a biblical understanding of history, revelation can become merely empty abstractions about Time and times. We need in our time to obtain a solid and cognitive grasp of that which holds together the two as one.⁸

The Creation Week in this way is intended to serve as the background for the testimony of Israel's redemption. According to the *nature* of the revelation of God with the prophetic history of the chosen people of God among the nations, we are to read the relationship between God, the world, and humankind at their inception from the Beginning of Time to a certain Ending of Time belonging to the glory of God as the Lord he is — the Great I-AM of the relationship — whose Word we are made to hear throughout the processes of his creation. Other notions of time and space found among the many creation epics, prevalent among the peoples of the Ancient Near East with Moses, are denied by this testimony. They have no claim to the reality that the world is God's "very good" creation from the Beginning to the Ending of his intention and purpose in Time and times. Moses thus confesses in the Exodus of Israel from Egypt the 'new Name' of God as the Lord he is, and the great I-AM he is, as the giver of the Name and the commander of the Prophet of Israel in the world. Moses is commanded to proclaim the "new Name" of God against the idol and myth making in the peoples of the Ancient Near East at the time of the self-revealing and self-naming events in the history of the people of God.

It is this self-defining Lord God, whose Voice from the Bush to Sinai is the commander of Israel's history, that is to be heard and obeyed according to the biblical covenanted relationship inherent in the testimony. The Torah and the Tabernacle established by Moses belong to this same Voice, the Voice to be heard in God's Beginning and in his Ending with Israel. There exists no other that is the One his people must hear. We understand the significance these events in history as a renewal movement for the covenanted relation between God and his people in his creation. With these renewals, we are steadily commanded to serve in the theatre of the world the primordial intention of humankind as made in the "image and likeness of God." With the renewals, relationship is steadily justified

8 See T. F. Torrance, *Natural and Theological Science* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 2001).

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and restored from its fallen condition in the history of the creation.⁹ Against all the idols, idol-making, and myth-making surrounding Israel in the Ancient Near East, Moses has appeared to testify to the Great I-AM. With her Exodus from Egypt, Israel is called to bear witness with her history to this revelation of the Redeemer-Creator that he is, this One who is the Great I-AM and the Lord of the covenant between himself and Israel among the nations. As this One, he is the holy One with Israel in his creation. He is self-revealing, self-naming, self-defining One and no other. He is this One as the Lord and God who is the One who has determined to communicate himself in his acts for his people, to deliver Israel from the "gods" of times past, from the destructive illusions about who he is with his people and his creation. The doctrines of *creatio ex nihilo*, "creation out of chaos" and "emptiness" and so forth, and creation out of "his Voice in the creation" are to be heard as the Beginning of the world as his creation. These doctrines thus form a key background for the formation of a framework of thought that is meant as Moses' witness to the revelation of God, the confession of his Voice, his Spirit, and his Hand as the Creator in his Beginning. The freedom we have in this world is thus rooted in the freedom of the One he is. Let it be understood as the actual case that we do not understand who the I-AM the Lord God is except by the faith that is his gift to us in our times!

We do not need to labor this point any further. I believe it is inherent in the purpose of the intention recorded in the biblical history of Israel and the biblical history of God's creation as the covenanted relationship between Time and Eternity. The Great I-AM of Moses' prophecy possesses that divine freedom to be who he is with us as none other than the Lord of the covenant and the true Creator of the heavens and the earth. He is to be known as such because he is the true Redeemer of humankind, through Israel, against all the idols of his enemies as this one Great I-AM giving himself to be known among us. Genesis 1:2 ought

9 We need to keep in mind, as steadily as we can, that the *nature* of this world, meant as home for our kind, may never be turned into mere myths and legends, where heroes freely roam victoriously among us. We are made to appreciate our need to understand the covenanted relationship between biblical theology and the science of the world we are to develop in our times. The "home" the universe is meant to be for us cannot be viewed through the lens of a false concept of time and space, according to the testimony of Moses and his followers.

not to be construed, then, as possessing, in common with the nations of the Ancient Near East, any other significance than the uniqueness of the meaning of the confession in the history of the world. Language employing terms found to possess meanings in common with the nations is not language made to serve the revelation of God with Israel. Moses' use of writing is meant to transform into real service to the revelation the intention and purpose of the One who is who he is, against all idol and myth making in the world. Thus the language of Moses' testimony would refer, in the freedom of God, to his royal authority over all he has created, as a world outside of himself. The terms of v.2 are meant to signify that which stands polemically over and against the polytheisms of the ancient peoples, their ritual magic and mythical animations among the darkness of the stars, and so forth, and that which stands, on holy ground, for the experience of Israel in this world. Moses' language thus transforms any meaning the terms might possess among the nations into the service of the revelation of the Word and Being of the Great I-AM. His Voice, his Spirit, and his Hand hold the secret of the creation, a secret we may be given within the prophetic thrust of the confession. This is:

- the One who will not be who he is as Lord and God without his Israel in his creation
- the Voice that spoke with the prophet from the burning bush. This is the Voice that spoke with Israel at Sinai
- the Voice that speaks prophetically in his creation even today.

He is the One that Israel must hear among the nations, in our histories, in the light of his revelation.

In this sense, the Exodus of Israel is to be understood as something utterly new in the history of the world. It is an utterly new event and fundamental for understanding his revelation as the faith of Moses' testimony to him. The Prophet and Servant of God's self-revelation with his people bears witness in Time and times to the Great I-AM whose Hand and Spirit and Voice, from the Beginning to the formation of Day One in the Creation Week acts to make "very good" the primordial background Moses understands as the ground on which the Exodus is to occur. This is the One who is to be known and heard as the Commander, the I-AM, revealed as the unique and incomparable One. It is this knowledge of God as the Lord that is the object of Moses' confession of him. This is the holy

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One who gave Moses to stand on his holy ground and be commanded as the Prophet and Servant the leader of Israel was to become. This is the Great I-AM Israel has been made to love. This is the subject of the object Israel must know and love with all her life in the world. There is no other world with this One and he will not be any other than this One that he is with his people in his creation. Humankind belongs to the Great I-AM of the revelation with Moses' confession. All the cosmogonies supposedly existent outside of him are to be cast aside and away. Something new is happening in the world — God as the Lord wills to deliver Israel from her sin and affliction in Egypt. Thus, all humankind is to be free from its idol and myth making and made free to follow its true Maker — the Almighty One! He is the One who makes Israel the prophecy she is among the nations in the history of his creation. When Moses employs human language for his testimony, there is no common sense to it; there is only the logic of the Word of God with his Spirit and his Hand giving voice to the terms of his humanity as God with his people in their Time and times in his creation. Their use by the rest of the Ancient Near Eastern peoples and languages is emptied of meaning. They are given a new significance within the revelation and set into service of his purpose and intention in this world. The Prophet of Israel, the Servant of God, Moses thus transforms the meaning and significance of the terms he employs into a language, human indeed, perhaps more human than we know, that is made to serve his covenanted relationship with humankind in his creation. As such they possess a prophetic and eschatological thrust at any given time in concert with their meaning for all Time. They are, indeed, the language of grace in God's revelation to Moses for Israel for all that Time truly is. To the *nature* of this Time we find no real definition in our selves, but only in the One who is who he truly is, and with no one else. I believe this point is often missed or ignored by much modern critical analysis of the Five Books of Moses today.¹⁰

10 We may invoke here the claim that the prophet of Jerusalem, Isaiah, made concerning the relationship between faith and reason, belief and understanding: "Unless you believe, you will not understand"! (Isaiah 7:9b, LXX). I would translate the Massoretic Hebrew "Unless you AMEN, you will not AMEND"! The verse was commonly embraced by the early Church fathers in order to work out an Orthodoxy that was able to serve the prophetic intention of the Word of God with Israel. I read the reciprocity between the two "Amens" as asymmetrical in nature.

The referencing power of Moses' polemical testimony to the revelation ought never to be allowed to escape our attention. It is this power that possesses the *universal* intent of the revelation. It is this power that is the bearer of the harmony intrinsic with the acts of God as the Lord with the *particulars* — and this *universal* and no other in the revelation. This power possesses a *nature* to be understood on holy ground, rooted in the grace and truth of this One in his covenant with his people among the nations in the creation, a *nature* that is indeed rooted in the ground of the wisdom of his Being as the Great I-AM to be the Lord of the covenant and the God of the creation with his people. It is this power he will not allow to escape our attentions. He will not be this One that he is without us in our times. The confession of the formation of "Day One" in the Creation Week belongs in the power of the Lord to name himself anew in the Exodus of Israel from Egypt and Egyptian "gods." He will not allow this power to escape our attentions; we may not disregard the humanity of his Word, his Voice, his Spirit, his Hand even from *the* Beginning of Time and all times. The blessing of this God's day and Week is the blessing of Israel seeking to restore us from our fallen condition in the world, to become the children of his Kingdom.¹¹

The significance of the use of the Name of the One who is the Lord God as the Great I-AM of the revelation with Moses belongs to the Voice that he is both within himself and in his acts with his Word for his people, with Israel among the nations. It is this Voice his people must hear as the Torah of foundation and formation in the world. As this One and no other, he is the I-AM of Moses in the Old, and the I-AM Jesus Christ in the new forms of the one covenanted relationship between God, the world, and man according to their witness to his revelation. He is in this witness the I-AM of the Trinity of God as the Redeemer-Creator confessed by the Church as the people of God among the nations. We

11 I have attempted to argue for this understanding of the *Five Books of Moses* in my book, *The Great Amen of the Great I-AM* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 2008). See especially chapters 2 and 3. From beginning to end, the wholeness of the Pentateuch's polemic entails the diverse particulars of the confession with a universal and unique intention and purpose that informs the relationship between Genesis 1–2:3 and what follows. No other time, no other space, can be claimed as the basis for understanding the cosmos of this world. Its beginning time and its ending time are acts of God marking the boundaries he himself draws in our histories with him.

are to hear, as steadily as we can, both the polemical nature of this witness and against idol and myth-making and the positive dimensions in its witness to our salvation in him. Moses' confession of the Beginning, Christ's confession, and the confessions of the people of God all are too seldom heard as witness to this One I-AM who is Lord of the covenant and God of the creation, against all the cosmogonies of the ancient peoples throughout the world. The self-revealing, self-naming, self-giving, self-defining power of this I-AM will be known as the One he is as Lord and God of his witnesses, Israel and the Church among the nations. We may not in this case understand the Beginning as created "out of nothing" divorced from the Incarnation of this Voice in the form of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer-Creator he is in opposition with his revelation against all pretenders to his throne, the Lamb and Lion of his Apocalypse with divine freedom, sovereign authority, and majestic faithfulness as the Trinity of the One he is in his Name for us in our times. As we interpret his Name, we must interpret all of his acts in covenanted relationship with his creation, his humankind, and the providence, presence, and prophecy of his Being as confessed by Moses in the service of the revelation in the first Exodus of his people from their bondage and afflictions among the gods of the idols of the ancient peoples. I was once a student of the physics teacher¹² who gave Einstein's "singularities" the name "Black Holes" in our modern cosmologies; he often said to us that every scientist needed to spend the first twenty minutes of every morning of his existence meditating on the Beginning of this world, for it was more important and vital to the development of our physics than we often realize. I did not heed his advice at that time, but I believe it was good advice then and it is good advice now for our scientists and theologians.

How then shall we seek to understand Moses' confession in verse 2 of Genesis 1? How should we seek to understand this language as his testimony to the Creator and the creation in the light of the claims of the Word become incarnate as the Person of Jesus Christ, a Jew in Palestine, as the Great I-AM of the witness to the revelation of God? To take seriously this confession and the scope of its

12 He was John Archibald Wheeler, who named the infinitely dense and curved space-time of the invariance in Einstein's gravitational field equations "Black Holes" and taught them at Princeton in 1954. It was a part of his "Meaning Physics" for which he searched the scientific enterprise of his times.

reach across the ages in our civilizations is breath-taking. That a man, especially a Jew, was to be understood as God with us, was not a fact neither Greek, nor Roman, or Barbarian could take seriously. But when we do take seriously his call and claim upon our lives in this world, we discover our life becoming quite different from the natural bent of humankind here, that is, free to follow him as the One he is in our times, our enmity against him gone, and our willingness to hear him with his Word, in any language, for us now. The grace and truth of this One that he is enlightens us with the light of his Word, so that we may seek to understand the humanity of his words in the world. The priestly and prophetic service of the wisdom of this Lord as God belongs to the One, according to the testimony of Moses, Christ, and triune Redeemer-Creator he is as this one I-AM. The Beginning of Moses' confession, the Beginning of Christ's confession, and the Ending of the I-AM the Lord God is in the fulfillment of his covenant in his creation for his people are to be heard as the Time of God with us in our times. In this light, Genesis 1:2 is meant to be understood in the context of an embrace that belongs to I-AM he is as the Lord of Israel's deliverance in the creation and as the God of the whole of his creation. We tend to forsake this dogma in our times, with deep consequences upon all of our meditations and search for meaning since the Beginning of God with us.

Specifically, this means that we are to read the verbal action of God as the "brooding" (MERACHEPHETH) of God's Spirit in v.2 in resonance with the rest of the verbs intended to confess the formation of Day One in the Creation Week. We need to hear all the acts of God for the first night and day of the seven nights and days as forming a wholeness of acts whose purpose resides ultimately with the blessing of the creation on Day Seven. All these acts of God belong to the whole of the "very good" creation with God from the Beginning (*creatio ex nihilo!*). The six verbs that depict the actions of God during the formation of Day One are thus to be heard as acts whose concert belongs to a wholeness that forms the content of the cosmos *in* the Beginning, where the whole is a cosmos that is a home for humankind, male and female, blessed as his image and likeness in the "very good" world of God's creation. The "brooding" over the "faces of the waters" with the "chaos and emptiness," the "darkness over the faces of the deep" that the earth is *after* the Beginning may be understood as the way God cherishes and sustains what he has "created" (BARA') or caused to

exist outside of his own existence.¹³ With the same power that causes that which he is not to be, he causes that which he is not to subsist in its own *nature* as created being. The significance of the dogma of *creatio ex nihilo* must not be lost upon our understanding of that which sustains the world, causing it to subsist freely outside of God's Being. In this case, the transcendence of God's Being in existence before the creation is bound up with his determination to be its Creator as rooted in his wisdom even from before his "creating" his Beginning of his creation, a wisdom that belongs to the divine freedom, sovereign authority, and majestic truth of his Being the One he is as made known in his revelation, against all the pretenders to his throne.¹⁴ The "nothingness" of the creation confessed by Moses must mean to us what it means to God the Lord and the Great I-AM he is in his covenanted relationship with his people. In this way, there exists for Moses and Christ a primordial dispensation in the meaning of the creation as an object that only the personal reality of the Redeemer-Creator can define with us. My point here must be that God *cherishes* ("broods over") the whole of what we must refer to as the unformed and empty darkness of the waters of the earth under the heavens as God's creation in the Beginning. All of that *stuff* or "something," whatever it is in v.2, in concert with the assertion of v.1, is the confession of time and space as a part of a whole that is yet to be determined by God as his own "very good" creation.

When Moses continues to confess the speaking of God ('AMAR) in v.3, and asserts that the origin of created light ('OR) belongs to this Voice of the Creator, we must understand that out of the night of the first day by the act of God's speaking there is posited with the 'stuff' of v.2 an order whose reality in the midst of these primordial realities forms the basis for the determination of Day One in the Beginning. Once this is established, we may hear that God sees (RA'AH), that he distinguishes (HIBDIL), and that he then names (QARA') what he is able to see and differentiate in created existence with its evenings and mornings now

13 I do not like to translate *BARA'* with English "create" because it signifies what all kinds of subjects can or may do, which it does not mean in the biblical world. I do not know a term for it in English.

14 This is the reason that we may discover no necessity in the creation as being the reality it is and nothing arbitrary in its Beginning. The Fathers of the Church called Christ thus the Wisdom of God as the Creator and Redeemer he is! (Proverbs 8:22-31)

given to form as an object of the Voice of God the creation is and will be.¹⁵ Thus, the whole of day One is a part of God's "very good" creation in the Beginning. The point here must be that we ought to hear all of the verbs in a resonating composition with one another, which we may call a concert of actions whose prophetic depths bear witness with Moses to the Time and times of the Lord God with Israel in all of her times in his creation. The cosmos of that Beginning belongs to the being of all six actions of the Creator in his Beginning, against all the myth making of the ancient peoples. It is in the light of his speaking that the "light" of "day" is "good" and the "dark" of "night" is good. God "sees" night and day distinctly (as man may see); he can differentiate them from one another and name them as the good days and nights of his experience in this world, against all the idols among the nations in times past. *The Beginning* is thus what it is, fundamentally, as it is in all times, past, present, and future according to the cosmos of Moses' confession of the creation. It was a challenge with Moses and Israel and evidently a challenge for us even to this day!

It is vital to remember here that the whole of these acts belong to the "very good" creation of God's Time for us in our times. The blessing of his finished work and his rest with his creation — when and where man, male and female as his image and likeness here, is made and blessed with a home — is never abrogated according to the *nature* of the covenanted relationship between God, the world, and humankind. There is no mention of evil anywhere in *this* Beginning of God with us. From the Beginning, "Day One" of verses 1-5 lays down a particular, the continuum of which in time and space belongs to the divine freedom, sovereign power, and majestic faithfulness of the Creator who is the Great I-AM, the Lord God of Israel in the creation. The space-time world in the orders of the light of day and the dark of night are formed to provide place for the events we experience as man in the history of the world as the image of God in our time and times. This "goodness" belongs to the prophetic power of Moses' confession in this world and its vitality across the centuries in our experience on the earth and under the heavens. Again, we find nothing explicitly connected with evil in this confession of the first day and the first week; that is

15 I think of the last triad of verbal actions in the formation of Day One as the humanity of the Creator in interaction with the Beginning, and the secret of the divine/human presence of God with and in the whole of his creation.

Moses' testimony to the cosmos of the "very good" creation from the Beginning. The whole of created reality is to found as an object rooted in the holy ground of God's divine freedom and power to be the Redeemer-Creator he has chosen to be with his people among the nations in his creation.

Why then do we read so much about the evil that opposes him among our commentaries on Genesis 1:2? Why does so much criticism today seem to prefer to believe that Moses, or whoever wrote Genesis 1, could not possibly have had in mind the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but who would seek to affirm the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition only means to hold before us a doctrine of "creation out of chaos and emptiness"? What have we lost sight of when we refuse to understand that the "nothingness" of the creation belongs to what is "very good" about the creation and Beginning? Why does the doctrine find so much consideration by the fathers of the early Church? What is the *nature* of the vital relationship between the Incarnation of the I-AM and the I-AM with Moses? Many would argue today that "*creatio ex nihilo*" is nothing else than Greek categories of thought being read back into the world of the Hebrew, a development occurring under the influence of the great Greek philosophers.¹⁶ As we have said, even the great Karl Barth did not avoid joining the consensus of

16 I may refer here again to the champion of the dogma of "creation out of nothing" in ancient Alexandria, John Philoponus, a disciple of Athanasius (325 AD) and Cyril of Alexandria (454 AD), and the foremost commentator on Aristotle in his time (490-570 AD). The Greeks opined that "Nothing comes out of Nothing!" Their cosmos was an eternal reality embedded by God with his Logos from his Eternity. Philoponus struggled against this doctrine: "If people assign the place above to the Divinity, this is not yet to be taken as a proof that heaven is imperishable. Because those too who believe the holy places and temples to be full of gods and raise their hands towards them do not assume these dwelling to be without beginning or imperishable but regard them only as a place more fit than others to be inhabited by God" (Shmuel Sambursky's *Physical Thought from the Pre-Socratics to the Quantum Physicists*, Pica Press, 1975, 119). The great Grammarian of the Academy in Alexandria here believed that "creation out of nothing" was a concept which belonged to the affirmation of the contingent rationality and unity of the creation, when and where the creation is what it is, separate from the *nature* of God, but with its nature interactive with the Creator, bound up together with him in a freedom by which both implicate orders of the creation and the explicate orders of the Creator were together freely related to one another.

modern historical-critical-analytical scholars with his reading of Genesis 1:2.¹⁷

17 A simple survey of the consensus will serve our purposes. B. W. Anderson, ed., *Creation in the Old Testament* (SPCK and Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1984) is quite aware of the chasm between science and theology as viewed by the biblical scholars. He works the split assumed popularly today between dogma and biblical theologies and our scientific views of time and history. Gunkel (*ibid.*, pp. 26-52) sought to understand the text as belonging to the many oral traditions in the Ancient Near East long before literary forms were found to set down the various cosmogonies among the nations. G. von Rad, *Genesis*, Westminster Press, 1972, 46-52, makes critical assumptions that lead the great German scholar to contribute to the force of the consensus and reads v.2 as a contradiction to the *creatio ex nihilo* of v.1. He posits that P's theology of "Day One" represents an understanding of Genesis 1:1-5 as that which joins the war against "creation out of chaos." He certainly does not think of "creation out of nothing," "creation out of chaos," and the creation of light as objects of the Creator's will with Moses and Israel. He thinks that "Yahweh" (The Lord) as the Creator (God) absorbs Egypt's ancient wisdom in order to confess a full doctrine of the creation (pages 62-63). The Jesuit Father, Dennis McCarthy (*ibid.*, 75) can in this same way divorce the covenant of the Lord from the creation of God, the Creator, in the biblical world. He thus posits a chasm between the "Uncreated Nature and Being of God" and the created nature and being of the creation as an object absolutely independent of God (Deism!). The splits and chasms belong to assumptions unable to understand the implicate and explicate orders of contingent rationality and unity between God, the world, and humankind. These lead to the great abyss with which scholars work between history and Salvation history and between modern creation theories and our evolutionary theories (*ibid.*, 90-101). Westermann argues that Genesis 1:1-2:4a reflects a composition whose long history indicates a steady struggle in which an evolution of understanding is crystallized within and out of the many myths and legends about the world of the gods of men. The lasting value of the texts in Time and times is a result of the necessity in this long evolution for understanding of God and his relation to the world (*ibid.*, 102-117). He can claim then that the contingency of the world is accidental or sheer randomness. Reminding his readers that the confession must possess some real eschatological significance, H. H. Schmid (*ibid.*, 102-117) can argue against any assertion that gives priority to redemption over creation. He argues for a "creation theology" in possession of a wisdom and righteousness that informs history with its events even without the uniqueness of the revelation. H. J. Hermission (*ibid.*, 130) writes, "The world well ordered, chaos excluded, the world therefore comprehensible within limits: this fits in very well with the concept of wisdom." All of these scholars affirm with Anderson that the *Chaoskampf*, the war that was "in the Beginning," denies *chaos and emptiness* any "goodness" in the creation. It is war from the beginning of the confession. Only with Walter Eichrodt and G. M. Landes do we find any discussion about the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in an exegesis of Genesis

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In spite of his great efforts to go beyond an understanding of the Bible from a *a priori* systems of reference and to relate the Bible's witness to God, he appears unable to persuade many as to his understanding of the revelation of God in the history of the world. What is the problem here?

Are we then to hear that the wisdom of the will of the Hand and Spirit and Voice of the Creator in the Beginning comes from outside of his revelation with Moses? Are the orders and laws of the created reality of life and existence, as rooted in the "Uncreated Life and Being" that is God the Lord interacting over and with and in the creation of the world, to be conceived as the object of the making of humanity? No, with his Hand, Spirit, and Voice, the God of the

1:1-3. Eichrodt (ibid., 65-73, cp. his *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. I, 102-106), a colleague of Barth at Basle, argues against the subordination of v.2 to v.1 and for the absolute value of v.1 as a general axiom entailing what follows in the confession. His discussion of the doctrine of "creation out of Nothing" would relate v.2 as "nullifying" the "perfection" signified by v.1, yet in opposition to the other "Creation Epics" found among the nations in the ancient peoples. He is without comment on the relationship of this understanding to any cosmology in our scientific culture, perhaps with Barth's rejection of "natural theology," that would serve as a framework of thought to interpret the Bible. With G. M. Landes we do find some discussion of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* with reference to an exegesis of Genesis 1:1-3, with v.2 participating in the "very good" the creation *is*. In the Beginning, there is no battle that takes place between God and the emptiness of the world. This author claims to hear "liberation" in the movement from v.1 to v.2 to v.3 of the confession. Genesis 1 belongs to the positing of "human hope," but again there is no effort to relate this hope to any sort of scientific cosmology that might be implicated with the chapter. He writes, "At the beginning of its creation, the earth is empty, enclosed by waters in total darkness. But when God's Spirit moved over the waters to separate them, the earth can be born, so to speak, i.e. it can emerge from its primordial darkness into the light of time, its surrounding waters filled with plants, animals, and humanity" (ibid., 138). "Emergence" is "liberation" from the primordial darkness and so forth. Finally, with the investigations of R. C. Clements, we are not asked to face any relationship of the covenant with Abraham and through Moses to David in the creation. His study is without mention of Genesis 1. The Pentateuch may be read with a deep chasm posted between redemption and creation in Moses' confession. The Prophet of Israel as the Servant of God appears to deliver God's people from Egypt for a land that has nothing to do with the cosmos of the heavens and the earth which from the Beginning lays down the contingent *nature* of the created reality which the world *is*.

creation is the Lord of the covenant (as the I-AM he truly is), and we may not divorce the one from the other. The Creator is free to “call” and “name” his created orders in the space-times and light of his creation as rooted in the holy ground of his “uncreated Light, Being, and Nature.” Implicate with Moses’ explication of the creation’s Beginning is the contingency of the world and its cosmos and humankind.

It is little wonder that, with his rejection of “natural theology,” Karl Barth could conceive of a new beginning for Christian theology freed from its assumptions and the various particular cosmologies viewed at various epochs in the history of European and then Western Civilizations. The abyss created by the split between biblical and dogmatic theologies, with the derivative chasms created between Redemption and creation, between Redeemer and Creator, in our times required the fresh start that Barth was to seek, free from Nazi Socialism and the German Church’s willingness to sign on with Adolf Hitler. He thus set himself the task of giving this new beginning to Christian thought, one that would not allow any “natural theology” to be conceived outside of the revelation of God as witnessed by the biblical world. There exists no antecedent conceptual system to the revelation that was capable of judging who God is, his acts in the world, and his Word in the same with his Time for our times in the history of his creation. There is no *a priori* framework of interpretation of the revelation of the Word of God. The dynamic nature of his revelation demands that the readers of the Bible develop an *a posteriori* poise towards this actual creation, one that belongs to the work of his reconciliation accomplished, hand in glove, with the revelation of the Great I-AM which the Lord God is both from his Eternity and with his Time for the created reality of time and times. Thus, the grace of this I-AM with his revelation of his Being in his Acts with his Word and his Acts as his Word in his Being formed the burden of Barth’s moving as a Reformation theologian beyond his Luther and his Calvin. Genesis 1 is to be interpreted in a manner that does not commit the exegete to any particular cosmology posited by our scientific cultures.¹⁸

18 Again, see T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time & Resurrection* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1976) ix-xiii, or his *Transformation & Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1984) chapter 9, for the author’s meeting with Barth on the issue of the great Swiss theologian’s stance against any “natural theology” and his full explication and understanding of their encounter, where Barth gave his blessing to Torrance’s assessment of the problem. Just as Einstein set Euclidian geometry into the heart of physics, where

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Perhaps the freedom, whose reason is inherent and co-inherent in the fields of theology and science, respectively, underlies our problems with grasping the relationship between the revelation and the Time and times of God's creation. Barth never read Einstein. Einstein never read Barth. They lived the abyss between two cultures. Perhaps a real freedom exists undergirding both fields of knowledge, a freedom the grace of which ought to be "cherished" with the Spirit of God even for us in our times, in the ages of our histories on the earth.¹⁹

Given Barth's escape from the rise of Hitler and Nazi Socialism in Germany, given the escape from Marxism in Russia, given Einstein's escape from Berlin to a new home at Princeton, given World War II, the fact that these two great thinkers in our times never read one another can only throw light upon the darkness in which their lives occurred. How may we seek to overcome the abyss between them?²⁰

it became transformed into real service as 4-dimensional physics, we need to set any "natural theology" into the heart of revelation, and through reconciliation develop that framework of thought and interpretation transformed into true and faithful service to the God of the creation and the Lord of the covenant, with all due respect for the theology and science relationship.

19 Again, see *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1984) and Torrance's *Theological and Natural Science* (Wipf and Stock, Eugene: 2002) for the kind of transformations Torrance has in mind here a belief that leads him to posit a real cognitive relationship between God, the world, and man which we must not allow to escape our attention. For it is with this relationship that we may, as the people of God, Israel and the Church, possess the biblical faith that must seek understanding of interactive wisdom with his creation and his humankind. Thus, from beginning Time to ending Time, created freedom and his freedom belong together with one another, respectively, as the authority and faithfulness he is as the commander of our destinies in his creation and redemption.

20 Torrance argues that it is "a sovereign freedom and lordly authority" that judges all Beginnings in and of this world. The Beginning bound up with Moses' confession and the Beginning bound up with the Incarnation belong to the self-revelation of the Great I-AM the Lord God in the space and time of this world. We need to think these together as the real source of all true knowledge of the grace this One is, who is both the Redeemer of Israel and the Creator of all as the Great I-AM he is. Thus, we may not seek to divorce them from one another and pretend that we are seeking him with our lives.

When Barth turned back for help in making a fresh beginning for his *Church Dogmatics*, he embraced the Reformation's concept of the grace of God, with Augustine and with Luther, when he articulated his position as an exegete of Genesis 1:2. He quotes Zimmerli in his discussion of the "rudiments" of the verse, and the chaotic chasm against God's Beginning of the creation, an object of "his perfect will." No positive resonance with v.1 is there to be heard.²¹ He then takes the position that v.2 belongs to a time past that existed before light was spoken into existence in the creation, where Evil's darkness surrounds, impotently, the perfect creation. If the "nothingness" of the creation is identified with v.2 (the "rudiments"), then the contradiction which the *τοηυ* and *βοηυ* ("chaos and emptiness" or the "unformed and unsubstantiated") signifies in God's creation must itself become contradicted by God himself. The teleological and eschatological dimensions of the reality of time in the creation are lost upon us. V.2, for Barth, is the "nothingness" that in the end will be nothing. Barth thus claims that the Spirit of God ". . . is not known in his reality and therefore hovers and broods over it impotently or wordlessly."²² It is only with the "speaking" (v.3) that the Word of God against this primeval Evil restores the original perfection to this evil phantom in God's Beginning. The steady determination of God against

21 Barth, *CD* III.1, 103-4, does side with Zimmerli against Luther on the relationship between v.1 and v.2 "The decisive objection against this exposition (Luther's contention that the verse explained the primal condition of God's creation in the Beginning before its light was spoken into existence), which Zimmerli rightly calls a 'desperate expedient,' is as follows . . ." Barth goes on to contend that any connection between v.1 and v.2 is inadmissible. God did not will the "things" proclaimed in v.2. He goes on to quote Isaiah 45:14 as evidence that the world was never meant to be inhabited right from the beginning and was never meant to exist as a *chaos and void* with a *darkness over the deep and the faces of the waters* which the Spirit of God had to maintain as against the will of the Creator. The "things" or "rudiments" of v.2 are "stuff" that needs to be overcome and transformed according to the 'perfect' will of God in his Beginning, whose will was moved to speak "light" freely into existence according to the confession.

22 *Ibid.*, 108. When I studied the verb *MERACHEPHET*, I discovered in the Syriac Tradition that "brooding" had obtained a significance of "cherishing," assigning a very positive dimension to its meaning. It is meant to be interpreted, not as "impotence" or anything irrational, but the love and wisdom of God acting to sustain what is "creation out of nothing" in the Beginning for the formation of "Day One."

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Evil is thus inherent our reading of Genesis 1. But we may observe that no Evil appears in the confession until the account of Redemption from the Fall of man in the garden of the paradise of the Lord God. There is no Evil identified with v.2. There is no war posited between the "good" and Evil in the primordial reality of Moses' confession. It seems to me that what we need to accomplish here is a transformation of our concept of "perfection" in our times, not an explication of the war between Good and Evil today.

In contrast with Barth, Brevard Childs addresses the problem we have represented here with some very different conclusions. He believes that there exist some very real connections between v.1 and v.2. The "brooding" of the Spirit of God in v.2 is entailed by the power of God (hand in glove with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo!*) in the Beginning as signified in v.1. The speaking of God in v.3 possesses a resonance with both v.1 and v.2 then, in which the power of the Voice of the Spirit is confessed as the source of the conditions that will become Day One of the Creation Week. A full "chord" of action is to be heard as struck from the Beginning within the wholeness of what the creation is as the blessed home for humankind, made in the image and likeness of God, in the "very good" Beginning. Divine freedom, sovereign authority, majestic faithfulness are to be heard at play with the wisdom of God, all in his will for that Creation Week. Because it is the will of this wisdom that we are to hear in the confession, against the idol and myth making among the nations, the polemical nature of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* must not be allowed to escape our attention. It is not a war against Evil that we are to read, but a warless Good we are to hear. It is this Week that gives to Moses' prophecy the vitality it has possessed across the ages of our histories. His Time for us in his creation, time past, time present, and time future are servants of the revelation of the Lord God with us. The resonance of this chord with its humanity in God's "very good" Creation Week is to be heard throughout the renewals of the covenant of the Lord as the God of his creation. It is for this reason that we may hear the Great I-AM of the Exodus (Exodus 3:14-15) and the ONE he is with the Promised Land of the covenant (Deuteronomy 6:4), and find ourselves compelled to overcome the divorce between covenant and creation from Beginning to Ending Time with our times. All *a priori* understanding of what this created reality is and who we are in it must be disallowed, for the sake of a positive grasp of the wisdom of God

in his freedom to redeem what he has "created" and "sustained" in existence outside of himself. When we learn to integrate them from this Beginning of Time to this Ending of Time, we may hear the Word of his grace and the grace of his Word in the actual *nature* of his Being as the I-AM he is with us, more near to us than we are to ourselves.

Crux interpretum? Indeed! A challenge that the Savior accepted on his Cross, the Redeemer and the Creator as the Person for all times and all seasons in the world!²³

23 Barth, *CD* III.1, 102.

“I YET NOT I BUT CHRIST”: GALATIANS 2:20 AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. Torrance

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ABSTRACT: T. F. Torrance regarded Galatians 2:20 as a verse of primary importance. It refers to Christ's vicarious and substitutionary faith which undergirds all of our Christian faith, ministry and worship. The essay discusses how Torrance's teaching on the vicarious humanity of Christ, the hypostatic union, and union with Christ explicated the theological significance of Galatians 2:20, emphasizing especially the significance for understanding the Christian life.

In the form “I yet not I but Christ,” the doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ plays a central role in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance. Although not used repetitively, Torrance's perspectives on Christian faith and life can properly be understood to some significant extent in terms of the theological consequences of Galatians 2:20. The verse, in fact, may be thought to function in a hermeneutical manner, giving a significant point of access by which to interpret Torrance's theology on the terms which he set himself. “For me,” he writes, this is “a passage of primary importance,” for it “refers primarily to Christ's unswerving faithfulness, his vicarious and substitutionary faith which embraces and undergirds us, such that when we believe we must say with St. Paul ‘not I but Christ,’ even in our act of faith.”¹

Torrance gives clues by which to identify the provenance of this identification of the significance of Galatians 2:20, sending his readers back to the Scottish

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1994), 31.

theological heritage exemplified by his own teacher H. R. Mackintosh² and the great theologian from Dumbartonshire, John McLeod Campbell. A particularly felicitous and informative sentence from the conclusion to *The Nature of the Atonement* sets the direction: "And this is true, whether we contemplate the personal work of Christ in making his soul an offering for sin, or his work in us in respect of which it is true, that when we live to God we must say, 'Yet not we, but Christ liveth in us.'"³ Both Scottish divines, no doubt, as also Torrance, drew upon the teaching of John Knox, from which I quote a well-known passage from his *Treatise on Prayer*, published in 1554. "Mark well these words: John said, We have presently a sufficient Advocate, whom Paul affirms to sit at the right hand of God the Father, and to be the only Mediator between God and man. "For he alone (says Ambrose) is our mouth, by whom we speak of God; he is our eyes, by whom we see God, and also our right hand, by whom we offer anything to the Father; "who, unless he make intercession, neither we, neither any of the saints, may have any society or fellowship with God."⁴

Torrance has observed that Scottish theology at the Reformation gave a place of centrality to the union of God and humankind in Christ, and to the understanding of the Christian life therefore as an offering to God only "by the hand of Christ" (Knox).⁵ Thus, "it is in and through our union with him, that all that is his becomes ours."⁶ And again: "It is only through union with Christ that we partake of the blessings of Christ, that is through union with him in his holy and obedient life . . . Through union with him we share in his faith, in his

2 See, for example, H. R. Mackintosh, "Unio Mystica as a Theological Conception," in *Some Aspects of Christian Belief* (George H. Doran Company, New York: 1923) 103–4.

3 John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Handsel Press, Edinburgh, and Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1996), 259.

4 John Knox, "A Declaration What Trew Prayer Is, How We Suld Pray, And For What We Suld Pray," in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (AMS Press Inc., New York: 1966), 3:97. For ease of reading, I have altered the quoted text to contemporary English.

5 See Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 42, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1965), 151.

6 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1965), 151.

obedience, in his trust and his appropriation of the Father's blessing."⁷ In this way, through union with Christ, Torrance's Christology moves seamlessly to his exposition of the Christian life. Union with Christ is given to us through the gift of the holy Spirit, and as such is the ground of the church and the practice of Christian faith and ministry.

Torrance indicates again and again that he is deeply indebted to Athanasius in many ways. This indebtedness is found, for example, in his development of what the latter spoke of as Christ exercising a two-fold ministry⁸ in which he "ministered not only the things of God to man but ministered the things of man to God,"⁹ a citation for which Torrance seems to have a particular fondness. Here in a nutshell is the Athanasian argument: Jesus Christ "was Very God in the flesh, and he was true flesh in the Word."¹⁰ Thus, Athanasius argues that Jesus Christ not only gives God's Word to and for us, but also as a man, he hears, receives, and responds to God's Word on our behalf. This two-fold ministry of Christ is a vigorously developed theme in Torrance's Christology. It is especially important, then, to explain how Torrance understands the role of Jesus Christ as the true human in his response to God on our behalf. When this is thought through in relation to the doctrine of union with Christ, Torrance introduces directly his understanding of our specific forms of response that are called forth by the gospel. It is in this way, I might suggest in passing, that we can rightly speak of Torrance as a practical theologian. And further, it is in this way that we can understand more deeply how Galatians 2:20 is, for him, a hermeneutic of the gospel.

Following Athanasius, Torrance asserts, then, that in the depth of the vicarious humanity of Christ in the incarnation there is both a humanward and a Godward direction, in which Christ mediates God to us and us to God in the unity of his incarnate personhood. This is the direct correlate of the hypostatic union. Thus

7 Ibid., 158–9.

8 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1983), 83. References to Athanasius include *Contra Arianos*, 1.41, 50; II.7, 12, 50, 65, 74; III.30, 38; IV.6.

9 Thomas F. Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," in *Theology in Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1976), 228.

10 Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, II.41.

Torrance refers to the “double fact that in Jesus Christ the Word of God has become man, has assumed a human form, in order as such to be God’s language to man, and that in Jesus Christ there is gathered up and embodied, in obedient response to God, man’s true word to God and his true speech about God. Jesus Christ is at once the complete revelation of God to man and the correspondence on man’s part to that revelation required by it for the fulfilment of its own revealing movement.”¹¹ Our interest at this point is on how appropriate stress falls especially upon the way Torrance develops the response of the incarnate Son toward the Father. That leads subsequently to reflection on our participation in that response.

Torrance insists that because the Word of God has been addressed to us, and, as such, has actually reached us because it has been addressed to us in Jesus Christ, we have the Word that has found a response in our hearing and understanding. That is,

We do not begin, then, with God alone or with humankind alone . . . but with God and man as they are posited together in a movement of creative self-communication by the Word of God . . . A profound reciprocity is created in which God addresses his Word to man by giving it human form without any diminishment of its divine reality as God himself speaks it, and in which he enables man to hear his Word and respond to it without any cancellation of his human mode of being . . . Thus the Word of God communicated to man includes within itself meeting between man and God as well as meeting between God and man, for in assuming the form of human speech the Word of God spoken to man becomes at the same time the word of man in answer to God.¹²

Torrance identifies the foundation for the Christological development of the incarnate reciprocity between God and humankind in the nature of the covenant partnership between God and Israel.¹³ The pattern for covenanted reciprocity is found, for example, in the covenant established between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai. God knew that Israel would not be able to be faithful as God required. Thus, God, within the covenant established and maintained unilaterally by God, freely and graciously gave a covenanted way of responding so that the covenant

11 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (SCM Press, London: 1965), 129.

12 Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford University Press, London: 1971), 137–8.

13 For the following, see Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 83–6.

might be fulfilled on their behalf. Israel was given ordinances of worship designed to testify that God alone can expiate guilt, forgive sin, and establish communion. This was not just a formal rite to guarantee propitiation between God and Israel, however. By its very nature, the covenanted way of response was to be worked into the flesh and blood of Israel's existence in such a way that Israel was called to pattern her whole life after it. Later, in the prophecies of the Isaiah tradition especially, the notions of guilt-bearer and sacrifice for sin were conflated to give the interpretative clue for the vicarious role of the servant of the Lord.

It would take the incarnation actually to bring that to pass, however, for Jesus Christ was recognized and presented in the New Testament both as the Servant of the Lord and as the divine Redeemer, not now only of Israel, but of all people.

As the incarnate Son of the Father Jesus Christ has been sent to fulfil all righteousness both as priest and as victim, who through his one self-offering in atonement for sin has mediated a new covenant of universal range in which he presents us to his Father as those whom he has redeemed, sanctified and perfected for ever in himself. In other words, Jesus Christ constitutes in his own self-consecrated humanity the fulfilment of the vicarious way of human response to God promised under the old covenant, but now on the ground of his atoning self-sacrifice once for all offered this as a vicarious way of response which is available for all mankind.¹⁴

That is, Jesus Christ has fulfilled the covenant from both sides, from God's side, and from our side. In the incarnate unity of his person he is the divine-human Word "spoken to man from the highest and heard by him in the depths, and spoken to God out of the depths and heard by him in the highest."¹⁵ "Expressed otherwise, in the hypostatic union between God and man in Jesus Christ there is included a union between the Word of God and the word of man."¹⁶ In which case, the gospel is not to be understood as the Word of God coming to us, inviting our response on the ground of our attitude of mind, perspicacity of will,

14 Ibid., 86.

15 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 138.

16 Ibid., 142.

or strength of piety, but as including “the all-significant middle term, the divinely provided response in the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

According to Torrance, it is in terms of the vicarious humanity of God in Christ that the full meaning of the obedience of Christ and the cross may be understood. To this end Torrance is fond of citing Hebrews 3.1-6, where reference is made to Christ as the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. “Here we have described Christ’s twofold function in priestly mediation. He is the Apostle or *Shaliah* of God, and he is also our High Priest made in all points as we are, but without sin.”¹⁸ As High Priest, Jesus is contrasted with Moses, who was faithful in all his house as a servant (Numbers 12.7 and Hebrews 3.5), while Jesus is Son over his own house (Hebrews 3.6).

In this particular passage the work of Christ as Apostle and High Priest, both in the sense of “the Son over the House”, is described in terms of confession, *homologia*, a word which occurs in three other passages (3.1; 4.14; 10.23). In each case it sets forth primarily the confession made by the High Priest as he enters within the veil. It is the confession of our sin before God and the confession of God’s righteous judgement upon our sin. As Apostle Christ bears witness for God, that he is holy. As High Priest he acknowledges that witness and says Amen to it. Again as Apostle of God he confesses the mercy and grace of God, his will to pardon and reconcile. As High Priest he intercedes for men, and confesses them before the face of God.¹⁹

This confession of Christ as Apostle and High Priest is not in word only, but includes the actual judgment of God at the cross and the actual submission of Christ in full and perfect obedience. But this obedience of Christ to the judgment of God must not be limited to his passive obedience only in which he was “made under the Law” to bear its condemnation in our name and on our behalf. For he lived also — in a phrase Torrance often used — to bend back the will of humankind into a perfect submission to the will of God through a life lived in active filial obedience to his heavenly Father. Torrance understands, therefore,

17 Ibid., 145.

18 Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1955), 11.

19 Ibid., 12.

that the humanity of Christ was not external to the atonement, and that the atonement cannot be limited only to his passive obedience. Rather, Jesus Christ "is our human response to God"²⁰ in such a way that both his passive *and* active obedience are imputed to us,²¹ for he not only suffered the judgment of God on the cross for us, but fulfilled the will of God in an obedient life of filial love. In view of this development of the vicarious humanity of Christ, it is clear why Torrance insists that incarnation and atonement must be thought together, and why revelation and reconciliation are inseparable.

One final point remains to be discussed, namely, Torrance's doctrine of union with Christ, for it is only through this union that we partake of the blessings of his holy and obedient life.²² Writing on the doctrine of deification through grace he notes that

Reformed theology interprets participation in the divine nature as the union and communion we are given to have with Christ in his human nature, as participation in his Incarnate Sonship, and therefore as sharing in him in the divine Life and Love. That is to say, it interprets 'deification' precisely in the same way as Athanasius in the *Contra Arianos*. It is only through *real and substantial union* (Calvin's expression) with him in his human nature that we partake of all his benefits, such as justification and sanctification and regeneration, but because in him human nature is hypostatically united to divine nature so that the Godhead dwells in him 'bodily', in him we really are made partakers of the eternal Life of God himself.²³

The Christian Church is what it is because of its indissoluble union with Christ through the Spirit, for in him is concentrated the Church and all ministry . . . (Thus), there is only one ministry, that of Christ in his Body.²⁴

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of that statement for ecclesiology and ministry. It is the case, then, that the Holy Spirit constitutes the church in union with its head, joining us to Christ to share in his communion with the Father, and to bear faithful witness to him in the life of the world.

20 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 90.

21 Reformed theology argues that grace is imputed, not inferred or infused.

22 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 158.

23 *Ibid.*, 184.

24 *Ibid.*, 208.

The doctrine of our union with Christ has its ground in the person of Jesus Christ. According to Torrance, the *homoousion* is to "be taken along with a cognate conception about the indissoluble union of God and man in the one Person of Christ."²⁵ Reconciliation is not something that is added to the hypostatic union; it is the hypostatic union at work in expiation and atonement. In this way the incarnation and the atonement constitute both the ontological and the epistemological center of knowledge of God. Jesus Christ is of God and humankind, being in the union of his person both Word of God addressed to humankind and word of humankind hearing and responding obediently to the Word of God in union with whom through the Holy Spirit we have communion with and knowledge of God. Just as God is antecedently and eternally who he is in and through Jesus Christ, so also the whole of our humanity has to be assumed by Christ in the personal union of his two natures, not only our corrupted physical nature, but also our spiritual nature in which we have become alienated from God in our minds. It is a real union of one who was truly God and fully human.

The hypostatic union is the personal union that takes place when the one person of the Son assumes human nature into himself, and thus into his divine nature. The union of divine and human natures is entirely the act of God in becoming a man. The result is that the Son of God exists as the man, Jesus, son of Mary, in the integrity of his human agency. Apart from this act of God in becoming human, however, Jesus would not have existed. In which case, the fully human life of Jesus must be regarded as grounded in the act of the Word of God becoming flesh. Christ's human nature was nevertheless a real and specific existence in which Jesus had a fully human mind, will, and body. This is why we must think of the incarnation in terms not of God in humankind, but in terms of God as a man, yet without ceasing to be God, referring to the one action of the "God-man," maintaining the unity of his person, in which grace is understood in terms of Christ's human as well as his divine nature.²⁶ This means that the hypostatic union is to be understood not just in terms of incarnation, but also

25 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 94. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville: 1980), 165; Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 57.

26 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 183.

soteriologically in terms of the reconciliation between God and humankind, while reconciliation is to be understood not just in terms of the cross, but also in terms of the incarnation.

The point here, in summary, is that in the hypostatic union God has set forth in the person of Jesus Christ the union of God and humankind by which we may be united to God by sharing in that union through the action of the Holy Spirit and by faith. This is not now an additional union, as it were, but a sharing through the Spirit in Christ in his primary union with us. "The 'objective' union which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself is 'subjectively' actualised in us through his indwelling Spirit, 'we in Christ' and 'Christ in us' thus complementing and interpenetrating each other."²⁷

On this ground, now, the doctrine of union with Christ is properly understood to be the central, organizing feature of all Christian faith and life, a basic belief in the act of God that influences every other belief and every act of believing faith. In all things we do not stand before God on the strength of our own piety, faith, good works, knowledge and the like. Rather, because the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus Christ we share in everything that is his, sharing in his union and communion with the Father. In and through him we are children of the heavenly Father, sharing in his own life in, and before, and from, God. Joined to Jesus Christ we share in the communion and mission of the Holy Trinity — Christian faith and life means no less than this! We stand before God in Christ's name alone. And we serve in Christ's name alone. The real meaning of the Christian's faith is the trust that "for Christ's sake" we are enfolded into the inner life of the Holy Trinity, to share in Christ's communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father.

All of this — the two-fold ministry of Christ and our union with him whereby we share what he in the flesh has offered to the Father on our behalf — may be summed up as the theological intent of Galatians 2.20, *I yet not I but Christ*.²⁸ The message of the vicarious humanity of Christ is the gospel on which we rely. The whole of the Christian life in all regards is included in the *I yet not I but*

27 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 67. See also Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Peter Lang, New York: 2003), 201.

28 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 107. See also Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31.

Christ, for in Jesus Christ all human responses "are laid hold of, sanctified and informed by his vicarious life of obedience and response to the Father. They are in fact so indissolubly united to the life of Jesus Christ which he lived out among us and which he has offered to the Father, as arising out of our human being and nature, that they are *our responses* toward the love of the Father poured out upon us through the mediation of the Son and in the unity of the Holy Spirit."²⁹ Torrance calls this a theological form of Fermat's principle insofar as the human's true and faithful response in the vicarious humanity of Christ invalidates, and actually makes impossible, all other ways of response.³⁰ Thus, "the actual coming of (God's) eternal Word into our contingent existence in Jesus Christ excludes every other way to the Father, and stamps the vicarious humanity of Christ to be the sole norm and law as well as the sole ground of acceptable human response to God."³¹

Thus, before we refer to our own faith, faith must be understood first of all in terms of "Jesus stepping into the relation between the faithfulness of God and the actual unfaithfulness of human beings, actualising the faithfulness of God and restoring the faithfulness of human beings by grounding it in the incarnate medium of his own faithfulness so that it answers perfectly to the divine faithfulness."³² Jesus acts in our place from within our unfaithfulness, giving us a faithfulness in which we may share. he is both the truth of God and human being keeping faith and truth with God in the unity of God revealing himself and human being hearing, believing, obeying, and speaking his Word.³³ In this way our faith is grounded objectively yet personally in the One who believes for us; our faith depends upon the faithfulness of God in Christ for us. "Thus the faith which we confess is the faith of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us in a life and death of utter trust and belief in God the Father. Our faith is altogether grounded in him who is 'author and finisher', on whom faith depends from start

29 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 108.

30 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 145. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1982), 88.

31 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 146.

32 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 92.

33 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 154.

to finish.”³⁴ Indeed we are summoned to believe, but in such a way “in which our faith is laid hold of, enveloped, and upheld by his unswerving faithfulness.”³⁵ We do not rely upon our own believing, “but wholly upon (Christ’s) vicarious response of faithfulness toward God.”³⁶

Likewise with regard to worship, Torrance insists that Jesus Christ has embodied for us the response to God in such a way that henceforth all worship and prayer is grounded in him. “Jesus Christ in his own self-oblation to the Father *is* our worship and prayer in an acutely personalised form, so that it is only through him and with him that we may draw near to God with the hands of our faith filled with no other offering but that which he has made on our behalf and in our place once and for all.”³⁷ Thus, all approach to God is in the name and significance of Jesus Christ, “for worship and prayer are not ways in which we express ourselves but ways in which we hold up before the Father his beloved Son, take refuge in his atoning sacrifice, and make that our only plea.”³⁸ Christ has united himself to us in such a way that he gathers up our faltering worship into himself, so that in presenting himself to the Father he presents also the worship of all creation to share in his own communion with the Father. Christ takes our place, and we trust solely in his vicarious self-offering to the Father.

The essential nature of the church, as of individual Christians, is participation in the humanity of Jesus Christ. That is, “the Church is Church as it participates in the active operation of the divine love.”³⁹ As the Son is sent from the Father, so the being of the church in love involves a sharing also in the mission of Jesus Christ from the Father for the sake of the world. This point has been especially developed by James B. Torrance in a clear and persuasive manner,⁴⁰ building perhaps on the insight of John McLeod Campbell that “Christ, as the Lord of our

34 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

35 Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31.

36 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 154.

37 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 97. See also Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 158.

38 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 97–8.

39 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 30.

40 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1996).

spirits and our life, *devotes us to God* and *devotes us to men* in the *fellowship of his self-sacrifice*.”⁴¹ In this way, ministry is grounded upon a Christological pattern (*hupodeigma*). Thus, “as the Body of which he is the head the Church participates in his ministry by serving him in history where it is sent by him in fulfilment of his ministry of reconciliation.”⁴² The ministry of the church is not another ministry, different from the ministry of Christ or separate from it, but takes its essential form and content from the servant-existence and mission of Jesus. The mission of the church is not an extension of the mission of Jesus, but is a sharing in the mission of Jesus. “Thus Jesus Christ constitutes in himself, in his own vicarious human life and service, the creative source and norm and pattern of all true Christian service.”⁴³

In the emphasis placed upon the vicarious humanity of Christ, the hypostatic union, and union with Christ, Torrance has explicated the theological significance of Galatians 2:20. And with respect to the understanding of the faith, worship, and mission of the church, he has shown the consequence. In this way it may be rightly said that Galatians 2:20 gives a special point of access to the theology of T. F. Torrance and his understanding of the Christian life.

41 McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 255. This dual theme of forgiveness and renewal was already expressed in Scottish theology in John Knox’s Liturgy: “I confess that Jesus Christ did not only justify us by covering all our faults and iniquities, but also renews us by his Spirit and that these two points can not be separate, to obtain pardon for our sins, and to be reformed into a holy life” (Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 20).

42 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 35.

43 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 162.

OPENNESS AND FORMAL LOGIC IN THE NATURAL AND THEOLOGICAL SCIENCES ACCORDING TO T. F. Torrance

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ABSTRACT: The issue of openness in the natural and theological sciences plays a significant role in the theology of T. F. Torrance. The depths of this role is made most clear when considered in light of Torrance's understanding of formal logic, a discipline long considered to be utterly closed. This essay seeks to demonstrate the openness that is necessary for all thought, not least in logic, in order to be meaningful. Additionally, it examines a concrete example of Torrance's tendency to use common terms in a distinctly differential way. Significant implications are drawn out for both natural and theological science.

Introduction

Openness of our thoughts, concepts, and systems to reality beyond them is crucial for understanding Torrance's theology. This essay will address the issues that surround openness in Torrance's major publications and ultimately relate it to the role that logic plays in his thought. However, we must understand that openness plays a role in all of Torrance's thought and not merely in how he understands logic; however, as formal, abstract logic has been treated by the mainstream of Western thought as a closed system, it provides the paradigmatic case in light of which to understand the radical function of openness in Torrance's thinking. Once the basic concepts have been elucidated, it will be possible to understand some concrete implications of the need for openness in natural and theological science and to grasp Torrance's two-fold understanding of how we come to know that which is radically new. This is a

topic of personal interest as one who has a background in pure mathematics. I find Torrance's understanding of logic to be enlightening and helpful.

Openness

From time to time, Torrance will make a distinction between working out the difficulties in knowledge we already have and the acquisition of totally new knowledge. Perhaps the most helpful discussion is regarding the shift in the asking of questions that took place by the humanists and taken up by John Calvin. The dominant form of questioning in the Middle Ages was the *quaestio*, which "is the kind of question you ask in solving a problem in knowledge you already have, in order to move from confusion to clarity. Questions of this kind arise in a complex of relations of ideas where the answer is to be found by straightening out the logical connections."¹ The form that was given dominance by people like Calvin was *interrogatio*, which is the kind of question you ask of a reality "in order to let it disclose itself to you and so reveal to you what you do not and cannot know otherwise. It is the kind of question you ask in order to learn something *new*, which you cannot know by inferring it from what you already know."²

An issue at stake in this distinction is the difference between closed and open systems. A question that deals with untangling knowledge one already has and, for such purposes, brackets out any consideration of truth or falsity, preferring to deal with validity or invalidity of reasoning, can imply that it is dealing with

1 Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 1997), 34. For a fairly extensive discussion, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1999), 34–35; Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 119–126, though in this passage, Torrance does not use these terms, but deals with the basic issue; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh: 1985), 12–13; Thomas F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1984), 267–268. Also see Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville: 1980) 49–50, where Torrance contrasts skeptical and dogmatic questioning.

2 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34.

a closed system that is not open to what is utterly new or beyond it. On the contrary, an interrogative question that seeks to uncover what is radically new, by its very nature is, or should be, open to reality outside of itself.³

Before we can say anything else, we must clarify the distinction between open and closed concepts. In Torrance's own words,

"Closed concepts" are of the kind that we can reduce to clipped propositional ideas, whereas "open concepts" are of the kind which by their very nature resist being put into a strait-jacket, for the reality conceived keeps on disclosing itself to us in such a way that it continually overflows all our statements about it. Closed concepts are rigid and easily manipulable but open concepts are elastic because they operate on the boundary between the already known and the new.⁴

The key issue that has dramatic consequences is whether our concepts and statements are open to questioning by the object of their reference or whether they are closed off and contained within themselves. The truth of open concepts and systems does not lie in themselves, for if they contained their own truth, they would be closed, but their truth lies in the reality external to themselves to which they refer.⁵ For Torrance, the radical openness of theological statements is rooted in the issues related to speaking of God, who is infinite, while using language which is finite. However, the need to use open structures of thought is not limited to speaking of God, but is similarly relevant for our statements in the natural sciences because the universe as we know it is not self-explaining but is radically contingent.

3 This caveat, that our questions should be open to reality outside of themselves is due to the fact that our questions are always laden with presuppositions, which means they can be closed without our recognition. Torrance acknowledged early on the crucial need for us to be willing to question even our questions and presuppositions. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 1997), 121–124.

4 *Theological Science*, 15–16. Additionally, for a discussion of the qualities and problems of closed systems of thought, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1980), 14–18.

5 See my companion essay, "Truth and Language in the Theology of T. F. Torrance," in this volume of *Participatio*.

Contingence

It is vitally important for us to consider the notion of contingency in Torrance's theology because of the implications it has for the openness of our concepts and systems. Much of Western thought has operated with a sharp dichotomy between necessity and chance, where we must think in terms of things being as they are because of some kind of logical or ontological necessity inherent in their being, or else abandon any hope of discerning order in the universe, as it must be ruled by chance. Both theology and natural science has tended to lean in the direction of necessity. The Christian understanding of the providence of God does not allow for a truly random conception of the created order; at the same time, natural science cannot operate without a deep extra-logical conviction of the ultimate order of the universe.⁶

Torrance suggests that a third option would be more in line with the core convictions of both theological and natural science and ultimately in line with the character of the universe. That the universe is contingent means that it might have been quite different than it is, or even that it might not have been at all, but that God has given the creation an order that is utterly distinct from the order that characterizes the being of God, but one that is radically dependent on that divine order. This is an order that is the result of neither necessity nor chance.⁷ Torrance also resists the tendency throughout history to pay lip service to contingency while denying it in fact by subsuming it within a larger necessity.⁸

Because a contingent creation is not a necessary creation (which would even lean in the direction of pantheism or deism), science cannot proceed through logical deduction on the basis of some kind of "first principles" akin to Euclid's five postulates. A contingent creation is, by definition, open to that upon which it is contingent. As an open system, it will not yield scientific knowledge to a method of deductive reasoning, which depends on a closed system where concepts are related *logically* as opposed to *ontologically*. Scientific knowledge can only be

6 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 103–105.

7 "The contingent freedom of the universe, then, is not something bound up with randomness or chance, for it is no more arbitrary than the freedom of the God of infinite love and truth upon which it rests and by which it is maintained" (*ibid.*, 58–60).

8 *Ibid.*, 64–65.

gained through actual empirical investigation of the creation, through the hard work of experimentation and radical questioning of our findings until our scientific concepts become correlated to empirical reality. A contingent creation is not random; there is an order, albeit a non-necessary one, to be discovered through the sciences. Thus, only an empirical (and not merely theoretical) science can disclose a contingent order.

Breaking out of the false choice between necessity and chance, and thinking of the creation as a free act of God, enables us to recognize that the scriptures do not portray a God who does what he does because of a kind of necessitarian impulse.⁹ Rather, God's acts are consistently portrayed as free, the result of *grace* and not necessity. To speak of God as being a *necessary* God can only make theological sense so long as "necessary" is constantly kept open to the reality of God. It is, in fact, best if we do not speak of God as "necessary" at all as it will simply lead to confusion. God is necessary, not in the sense of a necessary being defined in the abstract, such as the "first cause" or "unmoved mover" of Aristotle, but as the God who *must* exist because he is the God that, in fact, *does*, exist.

If a system is contingent, it means that it is not self-explaining. To be contingent is to have the meaning of the contingent thing outside of itself; a self-explaining contingent system is a contradiction in terms. This means that the universe, as a contingent reality, is also not self-explaining. Torrance argues, "If a sufficient reason is to be found [for the universe] (and sufficient reason there must be for such an intelligible system, otherwise it would disintegrate into meaninglessness), it must come from beyond the universe altogether."¹⁰ What is interesting is that it is the discipline of physical science, where it was perhaps least expected, that has been providing such convincing evidence that the universe is not a closed, necessary, and determinist system, but one that is radically contingent, finite but unbounded (to use Einstein's expression), and

9 *Ibid.*, 57–58.

10 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 98–99. Torrance ties this observation closely with the Gödelian theorems, discussed below in the section "The Implications of Gödel's Theorems." Also, see Torrance's comments on an observation by Wittgenstein in *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 120–121.

an absolutely singular event in all of history.¹¹ It is particularly interesting that while classical physics and mechanics, with and after Newton, played a major role in establishing a necessitarian framework for Western thought, it is the further development of that discipline, with relativity and quantum theory, that has done the very most in undoing such a conception, though it has taken a long time to die.

The significance of the radical contingency of creation is that the universe as a whole is an open system. It is not self-explaining and requires that we investigate every part of it scientifically. The Laplacean idea that given the condition of the universe at a single point in time, we could predict its behavior both forwards and backwards has been uprooted by post-Einsteinian science. This means that, as the universe as a whole is contingent and therefore open, it is difficult to imagine that there will be portions of the created universe that are closed and determinist. This insight has been reshaping natural science's conception of the universe but, unfortunately, has not made as deep an impact on theologians. Perhaps the most radical implication is that this means that our *logic*, as a part of this open and contingent universe is, or should be, itself open and contingent. It will be shown below how the quest for a closed, complete, and consistent logico-deductive system has failed, and indeed, has been demonstrated to be impossible.¹²

One advantage of closed systems is that the relations between ideas are clearly defined. There are accepted rules regarding how ideas are related to one another. If we could somehow get from our concepts to reality by means of logic alone, it would be easy to have the same kind of certainty in natural science as we can have within a mathematical system. This is the hope of rationalism in its different forms. However, in this contingent universe, there is not a logical bridge between empirical reality and our scientific concepts.¹³ If this is the case, some attention must be given to how we can advance in knowledge and understanding of reality external to ourselves.

11 Indeed, even Newton, in his own way, affirmed that the universe had to be open to God. See Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 69.

12 See below, "The Implications of Gödel's Theorems."

13 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 24–25.

Personal/Communal Participation¹⁴

Once our concepts and structures are seen to be open rather than closed, some serious thinking must be done to understand how we actually come to new knowledge or how we have come to know those concepts and structures. In a purely abstract, closed formal system, the primary (or only) relations are logical relations. Ideas are related together through formal logic, which is not concerned with *becoming*, but only with *is*,¹⁵ that is, timeless and spaceless relations. Within such a system, conclusions can be understood and determined through rigorous application of the human reason, especially the processes of deduction and induction. However, if it happens that a system is open and *not* closed, this is made much more ambiguous, for the rules of closed systems no longer apply.¹⁶ After all, if a system or concept is open, it means that it can no longer be seen as independent of reality outside of itself, or else it would not be open. Thus, as an open system or concept, it is intrinsically unformalizable in a complete sense, as it relies in a fundamental way on what lies beyond it.¹⁷

Torrance acknowledges that this ambiguity is only a problem if one is, overtly or covertly, committed to a frame of knowledge that equates truth with determinism. However, Torrance affirms that all knowledge is personal, that though one of the marks of rationality is that persons can distinguish between themselves and what they know, they cannot ever separate what they know from the fact that it is they who know it. People cannot jump out of their skin, as

14 For a more in-depth treatment of Torrance's understanding of Personal/Communal Participation (also known as the tacit dimension), see Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding his Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 2001), 334–344.

15 *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 90–91.

16 A striking example of this inapplicability of the rules governing closed systems to open systems is when one attempts, as is done in some apologetics, to apply the concept of entropy taken from thermodynamics as a way to undermine the theory of evolution. Such an argument would be immediately rejected, for the second law of thermodynamics applies to closed systems and not to an open system like the earth.

17 Such a complete formalization would transform the open system into a closed one, falsifying it.

it were. Even in the most formalized systems, there is an unformalizable, tacit, personal, and social coefficient of knowledge.

The personal and communal coefficient of knowledge is an extra-logical relation between the knower and what is objectively known.¹⁸ Drawing on the thought of Michael Polanyi, Torrance writes that personal knowledge¹⁹

is a way of knowing through responsible commitment to the claims of reality in which the personal and objective poles of the relation are coordinated together in the act of establishing contact with reality and grasping it in its intrinsic rationality.²⁰

This way of knowing is unable to be completely formalized and is often summarized by stating that we always know more than we can explicitly articulate at the time.²¹

What this means is that only a *person* is able to weigh the evidence for or against a theory or compare it with competing theories. Only a *person* is able to discern patterns of order in an open system. Only a *person*, who operates at multiple logical levels, is able to make sense out of the multiple levels in which reality is encountered. This means that, for Torrance, there is no shortcut by which we can bypass the *participatory* character of knowledge. Because reality is not a closed system, we cannot use logico-deductive methods to reach new knowledge, which means that we cannot use such methods to verify the discoveries of others. Only by actually coming to participate in reality in the same way as another can one verify a scientific discovery. That is to say, all appeals for verification must be directed back to the ground from which the discovery arose.

18 See *Transformation and Convergence*, 88–89. See also Thomas F. Torrance, “The Framework of Belief,” in *Belief in Science and Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Hansel Press, Edinburgh: 1980), 10.

19 This personal knowledge is knowledge that includes a personal and communal coefficient. For Torrance as well as Polanyi, *all* knowledge is personal knowledge. See *Theological Science*, 303; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 26–27; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science* (Helmets & Howard, Colorado Springs: 1989), 115–117; and “The Framework of Belief,” 9–10.

20 *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 67.

21 For one such statement, see Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 13.

It is also crucially important to note that there is a strong communal element to all knowledge. Each of us comes to self-awareness within a particular community, and, as science is coming to understand more and more, that community plays a considerable role as to how we understand the world around us. This is significant because every way of looking at things simultaneously excludes another way of looking at them.²² We see the communal facet of knowledge in the natural sciences in “the worldwide community of science,” with whom the individual scientist shares “accepted standards of truth and falsity consistent with the body of universally established knowledge.”²³ This is, or ought to be, true for theological science as well, where theologians participate in the worshipping life of the church alongside other faithful Christians.²⁴ Both theological and natural science operate within a community of verifiers,²⁵ if for no other reason than because we do not encounter reality alone but along with others.²⁶

This emphasis on personal and communal participation in reality is an assertion that it is not possible to encounter, or gain new knowledge about, reality without such participation. Reference was made above to the lack of a “logical bridge” connecting our concepts to reality.²⁷ Our contact with reality is decidedly *extra*-logical. The problem of relating our words and concepts to reality was described as an “extra-logical problem,” which can only be resolved intuitively.²⁸ In practice, this takes place through a process of “indwelling,” where

22 “The Framework of Belief,” 14.

23 Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind*, 115.

24 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 121–122.

25 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 122–123. Closely related to this is the role of tradition in knowledge. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1995), 389–390. Though Torrance only speaks of the need for tradition in making theological statements, it holds equally true for natural science.

26 Torrance speaks of the relevance of this for theology by pointing out that, in theology, we are not simply concerned with God/Human relations, but God/world/Human relations. See *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 45 and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 25–30.

27 See footnote 12 and its related discussion in the main body of the essay.

28 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 115.

we acquire our first intuitive clues through which we apprehend reality.²⁹ These clues, called “foreknowledge” by Polanyi and “prolepsis” by the Greeks, consist of “a tenuous and subtle outreach of the understanding with a forward thrust in cognition of something quite new.”³⁰

It is an authentically heuristic act in which the understanding leaps across a *logical gap* in the attainment of a new conception, and then guided by an intuitive surmise evoked by that conception probes through deepening coherences to lay bare the structure of the reality being investigated.³¹

How this proleptic grasp of reality functions in Torrance’s understanding of discovery will be discussed below.³²

This calls for much hard work in every field of inquiry, but none more than in theology where we have to do, not with an inanimate or impersonal reality, or even another human subject, but with the God who is an absolute Subject who nevertheless gives himself to be known by us objectively. Real discovery, that is, the uncovering of new knowledge that we could not have told ourselves, requires that we allow ourselves to be open to the inexhaustible revelatory capacity of reality, especially the reality of God. However, once we have gained an insight into this utterly new knowledge, it is important that we unpack its significance for the rest of our knowledge, and for this, we need to use the tools made available to us through the study of logic.

Logic

When Torrance writes explicitly on the nature and problems of logic, a significant and often rather confusing aspect of his theology comes to sharp focus. Torrance has a habit of taking words that are in common parlance, significantly redefining them and then using them in their transformed sense without further comment. This is completely consistent with Torrance’s understanding of the development of theological language in the era leading up to and following upon the council

29 Ibid., 93.

30 Ibid., 114.

31 Ibid., 14.

32 See below, “Two-fold Process of Scientific Discovery.”

of Nicaea in 325 A.D. One such example is that, while it is true that the early church took over words, such as *ousia* or *hypostasis*, from the Greek philosophy of their time, these terms were transformed in this appropriation so that they took on a decidedly *personal* character, being defined in light of the being of God. It is precisely when these terms were used in their pre-Christian hellenic sense that confusion arose in the church.³³

Torrance, in his chapter on logic in his monumental work, *Theological Science*,³⁴ engages in precisely this kind of radical reinterpretation. Whereas logic has almost universally been understood as what Torrance will call "The Logic of Systematic Form," Torrance insists on beginning by defining logic in terms of the inner rationality or intelligibility of the being of God. Only after he defines logic in light of the divine being does he apply it in a lesser sense to the inner rationality or intelligibility of created beings. Although he finally does take up the traditional notion of logic, Torrance's significantly redefined notion tends to marginalize it. It is not my purpose to critique this practice, as it seems demanded by Torrance's theological method in general; however, it is important that this be explained so that misunderstanding can be avoided.

Torrance himself never takes up the issue of logic in a comprehensive way in his later works, and tends to favor terms like "inner intelligibility" and "inherent rationality," to speak of what he earlier referred to as "the logic of God" or the "inner logic" of God or created beings.³⁵ Because of this, whereas Torrance's treatment of "The Logic of Empirical Form" and "The Logic of God" predominantly used the term *logic* in this radically differential way, that practice will be avoided in this paper for the sake of clarity, though those titles will remain.

33 For Torrance, a case in point is when some of the Cappadocian fathers forgot the understanding of *ousia* as *being* in its interrelations. See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1988), 241–242. For the decidedly "un-Greek" appropriation of Greek terms, see 68–75, especially 74. Additionally, this same issue came into play when Boethius logically derived *person* from the idea of universal substance, rather than from the triune being of God. See *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 174–175.

34 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 203–280.

35 It is entirely possible that this shift in terminology may have come about because Torrance felt he was being misunderstood by his hearers and readers.

The logic of systematic form³⁶

The logic of systematic form is concerned primarily with the internal consistency of our thinking.³⁷ Strictly speaking, the logic of systematic form is not concerned with truth or falsity but with valid or invalid argumentation.³⁸ In this way, it can be said that the logic of systematic form is most closely related to the discipline of pure mathematics, such as Euclidean geometry.³⁹ Such forms of mathematics operate with carefully worded definitions and basic principles and work with a rigorous application of logic to draw conclusions from these premises.

It must be remembered that, as classically understood, logic in this form is considered to be independent of time and space.⁴⁰ Logic is not concerned with *becoming*, but only with *is*.⁴¹ The entirety of Euclidean geometry is already implied in the five postulates that form its basis. Because systematic form is concerned only with a finite number of fixed axioms and the implications of their interrelation, logico-mathematical systems have been treated as utterly closed systems, completely detached from the empirical world.

36 For this section, see *Theological Science*, 246–263. When Torrance writes on these issues, he does so under the headings, “The Logic of Existence-Statements,” and “The Logic of Coherence-Statements,” drawing on concepts he developed in chapter 4 of *Theological Science*, “The Nature of Truth.” Though the logic of existence-statements and the logic of coherence-statements are roughly equivalent to the logic of empirical form and the logic of systematic form, respectively, they are not truly identical. It seems that Torrance wanted to emphasize the continuity between his understanding of truth and language and his understanding of logic. However, as our purpose here is to emphasize the open character of these various levels of logic, I have chosen to use these alternative terms used by Torrance. It should also be noted that the distinction between these two kinds of “logic” are significantly parallel to the distinction between a correspondence and coherence theory of truth, respectively.

37 *Theological Science*, 249.

38 *Ibid.*, 247, 249–250.

39 The distinctive features of Euclidean geometry will be discussed below in the section titled “Euclidean Geometry.”

40 *Theological Science*, 254.

41 *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 90–91.

Because of their closed and abstract nature, logico-mathematical systems have often been praised as being the most rigorous and thus most pure form of logic. According to Torrance's understanding of logic, as alluded to above and more fully fleshed out below, the exact opposite might be said to be true.⁴² The radically closed nature of the logic of systematic form makes it the least deserving of the title, "logic." If logic is the inherent rationality of existents, the logic of systematic form is the least logical of the three levels we have considered here.

Even though this is the case, it must be emphasized that Torrance does not wish to do away with formal, abstract logic. Indeed, when used as a tool to ensure non-contradiction within a complex of statements, and as a means by which we can work out the implications of what we know, the logic of systematic form is absolutely indispensable.

The casting of scientific results into a mathematical notation may not only give them consistency, making them precise and clear, but, as it were, do some difficult thinking for us by unfolding the implications of our scientific work beyond what we could determine with our empirical statements alone.⁴³

Without rigorous understanding and application of the logic of systematic form, there is much that we would not know. Whatever else Torrance's critical realism may imply, it certainly does not imply a rejection of formal logic.

In spite of this affirmation, however, Torrance refuses to give the logic of systematic form the primacy and authority that others have given it. In itself in the form of a closed system, the logic of systematic form tells us nothing about reality. It only tells us how we can decide if a statement is true given another statement of the same kind.⁴⁴ In order for the power of logico-deductive systems to be harnessed to helpful or meaningful ends, it must be open to empirical reality at key points. This does not mean that every formal-logical statement must have an empirical correlate, or that we can decide ahead of time which

42 See above, under the section heading, "Logic." Again, it must be remembered that at this point, Torrance is departing rather radically from the traditional meaning of "logic." Torrance once referred to this kind of logic as "paper-logic." See *Theological Science*, 219.

43 *Theological Science*, 25; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 62.

44 See the quotation of John Wisdom in *Theological Science*, 267.

statements must have such empirical correlates,⁴⁵ but there must be a real connection if such logic is to be meaningful in our world of space and time.

This is crucially important for it means that, for Torrance, even logic, which has been affirmed for its power as a closed system, must be kept open at crucial points or else it is utterly meaningless. Just as the contingency of the universe as a whole points to the openness of systems within the universe, the openness of the logic of systematic form, the most closed of all concepts, indicates that nothing can be truly closed off from empirical reality outside of itself without resulting in the falsification of our conclusions or the rendering of them useless.

Euclidean Geometry

If there were ever a discipline that has been seen as utterly closed, it is formal logic, especially in its most rigorously developed form in pure mathematics. Perhaps the paradigmatic example that will best help us understand the nature of closed, formal-logical systems is that of Euclidean geometry. Euclid put forward five postulates that he considered self-evident and so made no attempt to prove. From these five basic ideas, he proceeded to develop the whole of geometry as it was known for hundreds of years. Regardless of how complicated geometry became, it was always possible (at least in theory) to trace a given theorem back to its ground in the five basic postulates. This was a logico-deductive system that was built from the ground up. It was utterly closed to outside influences and stood for centuries as the premier example of what the human mind was capable of. Because it is closed, Euclidean geometry is capable of providing an absolutely explicit account of its conclusions and the reasons for them.

Because of the incredible success that various thinkers had in describing the behavior of natural phenomena in terms of Euclidean geometry, the reasoning

45 Empirical correlates are points at which a scientific (whether natural or theological) theory bears on reality. Empirical correlates are the points at which a theory can be verified or falsified. Without such correlates, a theory would have no real bearing on reality and is thus scientifically useless. See *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 34–39, and *Theological Science*, 237, 294–295. Also, see the section “The Stratified Nature of Reality” in my companion essay in this volume of *Participatio*, “Truth and Language in the Theology of T. F. Torrance.”

employed in it became the standard by which, in practice, logic was defined and this was applied to every field of inquiry. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, to think more rationally was to think *more geometrico*.⁴⁶ According to this kind of practice, logico-deductive systems akin to Euclidean geometry were seen to be the purest form of logic, and if something did not measure to that standard, it was seen as deficient or illogical.

The Insights of Clerk Maxwell and Einstein

In the years following thinkers such as Newton and Kant, there was a striking emphasis on phenomena as the only appropriate basis on which to build scientific knowledge.⁴⁷ However, Scottish physicist and committed Christian, James Clerk Maxwell, insisted that mathematics could not be isolated from empirical science, and that we must operate with “embodied mathematics.”⁴⁸ This means that our understanding of mathematics must arise from nature itself, rather than applied as an external parameter. Additionally, after trying and failing to describe the behavior of an electro-magnetic field in terms of Newtonian mechanics,⁴⁹ Clerk Maxwell developed a relational understanding of nature, that there are relations that are constitutive of realities. Torrance refers to such relations as “onto-relations.”⁵⁰

Einstein took this insight very seriously, calling Clerk Maxwell’s work in field theory the most important advance in physics since Newton.⁵¹ his work brought geometry into the heart of physics, making it a “natural science.” This further development of field theory revealed the inadequacy of Euclidean geometry to

46 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 320–321; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 41–42.

47 This stems largely from Newton’s claim (since then shown to be erroneous) that he framed no hypotheses and Kant’s radical distinction between phenomena and noumena.

48 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 226–229.

49 It must be noted that even this failure was not without its fruit as it led to Clerk Maxwell’s development of partial differential equations that have proved so important.

50 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 230.

51 *Ibid.*, 233.

describe nature and, together with non-Euclidean geometries, helped scientists to see these limitations and foster a way of thinking that derived geometrical conceptions from reality instead of clamping them *upon* reality.⁵²

The Implications of Gödel's Theorems⁵³

Though Torrance does not base his conclusions on the work of mathematician Kurt Gödel, he often cites his work as a dialogue partner and as one who has reached conclusions in the philosophy of mathematics that are remarkably parallel and congenial to his own conclusions in theology and philosophy of science.⁵⁴ A brief sketch of the context that gave rise to Gödel's groundbreaking work and its implications for logico-deductive systems will be given here.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a tremendous effort made to establish powerful logical systems that would be both consistent, that is, no proposition could be both proved and disproved within it, and also complete, that is, that every proposition that is expressible in terms of the system can be either proved or disproved within it. This goal inspired the development of meta-mathematics and other incredible efforts of human intelligence. Perhaps the greatest achievement toward this end was the writing of *Principia Mathematica* by Alfred North Whitehead and Bertrand Russell. This massive undertaking was designed to develop a considerably useful system that was both consistent and complete, as well as closed; that is, it did not rely on anything beyond itself for its completion or consistency.

The reason why this is desirable is that it would enable us to make entirely explicit everything that we implicitly rely on in order to prove something. There would no longer be any need to assume the consistency of a wider set of axioms

52 For a comment on the congeniality between the advances in logic and those in physics, see *Theological Science*, 248. See also *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 91–91 for Torrance's discussion, using Euclidean geometry as an example, that closing off a system in independence from reality distorts and falsifies it.

53 For this section, see primarily *Transformation and Convergence*, 135–148.

54 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 322–323; *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 70; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73–74; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 123–126.

in order for a system to function. The problem here is expressed several times by Torrance in Pascal's observation that, even in something as simple as the definition of a word, we must use other words that, for the purposes of the definition, must remain undefined.⁵⁵ It is the desire to eliminate such imprecision in mathematics that fueled much of this endeavor.

As it turns out, however, such a goal is inherently impossible. This was shown by the epoch-making work of Kurt Gödel and his famous "incompleteness theorems," published in 1931 in the essay, "On Formally Undecidable Propositions of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems." The main thrust of Gödel's point, and why it is significant for our purposes, is that it demonstrated that no formal system, provided it be of sufficient richness,⁵⁶ can be both complete and consistent within itself. This has radical implications because it means that, in any formal-logical system, there are propositions that can be expressed in terms of the system that are true, but also not provable.

This does not mean that any given system is hopelessly incomplete, but that it is incomplete *in itself*.⁵⁷ If the system were to be open to a richer, more comprehensive system, propositions that would otherwise have been undecidable within the original system can be decided with reference to the higher and wider meta-system. It must be noted, however, that this only solves the problem of completeness and consistency for the original system. This higher and wider system is also a formal-logical system, which means that Gödel's theorems

55 See Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 114.

56 This level of richness is a caveat because one could construct a closed, consistent, and complete system that is so simple that it is of no value. Such an example might be as follows: If a proposition has an odd number of words, it is true; if it has an even number of words, it is false. This is closed, consistent, and complete, but utterly pointless.

57 As Gödel's theorems demonstrate that a closed formal-logical system cannot be *both* complete and consistent, it stands to reason that, just as a system can be consistent but not complete, one could conceivably be complete but not consistent. The emphasis in Torrance, to speak of no others, is on a consistent system that is completed beyond itself. This seems to be because a system that is complete but not consistent has severely limited usefulness (indeed, it may even be shown to be useless), whereas a consistent but incomplete system has considerable usefulness, especially if it *can* be completed beyond itself.

apply to it as well, thus showing that even this second system cannot be both complete and consistent.

In theory, this process could go on forever, always making an appeal to a higher and wider system, but in practice, as Torrance points, out, we tend to work with only three levels of thought. The significance of Gödel's theorems is that, just as the empirical sciences have been increasingly demonstrating that we must understand reality as stratified and operate with a multi-leveled natural science, even mathematics which has so often been treated as something operating on only a single level, must operate on multiple logical levels and is marked by a fundamentally open character.⁵⁸

The Logic of Empirical Form⁵⁹

Though we have already discussed Torrance's understanding of the logic of systematic form, we must understand that Torrance, in his most significant chapter on logic, does not do so in this order, but subordinates the whole concept of formal logic to more dynamic forms of logic rooted in reality. To understand what he does here, it is instructive to look at his understanding of how Calvin altered the practice of asking questions as compared to the common practice at the time. Aristotle spoke of four questions that were reduced to three by Cicero: *quid sit* (what is it), *an sit* (whether it exists), and *quale sit* (what sort of thing is it).⁶⁰ Rather than begin with questions dealing with abstract ideas and possibilities, Calvin reversed the question, asking along the lines, "What sort of God is this revealed to us in Jesus Christ?" This way of thinking prioritized actuality over possibility, concrete over abstract, material thinking over formal thinking.

This is precisely what Torrance does in his understanding of logic. Rather than prioritizing a way of thinking that does not depend on actuality but only on

58 See Torrance, *Theological Science*, 259–263; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304–305; *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 17.

59 For this section, see *Theological Science*, 222–246.

60 Aristotle's fourth question was *propter quid*, which was combined into *quale sit* by Cicero. See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 121. Also see *God and Rationality*, 33–34.

abstract possibility, he turns instead to what actually exists. More specifically, he turns to deal with logic first and foremost as manifested in God as the only one who is existent in his very being, everything else having existence only by virtue of relation to God. For Torrance, God is so far from being illogical that he is the only place where we really encounter logic in the fullest sense of the word, for God is the only one in whom *logos* is *enousios*.⁶¹

Torrance has a tendency to use the word *logic* differentially. In this section and the following one, instead of continually speaking of the *logic* of God or the *logic* of empirical reality, we shall prefer to use phrases such as *intrinsic intelligibility* and *inner rationality* as synonymous expressions that will, we hope, bring increased clarity to Torrance's treatment of logic.

It must be repeated that the three levels of logic (logic of systematic form, logic of empirical form, logic of God) cannot be sharply divided. Inasmuch as the logic of God is understood to be the logic of a particular existent who is existent in the fullest sense whereas all other existents are so only in a derived sense, there is significant overlap in our understanding and articulating the logic of God and the logic of other empirical realities, though the uniqueness and priority of the logic of God must be maintained in spite of this overlap. Additionally, one significant aspect of knowledge is that it is never separated from a particular form. Form and being are deeply integrated, and the idea that we can have access to knowledge independent of form is meaningless, as we cannot understand anything, much less communicate it, unless it is in some kind of form.

Form arises, however, in two different ways, as we reflect upon external relations in the world, and as we seek to correlate what we apprehend in reducing the internal relations of our thought into orderly patterns. It may even be right to speak of two different kinds of form, *empirical form* deriving from objective relations in states of affairs, and *systematic form* deriving from the combination of our thoughts in consistent sequences, but if so they are found only in a polar relation to each other.⁶²

61 It is at precisely this point that confusion may arise as this turns the traditional understanding of logic on its head.

62 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 222–223.

It is because of this formal aspect of knowledge that we must deal with the logic inherent in such form. In this way, much of the above discussion on the logic of systematic form will overlap with this discussion and the one on the logic of God.

The logic of empirical form is concerned with the inherent connections and rationality in a given existent. The difference between the logic of empirical form and the logic of God is that the former is far more general, dealing with existents in general, both divine and created. It is important to note that, though the logic of empirical form precedes the logic of God in this essay, this is not how Torrance understands the relationship between these two forms of logic. Torrance is taking the insights gained from understanding the logic of God and generalizing them to deal with created realities and not taking insights gained from understanding the logic of empirical form and then applying them to understanding God. God always has priority, even in our understanding of logic.

The primary issue in the logic of empirical form is that it is a logic of discovery.⁶³ It deals with the inherent rationality of existents that are external to ourselves and our logico-linguistic systems.⁶⁴ As such, what we learn through encounter with empirical reality is content that we could not have taught ourselves in isolation from that reality. The logic of empirical form is a logic of reference, where the statements we use to speak of the internal logic of various existents do not contain the truth in themselves but refer to states independent of themselves through a semantic relation.⁶⁵

It could be said, for the sake of clarity, that, as the logic of systematic form is mostly closely related to mathematics, the logic of empirical form is most closely related to the discipline of empirical science, in that it is concerned with knowledge that is truly *new*. As such it is characterized by open concepts and structures, which derive their content from the realities to which they refer and are revisable in light of them. The logic of empirical form is not simply concerned

63 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 230–231, 239–240.

64 Reality proves itself to us with its own self-evidential force that we cannot rationally resist. See *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 97–99, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 103.

65 See my companion essay in this volume of *Participatio*, "Truth and Language in the Theology of T. F. Torrance."

with validity and consistency but with *truth*, the truth of existents in being what they are and not something else. Learning the truth in this sense requires that the questions we ask be interrogative in nature.⁶⁶

The Logic of God⁶⁷

In spite of the fact that we have, for the sake of clarity, begun our discussion of logic with the logic of systematic form, it is important to stress yet again that, to really comprehend Torrance's understanding of logic, we must grasp that he operates with a very different starting point. For Torrance, understanding logic in general must start with understanding the logic of God. When he speaks of "The Logic of God,"⁶⁸ Torrance is not uncritically applying his theological tradition with normative force, as if we could identify our human logic with the logic of God. Rather, the logic of God is the rationality that is inherent within the being of God and as such stands in judgment over all human logic.

There is tremendous overlap between the three types of logic discussed here. This is because, though our understanding of the logic of God must insist on its priority over the logic of other existents, both the logic of God and material logic more generally deal with the problem of what Torrance calls "ontologic," or the intrinsic intelligibility of existents, regardless of whether they are mundane or divine.⁶⁹ Additionally, regardless of whether we are speaking of God, other existents, or the relations between ideas, we have no choice but to use language, so Torrance's understanding of language overlaps with his understanding of logic.

Torrance understands the rationality of God, which deals not only with the problem of "ontologic," but also with "theologic,"⁷⁰ as deeply Christocentric.

66 See the discussion above in the section "Openness" on the comparison of *quaestio* and *interrogatio*.

67 For this section, see *Theological Science*, 203–222.

68 It should be remembered that we shall use the phrase "rationality of God," and others like it, as clarifying synonyms for "the logic of God."

69 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 205

70 For a discussion of the interior logic of theological knowledge, see *Ibid.*, 212–214. Also see *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 91, and *Theological Science*, 205.

By “the Logic of God” we can only mean Jesus Christ, for he and no other is the eternal *Logos* of God become flesh. he is the incarnate *Logic* of God, the Logic of God’s grace and truth toward us, and therefore we are bound to think in terms of this incarnate Logic in Christ. The Logic is in Christ before it is in us; it is in the given reality before it is in our knowledge of him. What we have to do is to lay bare the organic meaning or structural coherence of theological knowledge as it takes form and order in accordance with the living unity and order of the truth in Jesus Christ.⁷¹

When we set ourselves to understand the logic of God, we must not import a way of thinking derived outside of our field of inquiry, but derive it from within. This means that we must seek to understand God in accordance with how God comes to meet with us, which is in and through Jesus Christ.

There are two main facets of Torrance’s understanding of the logic of God that must be addressed. first, the logic of God is the logic of *grace*.⁷² Within this facet there are two issues that must be noted. For Torrance, the being and thus the logic of God always has priority over our being or our understanding. Because of this, we are not able to impose our own understanding on the being and logic of God without falsifying it. This demands a level of objectivity that is as rigorous as the hard sciences, if not more so. After all, we are dealing in theology with the God of all who will not be mastered by our creaturely concepts.

The second aspect of the logic of grace, and perhaps most important for our discussion, is that God is under no compulsion to be the truth of our theological statements. There is a sense that, when we engage in the natural sciences, the objects of our knowledge are under our control in the sense that, when we know them, they *must* be known, that they *must* submit to our probing and questioning.⁷³ God, however, is under no such obligation. God does not need to reveal himself to us, nor to make himself the object of our investigation. The fact

71 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 205–206.

72 Ibid., 214–216

73 Though it is true that, in this limited sense, the objects of natural science are under our control, inasmuch as genuine insights are never done away with, we must not make too much of this control as nature continually reveals itself to be unpredictable and reveals our need to carefully develop experiments and tools to know it.

that God has indeed done this requires us to always remember that we are not the masters of God but that God is *our* master.

Furthermore, this means that all our theological concepts must be radically open to God's gracious revelation. We can never round off our ideas and close them in so they have the same kind of timeless and spaceless certainty as an arithmetical expression. This means that there is an element of *decision* in our theological activity.⁷⁴ This is not to be understood as if our decision *makes* our conclusions true, but rather must be understood as a response to *election*. God has chosen to be truth for us so we must respond with decision that God and nothing else might be truth for us. Although this is particularly relevant in theological science, it is true, *mutatis mutandis*, in natural science as well.

The second key facet to understanding the logic of God is that it is the logic of *Christ*.⁷⁵ It is because of the absolute Christocentricity of the logic of God that we must conclude that the logic of God is radically *personal* and *dynamic*.

When we do that we are directed to Jesus Christ, to the Incarnation, to the hypostatic union, the unique togetherness of God and man in Christ which is normative for every other relationship between man and God.⁷⁶

However, there are dangers with this facet as well. We must not think of the hypostatic union as a static concept but rather a dynamic one whose significance runs throughout the whole of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Additionally, Torrance warns us that we must not "turn the doctrine of the hypostatic union into ideological truth, and use it as the masterful idea of a system of thought."⁷⁷ That is to say, we must not make our doctrines (including such central ones as the hypostatic union) into *closed* concepts that are no longer open to modification or interpretation from the reality they signify.

Out of the three subdivisions of "logic" dealt with here, the logic of God is the most firmly *logic* as it is rooted in the Logos inherent in the very being of God, which is the only thing that, for Torrance, deserves to be called logic in the

74 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 214–216.

75 *Ibid.*, 216–222.

76 *Ibid.*, 216.

77 *Ibid.*, 216.

fullest sense.⁷⁸ It is also the most fully personal and dynamic of all logic. Most significantly for our purposes, it is also the most radically open. Though we must use language to speak of the logic of God, which binds Torrance's discussion of this topic to the logics of empirical and systematic form, which were discussed above, this logic in itself is not bound to our words but utterly transcends them. It is a logic of divine being and so cannot be reduced to closed human concepts. Our understanding of the logic of God must be radically open to the being of God, for the logic of God is the inherent rationality and coherence within the being of God.

Significance of Openness for Natural and Theological Science

It is important that we take a moment and explore some of the key implications this understanding of openness has for our natural and theological sciences. The first of these implications is that it shows that the age of determinism is indeed over. Rigid determinism, which is a prerequisite of prediction, is only possible within closed systems, whose connections are logical⁷⁹ ones and in which time is not an internal parameter of the system (though it might be applied in an external way). With the increased understanding that we live in an open universe and that God truly does greatly exceed all our thoughts about him, determinism has been radically critiqued, though it is taking a long time for the popular mind to shift out of determinist categories.⁸⁰ Because of this, prediction is becoming less important as a criterion of theoretical proof.

78 At the risk of being repetitious, it should be emphasized again that Torrance uses the word "logic" differentially. It is to be clearly understood that Torrance is indeed calling, by his practice, for a radical redefinition of logic, akin to the redefinition of Greek philosophical terms by the early church.

79 This is in contradistinction to ontological interrelations, which Torrance believes to be constitutive of open systems.

80 The legacy of determinism in science has made many theologians hesitant to relate theology to science. However, theologians seem to be slow to understand the significance of the critique of determinism in natural science. See *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 18–20.

Since the realities we investigate, whether empirical reality or the being of God, cannot be captured in words, our statements and concepts must be continually kept open to reality, or else they will become false by transferring their truth from reality to themselves, thereby reducing ontological truth and relations to linguistic truth and relations. This means that the rationality of our concepts or statements is dependent on the rationality that is inherent in the reality to which they refer (their inner logic). It may seem as though this will lead to a tremendous decrease in precision, for we cannot reduce our concepts to clear-cut statements that we can manipulate at will. However, the opposite is the case. By closing our mental and linguistic structures off from the reality to which they refer, we make them most *imprecise* (or else we make them extremely precise but of no empirical value). The openness of our concepts drastically increases their precision because they renounce any truth in themselves but insist on directing our attention to the truth of reality.

Because we are dealing with open mental and linguistic structures, which implies that we are not able to reduce reality to statements *about* reality, we must expect that, though we have a grasp on key issues in understanding reality, this openness will lead us periodically to have our whole way of thinking and understanding radically changed and rebuilt in such a way that the key insights from before the shift are not lost, but that our structures of thought and speech bear a stronger relation with the structures of reality.⁸¹ It is precisely because this *does* happen (such as with the development of Nicene theology and relativity theory) that we are convinced that our theological and natural science is not self-generated, but is built on what is "heard" from beyond it. In the case of natural science, this takes the form of understanding that we gain through empirico-theoretical investigation of the universe; in theology, it takes the form of what we learn through the self-revelation of God. Because both are rooted in a source outside of ourselves, they continually break through our concepts and forge new ones.

Because of this need to be open to reality so that our terms can take on a fuller precision, our terms are always revisable in light of reality, so that terms may

81 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 345. Torrance occasionally uses Thomas S. Kuhn's term "paradigm shifts" to describe such radical changes in understanding. See *Theological Science*, 296.

need to be coined, reinterpreted, or discarded, depending on further disclosure from reality. In the natural sciences, this took place with the development of non-Euclidean geometries, where terms that were previously defined in a common sense way (such as "point" and "line") were radically reinterpreted as technical terms. Theologically speaking, this means that even key doctrines like the *homoousion* or the hypostatic union are not sacrosanct or beyond reformulation, but that they have their content in the reality of God's self-revelation in Christ, and if it should happen that it becomes clear that the terms need to be modified to better reflect reality, this can happen. If it happens that terms are not redefined, it is not because they contain the truth in themselves or because they are, as statements, adequate to the truth, but because they have proved remarkably fruitful at enabling us to understand and articulate the inner rationality or logic of the realities to which they refer.

Two-fold Process of Scientific Discovery

In light of the preceding discussion, it is clear that one could easily fall into two errors. The first of these is to make the kind of logic we see in closed formal-logical systems the ideal for all knowledge. To make this mistake in natural science would be to radically close our concepts and to affirm that knowledge is effectively isomorphic to Euclidean geometry. In this case, what we call "discovery" is really nothing of the sort, but the making of logical connections within the mind and a reverting to a quasi-Platonic understanding where all our knowledge is already innate in the mind but has to be uncovered by logical processes.

The other mistake one could make is to avoid formal logic altogether because of its limited use in describing the universe and its inability to truly *discover* utterly new truths, being able only to work out logical implications from known premises. However, to do this is to neglect the fact that logic is a tool that can be tremendously helpful, so long as it is not pressed beyond its inherent limitations. As Torrance has said in the statement quoted above, logic can "do some difficult thinking for us by unfolding the implications of our scientific work beyond what we could determine with our empirical statements alone."⁸²

82 See footnote 42.

The fact that Torrance affirms both the indispensability of formal logic and its inability to teach us something new makes it not surprising to see that he describes the gaining of knowledge as a two-fold process that includes both a leap forward in knowledge through a proleptic insight and a working out of the logical implications of that insight.⁸³ This enables Torrance to value formal logic but to resist the temptation to set it up as a standard that is independent of reality.

It is important to emphasize the fact that the insight that we must have to move forward in our knowledge is not something that we could have taught ourselves on the basis of what we already knew. That is to say, this new knowledge is not logically deducible from our previous knowledge. Because of this, truly new knowledge will not fit nicely into the logical form that we had before we had the insight, which can make it seem a-logical, or perhaps even *illogical* at first glance.⁸⁴

However, once the insight is gained, we can begin to unpack its significance. The implications of a new insight are sometimes so profound that it might take a long time to exhaust its significance. For example, after Einstein wrote his original ground-breaking papers on relativity theory, it took decades for scientists to fully appreciate what was accomplished. Once the implications have been understood, we take another leap forward with another insight, and the process begins all over again. It stands to reason, however, that our insights may very well come more quickly than we can understand their full significance. There is no requirement that we exhaust our understanding of an insight before we have another one.

It would be most appropriate to give a few examples from Torrance's own writings to help illustrate how he understands this as having taken place. Perhaps the strongest example is that of the apostles coming to understand the significance of Christ.⁸⁵ While they followed Jesus, they heard what he said

83 This bears some resemblance to Kuhn's notion of Scientific Revolutions and leaps forward in knowledge. *Transformation and Convergence*, 243; *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 47–48. Also, see *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 83–85, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 102.

84 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 203.

85 See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 44–45.

and watched what he did, but at the end when he was arrested and crucified, they scattered, returned to their previous lines of work, and locked themselves in rooms so they might not share Christ's fate. And yet, after they received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and understood the significance of Christ in a way that they could not have taught themselves (after all, nothing short of the very being of God taking up residence inside of them could generate this insight in them; not even the resurrection accomplished this), they became radically different people. All of a sudden, the whole of Christ's ministry took on new depth. They remembered all the times when he accepted identification as the Son of God and son of man, and they emphasized it in their passing on the story of the life of Jesus. The implications of this key insight were so profound that those who once fled from Christ's fate eventually willingly and boldly joined him in it.

Another, if somewhat less dramatic, example is the impact of humanist studies on John Calvin.⁸⁶ He had studied at Montaigu, learning especially, as Torrance affirms quite strongly, from Scottish philosopher John Major. However, there was much from his early learning that, because of the insights of the humanist movement, was seen to be a hindrance. Though he was careful not to abandon what he learned at school in its entirety, "everything had now to be looked at from a new angle, the relation of language to culture and of good letters to the realities signified."

Before a discussion on the significance of openness and logic and how they both play a role in this two-fold process of scientific discovery can be closed, some brief comments are called for in order to give a more full account of how Torrance envisions this process taking place.

It is important to note in this regard that Torrance's resistance to the usefulness of axiomatic systems is that they are made up of *fixed* axioms that are determined in an *a priori* manner and are not modifiable in light of experience. Torrance advocates the use of what he calls *fluid* axioms.⁸⁷ These are like fixed axioms in that they arise in the mind without logical proof, but are unlike fixed axioms in that they *can* be modified in light of experience. In a sense, fluid

86 See Torrance, *Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, 100.

87 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 77–79, 92–93; *God and Rationality*, 99–100. For three examples of how fluid axiomatic structures have been used throughout church history, see *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 86–91.

axioms are “free inventions” of the mind,⁸⁸ but they must not be understood as if they bore no relation to reality because they arise under the impact of reality upon the scientist and by his or her personal participation in that reality. These fluid axioms form the basis of the various theories through which one discerns reality.⁸⁹ However, as reality tends to outrun and outstrip all our most careful formulations, these axioms must be modified in light of what we learn and made to better reflect reality as it has been disclosed to us.

This is deeply related to what Torrance calls *disclosure models*.⁹⁰ Unlike what he calls *picturing models*, Torrance thinks that we need to maintain a real distinction between our models and what they are meant to refer to. Because of this, we must never allow our models to get in the way of our perceiving reality but be the medium *through* which we perceive it.⁹¹ In Torrance’s understanding, scientific theories are precisely this kind of model. They function as compound questions put to nature and have to be revised progressively in the light of the answers that come back from nature so that they may become more and more transparent media through which nature discloses its mysteries to us and imprints its truth on our understanding with its own self-explicative and evidential power.⁹²

The purpose of our theories is to understand reality more fully. They are media through which we come to know reality but reality always retains ontic priority over our theories.⁹³

88 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 79. “Free invention” is language Torrance borrows from Einstein. See also Albert Einstein, *The World As I See It* (John Lane, London: 1935), 134.

89 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 50–51, 64–65.

90 For a discussion on disclosure models, their construction and use, see *ibid.*, 85 –86.

91 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 255, 274–275; *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 124 –127.

92 Thomas F. Torrance, “Theological Realism,” in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, eds. B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 183–184.

93 A common theme in Torrance’s writing is that for our questions to be purified, they must be questioned down to their roots. See *God and Rationality*, 53–54.

By this process, we come to progressively deeper and more complete understanding of the natural world (in the natural sciences) and the God who created the universe (in theological science), while never forgetting the utter primacy the object of our knowledge has over our knowing of it. Torrance insists on appropriating the tremendous power of formal-logical processes but, through using the logic of God as his paradigmatic example by which he understands what logic truly is, insists rightly that logic must always be open to the reality it serves and must never be allowed to clamp an artificial framework down upon reality. Torrance's understanding of openness and logic is fully integrated and consistent with his critical realist epistemology.

TRUTH AND LANGUAGE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. Torrance

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ABSTRACT: Truth and the language we use to speak of the truth can never be separated in Torrance's critical realist epistemology, but this does not mean that they can be identified. This essay explores Torrance's deeply interrelated theories of truth and language and draws out some concrete implications that are helpful for moving forward in the dialogues surrounding theological epistemology and methodology.

Torrance's Critical Realist Epistemology

Before we can say anything of consequence on the topic of truth and language in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance, we must point out that he holds to a critical realist epistemology.¹ We will deal with elements of this epistemology, particularly the elements of truth and language in this paper, but we must begin with some brief discussion of the major themes of his critical realism here.

The key issues are that Torrance believes that there is a reality external to the mind of the subject and that this reality is knowable. This knowability is "*presupposed* by all human beings in everyday intercourse with the world and *confirmed* by successful scientific endeavor."² However, it is also important

1 "I have found myself to accept this epistemology of *critical realism*, but it has challenged me to rethink the whole question of *being*" (Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* [Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh: 1985], 132).

2 Elmer Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding his Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 2001), 60; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and*

that, though this knowability is presupposed and actually confirmed in human beings, it is not automatic. The suitable structural kinship between the human mind and external reality is not latent in the human mind but can and must be developed through actual contact with reality.³ This applies with equal force to our knowledge of the natural world as it does to our knowledge of God. As Torrance points out from time to time, children learn more about the physical world around them by the time they are five years old than they would ever be able to explain, even if they were to become brilliant physicists.⁴

As part of his realist conviction, Torrance rejects radical epistemological and cosmological dualisms of both ancient and modern origin in favor of a unitary understanding of knowledge.⁵ In particular, Torrance opposes a sharp dualism between the knower and what they seek to know, as is so often held by post-Kantian philosophy. Though there is no necessary or inherent connection between the knower and the reality they seek to know, Torrance insists that such a connection is *possible*. When dualistic ways of thinking are imported into our knowledge, elements that are found together in experience are torn apart. Instead, Torrance insists that, in our most basic experience, form and content are not separable from one another. In fact, Torrance believes that this dividing of “aspects of reality that are naturally integrated” has a “damaging effect in

Scientific Theology, 27.

3 This “actual contact” with reality is implied in the success of our science, but is not reducible to it. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 60; Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1999), 10; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 27. For a concrete example of how this happens with biblical revelation, see Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 37–38.

4 What Torrance has in mind here is similar to Polanyi’s notion of a “tacit dimension” in all knowledge. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1980), 13; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 48.

5 Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 57. Also see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 60–61, where Torrance understands “a unitary relation between the empirical and theoretical ingredients in the structure of the real world and in our knowledge of it” to be definitive of realism. However, Torrance wants to maintain a “proper dualism” between God and the created world. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1969), 71.

different areas of knowledge.”⁶ Particularly relevant for the purpose of this paper is that Torrance insists there can be a real relation between sign and thing signified.⁷

Torrance does not speak about the nature of truth in some way that is detached from the actual body of Christian revelation, but all his discussions are based firmly on the content of that revelation. What can be confusing for those who are new to Torrance’s work is that he does not emphasize this point very frequently. At the beginning of his monumental work on theological method, *Theological Science*, Torrance points out that his approach is self-consciously *Christian* and implicitly rooted in the depth of Christian theology:

It must be said right away, that what is offered in this discussion presupposes the full content of theological knowledge, and is an attempt to set forth the way of proper theological knowledge in accordance with that content – although, of course, little of that positive content can be expounded here. It is to be granted also that what is offered here is not fully meaningful if considered in abstraction from that material content.⁸

As clear as this statement is, he never asserts this point with such clarity again for the rest of the work. The fully integrated relation between theological method and content in Torrance’s work can be found in the first four chapters in his important work, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity and how it arises.⁹

6 See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1992), 1-5; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 40-44; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 9-10, 97-98; Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville: 1980), 146-149. For Torrance’s understanding of Athanasius’ rejection of cosmological and epistemological dualisms, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1995), 212-213.

7 Thomas F. Torrance, “Theological Realism,” in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, eds. B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1982), 172-173.

8 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 10-11. Also see *Ground and Grammar*, 155-156, where Torrance admits that, though he will not seek to explain the doctrine of the Trinity within that chapter, it is nevertheless assumed in his thinking.

9 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1-111.

As a corollary to this, Torrance's theological method is deliberately *a posteriori*, as indeed it cannot help but be if it is based on revelation, that is, content that is given from beyond ourselves.¹⁰

A genuine theology is distrustful of all speculative thinking or of all *a priori* thought. Theological thinking is essentially positive, thinking that keeps its feet on the ground of actuality; *a posteriori*, thinking that follows and is obedient to the given and communicated Word and Act of God as the material for its reflection; and *empirical*, thinking out of real experience of God determined by God.¹¹ "In no authentic knowledge do we begin with epistemology and then on the ground of theory independently argued go on to develop our actual knowledge."¹²

Torrance is adamant that we must not start with questions as to the *possibility* of knowledge but with the conviction that we have *actually* achieved knowledge, and only on such grounds ask how such knowledge has arisen and to what degree that knowledge is truly rooted in the reality in question.¹³

10 See the discussion of God's self-revelation in *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1–24.

11 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 33.

12 Torrance often rails against the allowing of theoretical factors to distort empirical factors in investigation, but he is very much aware that empirical factors do not stand alone. Empirical and theoretical factors are always related in a dialectical way and Torrance often prefers to speak of "empirico-theoretical" investigation because of this. See Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Wipf & Stock, Eugene: 1997), 165.

13 This touches on the role that "ultimate beliefs" play in Torrance's thought. Though anything resembling a full treatment of such beliefs is beyond the scope of this essay, it is sufficient to note that Torrance believes that the conviction that we do in fact know things is an ultimate belief (on which we stake our lives) that can neither be verified nor falsified, but arises under the pressure of reality on persons. See *Theological Science*, 25–54; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 80–81. For Torrance on ultimate beliefs, see primarily his essays "Ultimate Beliefs and the Scientific Revolution," in *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1984), 191–214, and "The Framework of Belief" in *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Handsel Press, Edinburgh: 1980), 1–27.

The Distinction between the Truth of Being and the Truthfulness of Statements

Before we discuss Torrance's understanding of truth in general, we must first understand how he defined "truth" and note some basic distinctions that were crucial to many of his most important discussions on the nature of truth. Perhaps the clearest definition of truth is found in Torrance's essay, "truth and authority in the Church."¹⁴ In this essay, he explains that he is concerned to put forward an understanding of truth by using the language of the church Fathers, early medievals, Augustine, and Anselm.¹⁵ he says,

The truth is that which is what it is and that which discloses what it is as it is. The concept of truth enshrines at once the reality of things and the revelation of things as they are in reality. truth comes to view in its own majesty, freedom and authority, compelling us by the power of what it is to assent to it and acknowledge it for what it is in itself.¹⁶

Within this manner of defining the truth, Torrance believes that we have an interweaving of both hebrew and Greek notions of truth; the former emphasizing truth as consistency and faithfulness, rooted primarily in the faithfulness of God to who God is, the latter which spoke of truth as the reality of things, "their *aletheia* or *physis*."¹⁷ It is important to understand, as we will clarify later, that this is a realist understanding of truth, as opposed to both existentialist philosophy and nominalism. For Torrance, truth has ontology; it is what really *is*.

Because of the tendency to either collapse the truth of signification and the truth of being together or to separate them entirely, Torrance often makes a point of providing an analysis (based on Anselm's *De Veritate*) of the many ways we can speak of something as "true."¹⁸ For the sake of completeness,

14 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 303–332.

15 Ibid., 310.

16 Ibid., 303. Also cp. *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 140–147; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 126–127; *Theological Science*, 141–143.

17 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 310–311. Also cp. *Theological Science*, 141. For a summary of truth in the whole of the biblical tradition, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 123–124.

18 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 127–135; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 141–147.

we will summarize the entire argument, and then indicate the key points for understanding Torrance's thought.

One crucial aspect which, unfortunately, cannot be fully discussed here is Torrance's conviction that all knowledge is fundamentally *personal* in nature.¹⁹ This extends to our knowledge of truth and our theory of language. In all of this discussion, it is important to remember that we are not dealing with knowledge or understanding that is somehow detached from ourselves as persons, but that there is a personal, tacit dimension that shapes what we know and perceives connections that cannot be reduced to entirely explicit articulation.

This personal character that is required in theological inquiry is not, however, a lapse back into subjectivism but

a responsible participation of the person as an active rational agent in the acts of understanding, but a participation that is controlled from beyond the knowing person by objective reality and universal standards which transcend his subjectivity.²⁰

Torrance is adamant that only a *person* is able to make judgments, understand or intend meaning, discern patterns, and be committed to reality and truth.²¹

To return to our summary, the first point to note in Torrance's analysis of the *De Veritate* is that we must distinguish between two "truths of statement."²² The first of these refers to whether or not a statement makes verbal sense. If it does, we can say that the statement is "true" inasmuch as it does what it is meant to do, that is, in this case, function as a statement. We could call this the "syntactical truth" of a statement. Both Torrance and Anselm grant that we do

19 Torrance is most frequently engaged in dialogue on this point with Michael Polanyi. Crucial discussions on this topic can be found in the essays, "The Place of Michael Polanyi in the Modern Philosophy of science," *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*, 107–173, and "The Social Coefficient of Knowledge" in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98–130. Also see *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 61–72.

20 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 45. For Torrance on the personal and participatory nature of all knowledge (including theological knowledge), see "The Social Coefficient of Knowledge," in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 98–130.

21 For a particularly outstanding and concise explanation of this issue, from which this brief treatment is primarily drawn, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 45–46.

22 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 128; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 144; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 320–322.

not usually mean this when we say that a statement is true, but it is important to note because, if a statement is not true in this way, it cannot be true in any of the other ways.

The second truth of statement deals with whether or not a statement directs attention away from itself to a state of affairs beyond itself. We could call this the "semantic truth" of a statement. Again, if a statement is to have semantic truth, it must also have syntactic truth, but it is entirely possible for a statement to have syntactic truth and yet not have semantic truth, as happens, for example, when a statement does not direct us to a true state of affairs. If a statement has both syntactic truth and semantic truth, it has what Torrance and Anselm call "truth of signification."²³

The truth of signification, by definition, cannot stand alone, but implies the connection between the statement and the thing signified. The truth of signification is dependent on the truth of being which, to put it as simply as possible, is "what really exists." For example, if I were to say, "The sheet of paper on which this document is printed is white," the truth or falsity of the statement would not be rooted in the statement itself, but in the reality to which it refers.²⁴ If it happened that this document were to be printed on paper of some other color, it would make the statement false, for it would no longer refer to something that is true independently of the statement.

The truth of signification is of extreme importance, because it is Torrance's answer to those who would demand a logical connection between statements and the reality signified. He often draws on the language of Wittgenstein that one cannot picture in a picture how a picture pictures what is pictured, and then he says that neither can we state in statements how statements are related to

23 *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 127–128; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 144–145; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304–305, 320–322. The syntactic truth and semantic truth of statements bear strong resemblances to coherence and correspondence theories of truth, respectively.

24 This is similar to Tarski's theory of truth. There are many places in the Torrance corpus where it seems that he endorses a purely correspondence theory of truth. In point of fact, it would seem that Torrance would consider the two options of a coherence or correspondence theory of truth as yet one more form of dualism to be rejected.

reality without reducing that relation into statements.²⁵ The relation between statements and reality is a *semantic* relation, and it is participatory, for it involves persons in knowing relations.

It is important to understand that Torrance maintains that the truth of being²⁶ carries its own authority, as stated in the quotation above.²⁷ This is a further reason why the truth of signification is so crucial. The sheer reality of the truth of being places us under a debt, or, as Torrance has said, "We owe it to the truth to be truly related to it."²⁸ Nothing can be brought forward to justify the truth of being other than its being what it is and not something else. The only way we can judge the truth or falsity of a statement is by actually participating in the reality of the existent in question.²⁹ There is no short-cut by which we can judge statements to be true or false by bypassing this participatory element.³⁰ The upshot of all this for understanding Torrance's thinking on this point is that, though the truths of statement are really related to the truth of being (and the supreme truth of God), this relation is not one-to-one. truth of being cannot be collapsed into truths of statement. This carries with it a rejection of a strict correspondence theory of truth.

It would be convenient to say that, for Torrance, the truth of being is self-evident, though that would be misleading. This is because Torrance (and Anselm)

25 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318. For other places where Torrance appropriates this Wittgensteinian language, and his modification of it, see *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 54; *God and Rationality*, 35–37, 109–110; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318–320; *Theological Science*, 183–186; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73.

26 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 128–129; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304–305, 320–322; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 6–7, 141–143, 145.

27 "Truth comes to view in its own majesty, freedom and authority, compelling us by the power of what it is to assent to it and acknowledge it for what it is in itself." See footnote 16 above.

28 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 317.

29 The element of personal participation in knowledge for Torrance is quite similar to that of Polanyi. The issue of verification will be discussed below.

30 This is due to the personal character of all knowledge. See footnotes 19 and 20 and related discussion above.

are deeply convinced that no created reality is truly self-evident, but everything that exists depends on God, who created the universe of space and time out of nothing. hence, the truth of created being is always dependent on a deeper truth, the Supreme truth of God.³¹ For Torrance, these distinct facets of truth form a hierarchy in which the truth of statement is dependent on the truth of signification, which is dependent on the truth of being, which is dependent on the Supreme truth of God, which is not dependent on anything beyond itself.³²

This analysis yields an understanding of truth that is a little more detailed than what we usually operate with in our daily lives. In practice, we tend to deal only with a twofold understanding of truth, distinguishing between the truth of being and the truth of signification.³³ This seems to be the real point of Torrance's analysis, to distinguish between truth and truthfulness and yet have them correlated in a real way.³⁴ To totally separate them (as postmodern thinkers often do) is to deny that our statements have any connection with objective reality; to identify them is to say that it is not possible to distinguish between the statement of the truth and the truth itself. This happens in nominalism or hyper-realism where the truth of statement and the truth of being are identical, such as the official statements of the magisterium in the Roman Catholic Church, in fundamentalism, and in certain forms of linguistic philosophy.³⁵ The danger of this error was understood by Plato, who, in his *Cratylus*, pointed out that "the more our terms become exact images or replicas of the reality of things, the more inevitable it is that they should be mistaken for that reality and become substitutes for it."³⁶

This twofold understanding of truth, where we distinguish between the truth and the truthfulness of our statements, will form the structure of the rest of this

31 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 129–130; *Transformation and Convergence*, 303–305, 312–316, 320–322.

32 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 317.

33 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 131.

34 Ibid., 145–149; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 2; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 317–318.

35 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 307.

36 Ibid., 320.

essay. The two main topics of discussion are truth and language, which can be understood as analogous to the truth of being and the truth of statement (the truth of signification), respectively. When Torrance speaks of truth, he almost always is speaking of the truth of being and the implications it has for our knowledge. Also, Torrance never treats language as if it were important in itself independent of the truth of being. Indeed, to affirm an independent relevance of language, independent of the truth of being, would be to lapse into nominalism or postmodern relativism. For Torrance, language is important because it directs us away from itself to the truth of being.

Truth of Signification/truthfulness of Statements

Torrance emphasizes, in a myriad of different contexts, that our words and statements do not have significance or truth in themselves, but only as they refer away from themselves towards the truth of being.³⁷ We will deal more fully with this truth of being below, but it is important to understand this referential function of language. The real conviction that drives Torrance to insist on a distinction between the truth of being and the truthfulness of statements is Christological. It is Torrance's conviction that when we speak of truth in its fullest sense (or truth with a capital "T"), we are speaking of Christ, the incarnation of God in human flesh in our contingent and creaturely world of time and space.³⁸

If we think of Jesus Christ in this way as the truth in his own Person, our statements about him, biblical and theological statements, cannot be true in the same sense as Jesus Christ is true, for they do not have their truth in themselves but in their reference to him away from themselves, and they are true insofar as that reference is truthful and appropriate.³⁹

37 Some of the most important discussion can be found in *Ground and Grammar*, 32–37; *God and Rationality*, 34–38, 175–176; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 58–61, 65–71, 94–97; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 153–154; *Transformation and Convergence*, 306–310; *Divine Meaning*, 245–274; "Theological Realism," 169–173.

38 There is a fuller discussion of this topic below under the heading "The Role of Jesus Christ in Relation to Truth and Language."

39 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 124.

For Torrance, it is impossible to state in a statement how our statements are related to reality without reducing that relation to mere statements.⁴⁰ In other words, there can be no legitimate attempt to render the relation of our words and statements to the realities they intend entirely explicit. The attempt to do so leads not to genuine knowledge but to skepticism, as is so evident in the collapse of foundationalism. To show that there can never be a direct logical bridge between our statements and the realities signified by them, Torrance draws on the observation that every definition of a word requires the use of other words that, for the purpose of the definition, must remain undefined.⁴¹

So, if Torrance insists on a real relation between statements and reality, but also that this relation cannot be brought to explicit verbal articulation, what kind of relation is it? For Torrance, statements are intended to fulfill a *semantic* function, where the truth of the statement is not in the statement itself but in the reality to which it refers. This relation is not logical, as we have seen, because we cannot bridge the gap between statement and the reality signified through logico-deductive activity; however, in spite of that, the reality intended shows through.⁴² This is how we operate with language in our daily lives, not even giving it much thought, only turning "a critical eye

40 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 36; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 318; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 143. As stated above, Torrance rejects any one-to-one correlation between statements and what is stated and thus rejects a strict correspondence theory of truth.

41 Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 65. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 73. Torrance quotes with approval the following statement by G. E. Moore: "It is quite impossible for anyone to prove, in one strict sense of the term, that he does not know any external facts. I can only prove that I do, by assuming that in some particular instance, I actually do know one. That is to say, the so-called proof must assume the very thing it pretends to prove. The only proof that we do know external facts lies in the simple fact that we know them" (*Theological Science*, 165). The refutation of skepticism, for Torrance, can never be through force of argument, but by sheer appeal to ultimate beliefs.

42 This "showing through" is not something that can be rendered entirely explicit, but is a function of the personal nature of knowledge. The conviction that reality shows through in spite of the absence of a one-to-one correlation of reality and our statements about reality is another example of what Torrance would call an "ultimate belief," neither verifiable nor falsifiable, but one upon which we stake our lives.

upon [the distinction between sign and thing signified] when something arises to obscure signification, such as a break in the semantic relation."⁴³

Our statements signify more than they can bring to explicit expression. The implications for terms such as "*homoousion*" or "hypostatic union" cannot be fully articulated in words alone. These can be seen as paradigmatic cases of what happens in *all* our use of language, where our statements signify much more than they can adequately express. This tacit dimension (developed in Torrance's thought in dialogue with Michael Polanyi) is consequential because it expresses Torrance's resistance toward any attempt to reduce reality to statements about reality.⁴⁴

In our ordinary experience, we do not question how words such as *house*, *large*, *red*, or any others, are related to the realities they intend; we jump immediately from the words to what they signify without a thought, and yet without thinking for a moment that the denotative statement, "The large red house on the corner" is the same thing as that large red house on the corner. Our statements fulfill their semantic function quietly and painlessly; so much so that we may take it for granted or forget that it is taking place, but it is still very important.

An additional significant point about the semantic function of language is that when statements direct attention away from themselves to a particular reality, they point us to something that exists *independently* of the statement.⁴⁵ This is why Torrance always insists that, though we operate with a twofold notion of truth, the truth of being always has ontic priority over the truthfulness of our statements of it.⁴⁶

The extreme importance of this semantic relation of statements to reality is thrown into relief when we consider what Torrance believes to be twin errors of not taking seriously the relation of the truth of signification to the truth of

43 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 58; "Theological Realism," 169.

44 For some key discussions on the inadequacy of a merely explicit understanding of our experience of reality, see *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 53–58, 64; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 132–133; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 37–38. When Torrance speaks of the tacit dimension, he is speaking of the personal and participatory nature of knowledge. See footnote 20 and related discussion above.

45 Torrance also likes to emphasize that truth or reality is discovered and not invented. *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 114; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 27.

46 See discussion below under the heading "The Ontic Priority of Being Over Language."

being.⁴⁷ The first of these errors is the tendency to utterly separate the truth of signification from the truth of being. If this is the case, words are detached from their ground in reality and may (not to say, *must*) be interpreted independently of such a reality. This has manifested itself in the moralism of medieval times and in the existentialist philosophy of modern times "in which the statements concerned are understood to express your attitude to existence."⁴⁸ The other error is to fall into an extreme form of nominalism that manifested itself in medieval times in the philosophy of the terminists and in modern times in linguistic philosophy.

The root behind both of these errors, in Torrance's mind, is the radical dualism between noumenal "things in themselves" and phenomenal "things as they appear to us."⁴⁹ As was noted above, radical dualisms tear apart our thinking in many ways, but in the scope of this essay, the only one that will concern us is this epistemological dualism that does not allow a real connection between our statements and reality.

The Significance of Existence-Statements and Coherence-Statements for Truth and Language

In his monumental work on theological method, *Theological Science*, Torrance discusses what he calls coherence-statements and existence-statements, drawing, respectively, on Hume's distinction between statements about "*relations*

47 For these two errors, see *Transformation and Convergence*, 307; *Ground and Grammar*, 32–37.

48 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 34.

49 Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 58. Though Torrance never makes this explicit, it seems that his analysis of ultimate beliefs (or would-be ultimate beliefs) is quite similar to the concept of a transcendental argument as found in the thought of Roy Bhaskar, namely, that while our convictions may be mistaken, if we assume that a conviction is sound, it has certain concrete implications. The connection (that is non-dualism) between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is the basis on which we can see whether our beliefs are properly "ultimate" or whether they are "penultimate." See Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Verso, New York, NY: 2008), 20.

of ideas and those about *matters of fact*.”⁵⁰ Never again would Torrance go to such great lengths to expound the differences between these two kinds of statements, but the main ideas expressed in them manifested themselves quite frequently in the works published shortly afterwards. Even though the distinction is explicitly mentioned less and less often in his later works, and the distinction is cited as being drawn from earlier and earlier thinkers, first Calvin and Bacon,⁵¹ and then all the way back to Clement of Alexandria,⁵² the key ideas still lurk in the background and are brought up for brief acknowledgement.⁵³

The distinction is based on the fact that there are some statements, called by Torrance coherence-statements, which can be deduced and verified simply with the use of deductive reason. Such statements are not necessarily dependent on anything that actually exists anywhere in the universe. Other statements, however, are deeply connected to the actual world of space and time. Whereas the former can be deduced by pure logic, these statements can only arise within our experience. Both kinds of statements operate with a semantic function. Existence-statements have their meaning primarily in their referring away from themselves to a reality that exists independently of themselves; coherence-statements have their meaning primarily in their referring away from themselves to other statements.

It is important to notice that, though existence-statements and coherence-statements do indeed have implications for Torrance’s understanding of truth, in themselves they have more to do with his theory of language. Neither existence-statements nor coherence-statements have meaning in themselves; they function as they refer away from themselves to something else. This means that, though existence-statements refer to things that exist independently of them in the world and coherence-statements refer to other statements within a complex of statements, both function in a primarily semantic way.

50 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 164. The lengthy discussions can be found on 164–172 and 226–263. Also see *God and Rationality*, 44–45.

51 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34–35.

52 Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 180.

53 See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34–35; *The Christian Frame of Mind* (Helmert and Howard, Colorado Springs: 1989), 73–75; *Divine Meaning*, 180.

There are a few important considerations for Torrance's theology related to this distinction. For Torrance, existence-statements are of primary importance.⁵⁴ It is only where our statements have actual empirical correlates that they can be said to have real meaning, or at least, meaning that bears on external reality and not simply the connections between ideas. This relation between ideas, however, is not to be neglected because it is only through the complex of coherence-statements that we can see whether all our statements are indeed truthfully related to the reality in question — for example, out of our basic encounter with God — for if they are not, there would be contradictions among them.⁵⁵ Torrance, adapting a statement by Kant, stated that "coherence-statements without existence-statements are empty, existence-statements without coherence-statements are blind."⁵⁶

This means that our complex of coherence-statements, if they are to have a connection to the real world and not merely describe an independent "conceptual space," cannot stand alone with some kind of arbitrarily imposed criterion that they are more rigorous because they derive, not from experience, but from the pure activity of the deductive reason. They must be correlated, at least at decisive points, with reality in order to avoid taking on an independent character, detached from empirical reality and, hence, useless for daily life.⁵⁷

Perhaps the most important insight to grasp from this distinction between existence-statements and coherence-statements is the difference in the nature of the knowledge we gain through them. Existence-statements are able to tell us what we do not know, and indeed, could not have told ourselves, because

54 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 165.

55 Ibid., 164.

56 Ibid., 169.

57 The notion of "empirical correlates" and their importance for Torrance's thought, not least for their implications for Torrance's position within the debate between correspondence and coherence theories of truth is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it must be noted that Torrance is not interested in any theory, regardless of how coherent, that is entirely detached from our spatio-temporal existence. For example, if it is to have meaning for us, the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ must be correlated with our empirical world in the empty tomb. See *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 34–39.

they draw on a vast reality that far exceeds what they can explicitly articulate.⁵⁸ Coherence-statements, on the other hand, cannot tell us anything new in the strict sense, but only help us to make sense out of what we already know.

This issue is brought to light most clearly in Torrance's discussion of the change in the type of questions that were being asked in theological and natural science due to the Reformation, especially in the work of John Calvin.⁵⁹ The form of questioning called *Quaestio* was common in the middle ages and was "the kind of question you ask in solving a problem in knowledge you already have, in order to move from confusion to clarity."⁶⁰ The form of questioning that rose to prominence through the work of Calvin and Bacon was known as *interrogatio*, in which "you interrogate something in order to let it disclose itself to you and so reveal to you what you do not and cannot know otherwise. It is the kind of question you ask in order to learn something *new*, which you cannot know by inferring it from what you already know."⁶¹ This new form of questioning had its origin in the courtroom and bore a strong resemblance of the practice of interrogating witnesses to get at what is the case.

The issue of verification arises sharply when we consider the difference between existence-statements and coherence-statements.⁶² Torrance affirms strongly that we cannot verify the truthfulness of a statement by some way that bypasses how actual knowledge arises.⁶³ This means that, while the truthfulness of coherence-statements can be verified by anyone who begins with the same set of basic concepts or axioms through the rigorous application of their reason, it would be utterly irrational to apply the same process to the verification of existence-statements. The only way to verify the truth of an existence-statement

58 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 166.

59 For what follows, see *God and Rationality*, 33–35, and *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 12–14.

60 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 34.

61 *Ibid.*, 34.

62 *Theological Science*, 177.

63 *Ibid.*, 145–146, 165–166, 193–194; *God and Rationality*, 196, 201–202; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 135–137.

is to intuit⁶⁴ the reality in question afresh, as that is how the statement in question arose in the first place. "This means that we can only 'convince' others of the truth of our existence-statements if we can get them to see or hear the reality they refer to as we see or hear it. It can never be forced upon them. They must be brought to share our *intuition* of the object given."⁶⁵ That is to say, indubitable demonstration is never possible, but a shared intuition can help keep our statements grounded in reality and allow our statements to be challenged by the statements of others who also share in apprehending the same objects.

In summary, for Torrance, both existence-statements and coherence-statements work together to enrich our knowledge. Engaging deeply with coherence-statements can help to further our thought more quickly and fully than with only the use of existence-statements, but it is important that they are correlated with empirical reality at crucial points.

At this point, let us turn to the other understanding of truth, the truth of being. After some of Torrance's basic positions have been discussed, we can consider some of the major implications of the relation between the truthfulness of statements and the truth of being.

The Truth of Being

Torrance places a major stress on the truth of being; for him, as the name implies, it is a matter of metaphysical significance. We are concerned, not with inventions or projections of our minds, but with a reality that exists independently of us and stands over against us as an object. To use Kantian language, we are not to be content merely with things as they appear to us but must push on to things as they are in themselves.

Once a position like this is affirmed in the philosophical dialogue in the post-Kantian world, the question is bound to be raised, "Is it even possible to know whether an independent reality really exists?" Torrance, however, adamantly

64 Torrance defines this term in the following way: "We shall use the term 'intuition' to speak of our apprehension of a reality in its objectivity and unity, as a whole" (*Theological Science*, 165, footnote 3). It should be noted that this is markedly different than how others use this term.

65 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 165.

refuses to answer this question because it is posed in abstraction from our actual experience and can have no real meaning. he grants that such questions can be asked, but they can *only* be asked *a posteriori*, after we have arrived at actual knowledge, by which we must test what we think we know.⁶⁶ Citing with approval an essay by G. E. Moore on the philosophy of David Hume, Torrance says, "The only proof that we do know external facts lies in the simple fact that we know them."⁶⁷ If such questions are intended to be skeptical and to demolish theology and theological statements, in point of fact they undermine empirical science and all knowledge and language.⁶⁸

We must begin with our actual knowledge of reality and only engage in our critical testing *a posteriori*. It is important to note that, although the title of this section is "The Truth of Being," Torrance's discussions are frequently within the context of the supreme truth of God as the paradigmatic case of truth. It is methodologically dubious to begin with how we come to know created truths and then try to apply that understanding to how we come to know God. Rather, since God is the supreme truth, we begin there and then find that it is indeed consistent with how we know created truths. However, we must never forget that, for Torrance, the supreme truth of God always has ontic and epistemological priority.⁶⁹

When dealing with our experience of external reality, Torrance does not break down to explicit articulation *how* we come to know things, yet affirms that we do indeed come to know them.⁷⁰ Indeed, as was discussed earlier in the section on language, to do so would be to violate some of his deepest methodological

66 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 43–44. Also, see discussion above of Torrance's *a posteriori* theological method.

67 Ibid., 165.

68 Ibid., 183–184.

69 Some have considered Torrance to be a foundationalist, though in a different way than classically formulated, using either the reality of God or the whole complex of personal and communal apprehension as the "brute fact" upon which to base our knowledge. An answer to this critique can be found in Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 343, note 97; and 358, note 136.

70 See footnote 2 and the related discussion above of Torrance's conviction that there is a knowable reality external to the mind.

convictions. However, an example of the power with which he speaks of this kind of experience may be appropriate. In a personal moment in the preface to *Theological Science*, he asserted,

I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of his overwhelming reality and rationality. To doubt the existence of God would be an act of sheer irrationality, for it would mean that my reason had become unhinged from its bond with real being.⁷¹

A detailed account of Torrance's epistemology is beyond the scope of this essay; it is sufficient for our purposes to build on the conviction that we *do* come to know reality.

The Implications of the Stratified Nature of Reality for Truth and Language

One of the problems that Torrance sees cropping up frequently in the history of thought is the tendency to flatten out reality onto a single logical level instead of recognizing that reality is stratified in a multi-leveled structure. To collapse everything to a single level is not only irrational (that is, behaving toward reality in a way that is not consistent with what it actually is), but it owes more to unscientific *a priori* assumptions than actual investigation of reality.

To a certain extent, Torrance can understand why this has been such a major trend in theological thinking. In the time of Thomas Aquinas, to think more rigorously was to think more like in Euclidean geometry, which does not operate with different logical levels.⁷² However, this way of thinking has been overcome by the integration of geometry into physics as well, and is very much evident in the extremely important and influential work of Kurt Gödel.⁷³

71 Torrance, *Theological Science*, ix.

72 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 321; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 41–42.

73 Gödel's thought is referenced (explicitly or implicitly) quite frequently in Torrance's work. See *Theological Science*, 256–257; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 86–90; *God and Rationality*, 99–100; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 73–74, 116–117; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 86–87.

The work of Einstein has helped to move natural science in a direction where the stratified levels of reality are taken more seriously. Torrance often cites the essay by Einstein, "Physics and reality," as a helpful resource.⁷⁴ The language used is often borrowed from Einstein, as well as the basic structure of the three levels, but Torrance's appropriation is not uncritical; there are many distinctively Christian elements that are of decisive importance in his thought. We will now turn to the understanding of the stratified nature of reality as it is found in his works.⁷⁵

The first level is the level of our ordinary, day-to-day experience. It is at this level that our concepts and statements are tied very closely to empirical reality.⁷⁶ Within the context of Christian faith, considering how the doctrine of the Trinity arises, Torrance refers to it as the evangelical and doxological level, where we are joined with the community of the faithful in hearing the gospel and responding with praise and thanksgiving to God. He will also point out that, in the context of the church, this is the level of "incipient theology," where empirical and theoretical elements are inseparably intertwined.⁷⁷ Perhaps no more than at this level is it clear that Torrance rejects the notion that events come first and interpretation comes later; rather events are already laden with meaning and cannot be understood apart from their intrinsic intelligibility.

It is at this level where our deepest convictions not only about the natural world but also about God arise. Scholarly theologians have no more access, for all their reading and reflection, to the reality of God than people who have lived long in the scriptures and participated fully in the worshiping life of the church all their lives. Theologians might have more conceptual clarity at higher levels, but it is at this first level that our deepest understandings of divine and created nature arise. For Torrance, the development of our most basic grasp of the knowledge

⁷⁴ Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 156; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 132.

⁷⁵ Brief discussions on the stratified nature of reality as a whole can be found in *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 82–88; *Transformation and Convergence*, 305, 322–328. It is also hinted at in Torrance's earlier book, *Theological Science*, 258–261.

⁷⁶ For this first level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 156–157; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 88–91.

⁷⁷ Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 23–25; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 39–42; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 43–50.

of God is largely tacit, holistic, and rooted in this evangelical and doxological participation in the church. In Christian theology, such participation is analogous to Einstein's "everyday thinking," of which physics is but a refinement.⁷⁸

The second level is where we take the content from the basic level and try to organize it and make sense out of it, bringing it to some degree of clarity.⁷⁹ Within the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, this takes the form of the probing into the evangelical and doxological experience of God and beginning to see that there is a three-fold nature to how God interacts with us. We see that God is portrayed in the New Testament and worshipped in the church as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, yielding what has come to be known as the economic Trinity.

The third level of reality is where we take the content from the second level and once again attempt to probe into its inner intelligibility, coining new terms, and shedding ourselves of unnecessary concepts in order to achieve the highest level of logical and conceptual simplicity possible.⁸⁰ In trinitarian theology, this takes the form of the insight that what God is towards us in Christ and as the economic Trinity he is antecedently and eternally in himself as God. That is, God does not just reveal himself to us as triune but truly *is* triune in his being.

It seems that, for Torrance, the first and third levels are the most important and that the second level exists as something of a bridge between the two.⁸¹ The reason for this is because Torrance adamantly resists a conventionalist use of language, where our terms and concepts are meant merely to help us organize our thoughts and are not necessarily based in reality. At the most basic level,

78 Albert Einstein, "Physics and Reality," in *Ideas and Opinions* (Wings Books, New York/Avenel, NJ: 1954), 290.

79 For this second level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 157; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 91–98.

80 For this third level, see *Ground and Grammar*, 157–158; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 98–107.

81 This marginalization of the second level seems strongly implied when understood in light of Torrance's larger theological concerns. However, an ambiguity persists: does Torrance believe that the second level has a lasting significance in scientific inquiry or is it merely a transitional level, not altogether unlike the role of theory in positivism (a view Torrance so passionately rejects)?

we are concerned with direct personal participation;⁸² at the third (which is, for practical purposes, the highest level, though, in theory, the levels could extend upwards *ad infinitum*), we are dealing with the highest level to which we have yet been capable of, where our terms are profoundly shaped and rooted, not in the organizing of our thoughts, but by the penetration into the depths of reality as it is in itself, independent of our knowledge of it.

This marginalization of the second level is evident in Torrance's insistence that there are some concepts and terms that are developed in the organizing of our thoughts that, upon deeper investigation, are shown to be inadequate or even simply unnecessary.⁸³ For example, the doctrine of transubstantiation ultimately was trying to get at the idea that Christ is really present in the Eucharist. However, in a framework of thought dominated by Aristotelian philosophy, this basic conviction could not take a form other than transubstantiation. When we reached greater conceptual clarity and began to understand the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist in a deeper way, we come to understand that transubstantiation, as necessary as it was in historical theological development, needs to be kicked away, as a scaffold is once the building is erected. Further understanding has shown that it is a misunderstanding of what transubstantiation was intended to communicate if we insist on perpetuating the doctrine "as if that form of the conception had a point-to-point correspondence with the real presence."⁸⁴

The concern with moving up through these levels is that, as one ascends them, they are progressively further and further away from the world of experience and there is a tremendous temptation to think words or concepts instead of thinking *realities* through our words and concepts.⁸⁵ This concern leads us to

82 This is because all of our knowledge is personal and participatory. See footnotes 19 and 20, and related discussion above.

83 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 324–328; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 151–157.

84 Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence*, 326–327.

85 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 44, 194, 203; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 63. For a discussion of the deeply related idea of the "scope" of the scriptures in Athanasius' theology, see *Divine Meaning*, 235–244. It is in making points like this that it becomes clear that when Torrance speaks of "truth" he is referring (using Anselmian language) to the truth of *being* rather than the truth of statement. This difference of

the important point that, when we are dealing with these different levels in the stratified nature of reality, we are dealing with levels that are correlated with one another. This correlation is not a one-to-one relation between them; after all, if the levels were coordinated in this way, we would not be dealing with several levels, but just different understandings of a single level. The levels are coordinated with each other and with reality at certain critical points, without which, they would become detached into nothing more than abstract thought.⁸⁶ To a certain degree, the three levels give expression to differences in degree rather than in kind; however, they must not ever be flattened down into a single ontological or epistemological level, for that is something that Torrance absolutely rejects.

An example of a refined theological concept that is involved in trans-level coordination with reality can be seen in the doctrine of the hypostatic union.⁸⁷ The hypostatic union expresses the conviction that while Jesus is true God of true God, he is also true man of true man and that these cannot be separated from one another, nor collapsed together. There is basic evangelical and doxological evidence for this in statements like "I and the Father are one," and "He who has seen me has seen the Father," and "No one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him," as well as others. This basic experience is organized at the second level into the conviction that, in Christ, we see God, that there is a connection between revelation of Christ and revelation of God. Finally, we push to the deeper conviction that this connection is not merely a convenient way of thinking, but is grounded in reality, that in Christ, God and man actually *are* united.

Once the doctrine of the hypostatic union is achieved, however, it tremendously simplifies our thought and provides clarity above and beyond what we could have anticipated and thereby shows that it truly is rooted in the truth of being. We begin to realize that isolating things such as the pain and suffering of Christ

emphasis is not made sufficiently explicit on a consistent basis, but it is a difference that sets Torrance apart from the mainstream of the realism/anti-realism debate.

86 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 140, 148; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 34–39; *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 35–37.

87 For a more detailed discussion involving both the hypostatic union and the *homoousion*, see *Ground and Grammar*, 159–174.

from the being of God is a violation of the hypostatic union. The coordination of basic experience with these higher levels allows conclusions to be made which are crucial to the consistency for a lower level, but cannot be decided on that level. To put this in another way, as we probe into the higher epistemological levels, we are simultaneously probing more deeply into reality itself. As such, there are moments when we experience a "paradigm shift" or a "gestalt switch" at the higher levels that then reshapes how we perceive all of reality, not least at the lower levels. However, even our concepts at the highest levels are still fundamentally statements that are relativized by the realities to which they refer, and therefore they must never be confused with the truth of being or the supreme truth of God.⁸⁸

Even though, epistemologically speaking, we are moving away from the level of our basic experience as we ascend from lower to higher levels of reality, the higher levels have penetrated more fully into the inherent intelligibility and rationality of reality.⁸⁹ In spite of the fact that the higher levels are more detached from direct personal participation, they exercise a controlling function over the lower levels. This control coordinates a hierarchical structure of truths where each level is open to the levels above it and has its meaning with reference to those higher levels, but the latter are not reducible downward.⁹⁰

It is crucial to remember that the purpose of striving after this clarification and simplification of our concepts and thinking is so that we may be radically committed to the inherent intelligibility of reality. We must not confuse or conflate our statements of the truth with the truth itself.⁹¹ Rather, the real goal is to develop terms that are not merely constructions but serve to signify realities beyond themselves and are rooted in them.

88 This touches on Torrance's notion of "disclosure models," a brief treatment of which is below under the heading "The Ontic Priority of Being Over Language."

89 Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 160.

90 *Ibid.*, 140; *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 20.

91 As we mentioned above concerning the truth of signification and the semantic function of language (see, respectively, footnotes 24 and 43 and relevant discussions in the essay).

Further Elements of Torrance's Theory of Truth and Language

As interesting and compelling as Torrance's understanding of the truthfulness of statements and the truth of being may be, equally interesting are the relations between his theory of truth and theory of language. A few of the most important of these elements will be addressed here.

The inadequacy of our language

By affirming that the function of our words and statements is to direct attention away from themselves and toward a particular reality, Torrance is affirming that there is a measure of inadequacy in our language, where our statements do not really capture the reality to which they refer us. Torrance refers to this fact quite often so that it is difficult to read any essay on either truth or language that does not include a comment to the effect that the inadequacy of our statements is part of their truthfulness. Any statement that claimed to fully exhaust the reality it intended would be grossly inaccurate.⁹²

This issue is not new, as Torrance points out by discussing it as it is dealt with in Plato's *Cratylus*. The question, "Do the terms we use have their significance in virtue of some natural relation between them as verbal signs and the realities they signify, or simply in virtue of an extrinsic conventional relation?"⁹³ The conclusion is that "If words or signs are to do their job properly, they must have some measure of detachment or incompleteness or even discrepancy to allow them to point away from themselves to the realities intended, in the light of which their truth or falsity will be judged."⁹⁴ This is true for all statements, regardless of how mundane their reference; how much more so is it true for theological statements that direct us to the inexhaustible depths of God?⁹⁵

92 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 169, 187–188, 198; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 162. To see where Torrance finds this idea in the thought of Athanasius (i.e., "Thus far human knowledge goes, for at this point the Cherubim cover themselves with their wings."), see *Divine Meaning*, 246.

93 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 65; "Theological Realism," 170–171.

94 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 65.

95 Drawing on Polanyian language, the inadequacy of our language, that is to say, the fact that, even at their best, our statements fall short of the reality they intend,

Torrance makes an important distinction, which he takes up from patristic thinkers, between *apprehending* and *comprehending* God. Both, he affirms, are conceptual ways of knowing God, as opposed to the popular claim that we can have only a “non-conceptual knowledge of God.”⁹⁶ “Apprehension is a grasping of God which does not exhaust his transcendent reality and mystery; but it is no less conceptual for that reason, since it is the form of conception rationally appropriate to his divine nature and majesty.”⁹⁷ Comprehending God would be to say that we can bring the totality of God under the command of our knowing, which would be to bring the infinity of God under our finitude. Torrance does not believe that we need to choose between a conceptual or a non-conceptual knowledge of God, “nor even between apophatic and cataphatic knowledge, but between *cataleptic* apprehending and cataphatic comprehending.”⁹⁸ That is to say, rather than emphasize the contrast between “positive statements with definite conceptual content” and “negative statements with indefinite conceptual content,” we ought to highlight the contrast between a focus on our statements as such (which will tend to connote their adequacy) and the reality to which our statements direct us.⁹⁹

The ontic priority of being over language

Although Torrance’s emphasis on the ontological priority of the truth of being over all our expressions of it has been alluded to a few times already in this work, it nevertheless bears a more substantial treatment. In the light of the relationship between language and reality, we can see that for Torrance words are neither identical to the realities they intend nor are they utterly detached from them and only filled with content from the subjective states of the interpreter. For

has implications for what Polanyi would call “focal knowledge,” as it means that we can never make what we know entirely explicit. However, it does not limit our “subsidiary knowledge,” as we always know more than we can tell. Many have remarked upon the poverty of their minds and tongues to give expression to what they truly apprehend. For example, see Gregory Nazienzen, *Oration*, 40.41.

96 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 22–23.

97 Ibid., 22.

98 Ibid., 22.

99 Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind*, 107–108.

Torrance, biblical and theological statements form a kind of lens *through* which we may “look” to know the divine realities they direct us toward.¹⁰⁰

Torrance, in his works on the theology of the early church, often quoted a pithy statement of Athanasius regarding how our terms must be forced to conform to the nature of God and not vice versa. “Terms do not detract from his nature; rather does his nature draw terms to itself and transform them. For terms are not prior to beings, but beings are first and terms come second.”¹⁰¹ It is clear from his publications that Torrance agrees with this idea, for language is always subordinated to reality.

Drawing on Einsteinian language, Torrance believes that God and the created world do not wear their heart on their sleeves and that they are deep but not devious.¹⁰² We really can penetrate into their inherent intelligibility, but that such an understanding is far from automatic and requires much disciplined and rigorous investigation.¹⁰³ Our investigative labors produce models of the reality we are investigating that are intended to be rooted in that reality but are judged to be truthful or false in light of it. As we ask questions of reality to understand it, our very questions are questioned by the authority of its being so that we are taught to ask new and better questions, which are also refined in light of what actually *is*.

This idea, that we produce *disclosure models*, that is, models through which we look so that reality can disclose itself to us, is already latent in Torrance’s

100 This has been discussed above in the concern that we do not think concepts, but think realities *through* our concepts. See footnote 87 and its related discussion above.

101 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1988), 129. This is cited several times in this book. Also see in particular Torrance’s analysis of how Athanasius applied terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *physis* in *Divine Meaning*, 206–212.

102 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 119–135; *Transformation and Convergence*, 253–259; “Theological Realism,” 189.

103 This is strongly related to the “knowability” of reality as discussed in the opening section of this essay “Torrance’s Critical Realist Epistemology.” Though we make contact with reality, we must develop a structural kinship between our minds and what we seek to know.

understanding of the stratified nature of reality.¹⁰⁴ We take the empirical and theoretical elements already present in our daily experience and organize them into a helpful model through which we go back to reality and check our model's validity. There are times when our models are shown to be not actually rooted in reality and must be discarded or radically revised. However, there are other times when our models reveal far more to us about the reality in question than they continually surprise us in their fruitfulness. By doing so, they reveal that they are truly rooted in reality;¹⁰⁵ in fact, they may be more deeply rooted than even their original formulators could have imagined.¹⁰⁶

The ascending the different levels of reality involves a developing and refining of disclosure models, the goal of which is to find high-level models that both simplify and clarify our understanding of reality.¹⁰⁷ Such an example in physics would be relativity theory; in theological science, two would be the *homoousion* and the hypostatic union.

Authority

Another crucial implication of the relation between the truth of being and the truthfulness of statements is how Torrance understands authority. He discusses the issue of authority in two different essays where he distinguishes between something being *authoritative* and *authoritarian*.¹⁰⁸ Torrance does not deny that legitimate authorities arise in the history of theological investigation, but that their authority does not rest in themselves but in God, from whom all authority comes.

104 See discussion above in section "The Implications of the Stratified Nature of Reality for Truth and Language."

105 This draws on a Polanyian understanding of "reality."

106 Only if the model is inadequate to the reality, that is, if it does not attempt to reduce the relation between the model and reality to a one-to-one relation, can it be revised in light of it. For an example of how, for Torrance, this kind of revision can take place, see *Theological Science*, 171.

107 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 201–202; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 162, 181; *Ground and Grammar*, 124–127.

108 These discussions can be found in *Transformation and Convergence*, 328–330, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154–156. Although the essays in which these discussions are found are different, the discussions on authority in them are nearly identical.

It seems best to speak of the distinction between the authoritative and authoritarian by pointing out the parallels in Torrance's thought between these concepts and the truthfulness of statements in general. For Torrance, a statement is truthful when it successfully directs attention away from itself toward the reality it intends, and it is false when it fails to do this or indicates something that is not the case. Similarly, as God is the source of all genuine authority, when authorities behave and speak in such a way as "not to obscure [God's supreme authority] but let it appear in all God's ultimate Prerogative and Majesty and to be acknowledged as such,"¹⁰⁹ they are truly authoritative. "However, when these secondary authorities arrogate to themselves the authority delegated to them, thus constituting themselves authorities in their own right, then they become perverted, the 'authorities of darkness.'"¹¹⁰ Because of this, we can say that "faith and certainty do not rest on biblical authority as such" but on the realities to which the Bible bears witness.¹¹¹

An example of authoritativeness versus authoritarianism comes from the Gospel accounts. The Jewish leaders behaved as if their words were authoritative in themselves, thus obfuscating the true authority of God, and were thus authoritarian. On the other hand, Jesus' teaching was marked by a true authoritativeness where the authority of God showed through and bore witness to itself.

Communal Shaping of Language¹¹²

In his various discussions on language (especially theological language), Torrance will often remind us that the words we use to speak of a given reality must be fundamentally shaped by the nature of that reality. Otherwise, our

109 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154; *Transformation and Convergence*, 328.

110 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 154. *Transformation and Convergence*, 328.

111 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 135.

112 This section has some points of contact with the personal nature of all knowledge. See footnotes 19 and 20 and their related discussion in the main body. In particular, both discussions are to make it clear that our knowledge is never isolated from the whole complex of our person and interpersonal relationships.

understanding is shaped by our previous understanding of our words instead of reality being understood out of itself. This is the reason why he insists on using terms differentially, that is, the same word may have different meanings depending on whether it refers to created or uncreated realities.¹¹³

However, it is equally important that our words retain some degree of continuity with ordinary usage, or else they will become detached from our experience and become essentially meaningless. The difficulty is that words acquire their meaning within communities, and the language and subconscious of communities are not always adequately shaped by reality. Indeed, part of the reason behind Torrance's tireless crusade against dualism is the fact that such habits of thought have been built into culture and reinforced through language.¹¹⁴

The acquisition of new knowledge is complicated by the nature of language as communally generated. This is because our new knowledge arises out of contact with reality that cannot be fully communicated within the compass of the language we have already developed, or else it would not be truly new knowledge. However, in order for that new knowledge to be communicated, it must be done in the language of a particular culture. In this process, we coin new terms, and previous terms are stretched beyond their normal usage, but a fundamental continuity is preserved.¹¹⁵

However, because the language used today is the product of what was developed in the past, our language has a built-in obsolescence that resists the development of new ideas.¹¹⁶ Our language must be forced to be modified as new knowledge is gained. Torrance believes this is possible (because it does indeed happen), but that it is not inevitable, and we must be deliberate at freeing ourselves and our culture from the restrictive linguistic trends of the past.

The paradigmatic example of a people whose language and culture have been shaped under the influence of God's interaction with them is ancient Israel.

113 This relates to the ontic priority of being over language as discussed above. Also see *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 17–21. See also the text related to footnote 102 above for a quotation from Athanasius expressing a similar conviction.

114 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 28–32.

115 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 180–182.

116 Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 19–20; *God and Rationality*, 117–118, 203; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 151, 160–163, 181.

Torrance believes that this sustained influence of Israelite life, culture, worship, and language is crucial to understanding God's self-revelation in Christ, not least the atonement. By understanding biblical and theological statements, not by imposing a Gentile frame of knowledge upon them, but by allowing their significance within the life and history of Israel, we gain fuller understanding of what God has done, both throughout history and in Christ.¹¹⁷

The role of Jesus Christ in relation to truth and language for God

This discussion of the role of Jesus Christ in Torrance's understanding of truth and language is at the end of this essay. This is not because it is intended to be marginalized. Rather it can be seen as the climax and paradigmatic case that envelopes all the topics discussed so far.

Theological statements have the particularly difficult function of referring away from themselves to a reality that is infinite and so completely outstrips their ability to adequately communicate what they intend.¹¹⁸ They are creaturely and contingent words that are attempting to express something that is utterly *uncontingent*.¹¹⁹ There is a yawning chasm between created reality and uncreated reality. How can our words cross that gap? This is a legitimate concern and one that Torrance admits readily. However, he is clear to point out that, if this is meant to be a skeptical observation, it does not just tear down theological science, but all forms of natural science as well, for even when we are speaking of a created and contingent reality, our words prove to be inadequate.¹²⁰

117 Several of the most important discussions of God's shaping of the Israelite culture can be found in *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 86–88; *The Mediation of Christ*, 7–23, 26–39; Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, MI: IVP Academic, 2008), 37–56, 69–75, 130–131; Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, MI: IVP Academic, 2009), 7–60.

118 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 149–150, 183.

119 This is tied up with the semantic function of language, but is amplified because now we are dealing with statements that refer, not to a created and contingent reality but the uncreated and uncontingent God.

120 Torrance, *Theological Science*, 184. See section above under the heading "The Inadequacy of our Language."

Torrance is unconcerned with this inadequacy of our language. After all, as has been shown above,¹²¹ the inadequacy of our language and statements and their indicating more than they can explicitly articulate are part of their truthfulness, being related to the truth of being by a semantic, not a logical, relation.¹²² However, in order to provide further elucidation, Torrance points to Jesus Christ as the truth in its fullest sense.¹²³ As the one person who is at the same time fully God and fully human, Jesus is both the truth of God and the truth of human being.¹²⁴ Our statements about God do not need to cross the gap between created reality and uncreated reality because they may terminate on the incarnate person of Christ, who bridges that gap in his own person.¹²⁵

The incarnation involves a hypostatic union not only between the Word of God and the word of man, the Rationality of God and the rationality of man, but between the uncreated truth of God and the created truth of this world which God has made and to which we belong . . . Thus when our contingent statements refer away from themselves to the truth of God as it is in Jesus Christ, they do not have to bridge the infinite difference between the creature and the Creator in order to terminate on that truth, for they may refer to it in its incarnate reality, and insofar as they are true they may actually terminate on that incarnate reality and thus upon the truth of God Almighty himself.¹²⁶

A crucial concept that must be taken into consideration when attempting to understand Torrance's understanding of the truth of God as it is in Jesus is that, in God, we do not have to do with one whose word and action are

121 See above, "The Inadequacy of our Language."

122 See above section under the heading "The Distinction between the Truth of Being and the Truthfulness of Statements."

123 Often this is done within the context of an extended theological exposition of Christ's words in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life." See *Theological Science*, 146–160, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 137–145.

124 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 85–86, 88–89; *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 183–186; *Theological Science*, 143–144, 185–187 (This passage is related to thinking *a posteriori*, see discussion above, page 3); *Divine Meaning*, 108–109, 186–187, 251–254; *The Mediation of Christ*, 50–62.

125 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 124–126.

126 *Ibid.*, 125.

separable from his being.¹²⁷ With us, our words and our actions are different than who we are (though Torrance will grant that they are related). With God, this is not so. God's word and activity inhere in God's being.¹²⁸ God does not just communicate something *about* himself to us, but communicates *himself*.¹²⁹ The relation between God's revelation of truths and God's revelation of himself can be summed up nicely in Torrance's own words: "[Jesus Christ] is the truth communicating himself in and through truths, who does not communicate himself apart from truths, and who does not communicate truths apart from himself."¹³⁰

It must not be forgotten that, for Torrance, every aspect of the life of Christ was a vicarious healing on our behalf and in our place.¹³¹ The fact that Jesus took on a human mind and appropriated human language shows us that even our minds and language need to be healed and reconciled to God. However, it must always be remembered that it is Jesus within the context of Israel, as one who participated in the forms of life and speech of the ancient Jews, joining in the community that shaped the language and came to know God. At the end of the day, we are not seeking for some kind of philosophy of language or truth that somehow bypasses the reconciling of our language and understanding that is worked out in Christ. Rather, it is one more way that we seek to be united to Christ. Like every other aspect of Torrance's theology, truth and language are fully Christocentric.

In bringing this discussion of truth and language in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance to a close, it seems appropriate to show how, in Christ, all the strands of thought discussed here are drawn together. For Torrance, although

127 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 62–67; *God and Rationality*, 141–142; *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 124–129; *Transformation and Convergence*, 304, 316–317; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 40–42.

128 Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 151–153; *Divine Meaning*, 190.

129 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 179–180; *Theological Science*, 147.

130 Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 125–126. This is not a form of Augustinian illuminationism. Not only is Augustine more Platonic than Torrance, but Torrance is also emphasizing that we do not come to know divine truths in any way that bypasses the actual life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

131 The very best place to find more about Torrance's understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ is *The Mediation of Christ*.

he never engages in a full exposition of Christology in any of his works on theological method, Christ is truly the first and the last, Alpha and Omega. All of his reflection, but particularly about truth and the function of language, begins with Christ and has its most sublime expression in Christ. The fact that God has condescended to meet with us as one of us and one with us is the absolutely central conviction in Torrance's thought.

In Christ, we see the whole hierarchical structure of the stratified nature of truth. he speaks human words that direct us to himself as the truth of being and, through himself, are made to terminate finally on the reality of God, with whom he is of one being.¹³² In addition, by encountering us with the fullness of his person, Christ confronts us with knowledge that is absolutely new and cannot be explained in terms of knowledge we had already gathered from elsewhere.

We can see each of the three levels of reality that Torrance emphasizes in Christ as well. In our ordinary experience with Christ, we intuitively come to understand that we are dealing with divine communication. By ordering our experience of Christ through the biblical witness, we realize that, in Christ, we have to do with an utterly unique revelation of God through this human being. As we penetrate further into our evangelical and doxological experience in the worshipping life of the church, we come to explicit awareness that, in Christ, we do not only have to do with a revelation *from* God. Rather, we have to do with the fullness of God in human flesh so that what God is in his interaction with us he is antecedently and eternally in himself.

Nowhere do we see the inadequacy of our human words more strongly than in the ministry of Jesus. Never before had such astonishing things been said about God, and yet Jesus, the fullness of God in human flesh, does not hesitate to take them on his lips. This also shows us the power of the semantic relation of words to reality. Never before did words have to indicate a reality as infinitely beyond their capacity than in Christ, and yet the meaning of his words shows through, challenging and transforming human words, thoughts, and lives.

132 See discussion, "The Role of Jesus Christ in Relation to Truth and Language for God" above. Torrance rejects the sharp division between a "Christology from below" and a "Christology from above," insisting that we think out Christ "in his wholeness and integrity as one Person who is both God and man" (*The Mediation of Christ*, 53).

In Christ, words were spoken and actions were performed with true authority, in sharp contrast to the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees. By taking up the language and history of the nation of Israel, Jesus radically reshaped human understanding. his interpretation was shaped by the being and will of God and not corrupted by human traditions. Now that Christ has come among us, we are not able to go behind his back, to somehow return to a pre-Christian attitude. The new wine has completely destroyed the old wineskins.¹³³ In Christ we are brought face-to-face with the reality of God, the knowledge of whom forces us to break out of the shackles of unredeemed ways of thinking and speaking.

133 Matthew 9:17.

THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST, INCARNATE, CRUCIFIED, RISEN, AND ASCENDED¹

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Introduction

The doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ is crucial to our understanding both of Christ and of Scripture. The Latin word for “vicarious” means to speak and act in place of another, on that other’s behalf. That is precisely what Christ has done for us through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is impossible to do justice to such a large subject in a single paper. My hope is that what I say here will stimulate further thought and discussion.

While liberal theologians do not hold to the vicarious humanity of Christ, sadly, many evangelical theologians restrict the vicariousness of Christ to his atoning death. The latter become concerned if we speak of the vicarious life, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, believing that doing so detracts from the importance of Christ’s substitutionary, atoning death. This is a misunderstanding of Scripture. Christ’s substitutionary atonement embraces his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost. Those who restrict the vicariousness of Christ to his atoning death interpret the atonement purely forensically.

There is, however, a forensic interpretation of justification through the death of Christ that is correct and helpful. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans leads us to think of a law court where a person is rightly pronounced guilty and sentenced to a heavy fine. When the judge himself pays the fine on behalf of the person who is guilty, the guilty person can then go free. Justice has been done. Because

¹ This essay was originally presented at a T. F. Torrance theological conference held in November 2010 at Firth, Loch Tay, University of Edinburgh.

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Christ has died for us, we are legally before God able to go forth free of the consequences of our sin. God reckons us righteous in Christ. We have been justified by the grace of God through faith.

But if we restrict the vicariousness of Christ to his atoning death, if we hold only to a forensic interpretation of the atonement, and if we fail to recognize the all-embracing nature of the vicarious humanity of Christ and fail to stress union with Christ (which enables us to share in the fruits of his salvation), we are being unbiblical. It is worth pondering why this is so.

First, by restricting Christ's vicariousness to his death, we separate the death of Christ from the rest of his ministry, and we thus fail to recognize the full significance of Christ's ministry and the importance of the humanity of Christ for our salvation. We also separate the death of Christ from his resurrection, and that undermines the full meaning of his resurrection and its importance for our salvation.

Second, when we lay the emphasis on Christ's work and what he accomplished, rather than on his person, we almost inevitably become more interested in the blessings of the gospel than in Christ himself. Quite subtly we separate the blessings of Christ from Christ, and the work of Christ from his person — and can even regard the "incarnation" as just one optional way among others of accounting for the experience of salvation.² This is true of theologians like Rudolf Bultmann, as it is true of many liberal theologians. But I believe it is also true of evangelicals who reject the vicarious humanity of Christ and seek to interpret Christ's atonement as an objective event apart from us and apart from our union with Christ.

Third, the restricting of forgiveness and salvation to what Christ has done on the cross throws us back on ourselves. As my brother James used to say, a doctor diagnoses our illness or disease, gives us a prescription, and leaves us in the anticipation that, as we take the prescription, we will be healed. However, God does not act like that. The atonement is not God's prescription, which we are given and asked to accept, even with God's help, in order that we might be saved and inherit the kingdom. God, having acted in Christ, does not throw us

² James B. Torrance, "Christ in our Place," in Thomas F. Torrance, James B. Torrance, and David W. Torrance, *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 41.

back on ourselves, making our salvation to some extent dependent on ourselves — dependent on our repenting, our praying, our reading the Bible, our going to church (however right, good, and necessary for the living of the Christian life these things are). Our salvation from first to last is an act of God through grace. God has accomplished everything for us in Christ.

Fourth, with such a restricted interpretation of Christ's atonement, we receive deliverance from guilt but not from the power of sin, which is lodged in our lives. Many evangelicals stress deliverance from guilt. Yet, however important that is, the necessary thing is to be delivered from the power of sin, to be given a new life in Christ. Jesus said we must be born again to see and enter the kingdom of God. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation."

Fifth, this takes us back to my first and second points, where I said that we cannot separate the death of Christ from the rest of his ministry and we cannot separate the work of Christ from his person. The vicarious humanity of Christ and union with Christ are twin doctrines that cannot be separated. Holding to them ensures our theology is centered on Christ. Our faith is not in a creed. It is not in a set of doctrines, although these are important, and it is not simply in the work of Christ. Our faith is not dependent solely on the event of Christ's atoning death. Our faith is in the living person of Christ, together with all that he said and did. We cannot, in other words, separate what Christ said and did from his person. John Calvin loved to say that Christ comes to us clothed with his life, death, and resurrection. Always our faith is in his person. Faith is a way of being related to the person of Christ, who lived, died, rose again, and ascended. In sending the Holy Spirit, Christ himself returned to the disciples. Pentecost is the completion of atonement.

Twin Doctrines

As we hold to the vicarious humanity of Christ and union with Christ, we escape legalism in its many different forms. The Christian faith becomes a dynamic, intensely personal way of life. Christ is central. We are continually seeking to "put off the old self with its practices and put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Col. 3:9; see also Eph. 4:22–23). Our concern is to draw ever closer to Christ, to be clothed with Christ,

to be clothed with his righteousness, to have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5), that we might see his glory, share in the fellowship of the Son with the Father, and live to advance his kingdom. Hence, the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, "Fix your thoughts on Jesus" (3:1), and again, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus" (12:2).

The Sum of the Gospel

If we were asked to sum up the teaching of the apostle Paul, we would be required to say that he taught "salvation by grace alone, and union with Christ." Likewise, if we were asked to sum up the theology of Calvin (as expressed for example in his *Institutes* or commentaries), we would rightly say "salvation by grace alone, and union with Christ."

"Union with Christ" is expressed in the words "in Christ" (*en Christo*). As Professor William Barclay has pointed out, in Paul's letters the phrase "in Christ" occurs 34 times, "in Christ Jesus" 48 times, and "in the Lord" 50 times.³ That is to say, the phrase "in Christ" or its equivalent occurs 132 times. In the Gospels it occurs approximately 40 times. This being so, we must take the words "in Christ" very seriously. Yet, how often have we read an article or even a book on the atonement of Christ, and these words are scarcely mentioned, if at all?

Three years ago I attended a dogmatics conference in the Free Church College in Edinburgh organized by Rutherford House. Several well-known evangelical theologians spoke, and the doctrine of "union with Christ" received little attention! Although the conference, which was very good and stimulating, was dedicated to the topic of Christ and his atonement, some speakers did not even mention it. Nonetheless, the failure to stress union with Christ (that is, Christ's continuing union with us and our continuing union with him by grace), in my opinion, was a grave weakness. We cannot properly understand Christ's atonement and how we share in the fruits of Christ's atonement without taking seriously the New Testament stress on union with Christ. For example, a well-known theologian and scholar said (if I understood him correctly) that the righteousness conferred on us in Christ is the righteousness of the law court. In Christ and in virtue

3 William Barclay, *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh: 1963), 14.

of Christ's atonement, God declares innocent and righteous guilty sinners who are repentant. But the righteousness, which he confers, is not Christ's own righteousness. It is forensic righteousness! At this (although I enjoyed the rest of his lecture), I cringed! To me it was quite unbiblical. All the fullness of God resides in Jesus Christ. By grace, through union with Christ, the fullness of Christ is imparted to us. Christ imparts to us his own holiness, his own righteousness, his very life, in virtue of which we are united with the Father and made by grace to share in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity. In the New Testament we are asked to be "clothed with Christ." Grace is where we deserve absolutely nothing and God bestows on us everything!

The Uniqueness and Vicarious Humanity of Christ

When we stress salvation by grace and union with Christ, we affirm the absolute uniqueness and centrality of Christ, in and through whom alone is there salvation (Acts 4:12). By stressing the "vicarious humanity of Christ" in our salvation, we stress the uniqueness and centrality of Christ and the bearing of his humanity and work on the whole of our lives. Christ is for us and with us in every area and activity of our lives. Hence Paul says (and he is describing the Christian life to which we are all called), "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21).

Christ's atoning work, his salvation of us, happened in a way that was independent of us — "while we were yet sinners" — but inescapably involved us as Christ died as man, for us in our place. Christ forever united himself with us so that what happened to Christ happened to us in a profound way. We are healed, redeemed through our union with Christ. That is perhaps nowhere clearer than in what Paul says in Romans 6. When Christ died, we died, so that when Christ rose, we rose.

In stressing the biblical emphasis on union with Christ, we are required, as I have already said, to interpret the atonement not simply in terms of Christ's death (or death and resurrection), but in terms of the whole Christ event, which embraces his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost (which is the last act of atonement). *Christ worked out our salvation in his own person.* As through the Holy Spirit we are united to the person of Christ, so we share in his salvation.

The Incarnation

Our salvation commenced with the incarnation. By becoming man, God both affirmed our humanity and sanctified it. God, although remaining God of very God, in the incarnation took our flesh and blood and became one with us. He actually became us! He became a man. In becoming man he was yet God, through whom "all things were created . . . For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Col. 1:16–17, 19). "The Son is the radiance of God's glory, and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Heb. 1:3).

In becoming man and living with us on earth, he yet as God, through the Holy Spirit, continued to be with the Father in heaven. As the early fathers said, even as a child in the cradle he upheld by the Word of his power the heavens and the earth. That is clear from Hebrews 1:3–4. John Calvin also stressed the presence of the ascended Christ being both in heaven and yet at the same time present with us.⁴ In Jesus Christ we have the presence of the Triune God, whether on earth or in heaven, active at one and the same time on our behalf. He is with the Father and yet with us on earth in the flesh.

God, in taking to himself in Jesus our flesh and blood, became not simply a man but representative man. He related himself to us all. That is, in Jesus, God once and forever, for all eternity, joined himself in the flesh to the whole of humankind. Men and women, for better or for worse, are united with God in an eternal covenant of grace through the Holy Spirit, which they cannot break. This means that all that happened to Christ affects our life and being. Christ and all humanity are wrapped together in the same bundle of life for eternity.

Because God became man, once and forever, in Christ Jesus, God has put his seal on our humanity. The incarnation guarantees our humanity and the safety of all creation. Because of sin the world was hurtling to destruction. Humankind was destined for death and destruction. God intervened. He entered into this world. He took hold of it, making a covenant of grace and life first through Noah, and then through Abraham and his seed, Israel. That covenant of grace and life he fulfilled, confirmed, and forever sealed in Jesus Christ, who is the Creator

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (version of 1846 edited by Robert Pitcairn), 4.17.29.

Word made flesh, our flesh. God conquered the powers of death and destruction by becoming man in Jesus Christ.

It is deeply significant for our understanding of Christ's vicarious humanity that the name Jesus most frequently used in reference to himself was the "Son of Man," which occurs some seventy-four times in the Gospels. In taking our flesh and blood, Jesus became a particular man and also representative man. In identifying himself with us as representative man, he did two things.

First, he took all our sins, our sufferings, and diseases upon himself. This he did gradually throughout his life. When fully clothed with them he took upon himself his own divine condemnation upon them and took them all away. He bore a condemnation that we deserved and could not possibly have endured and survived. Second, at one and the same time, in identifying himself with us he sanctified our humanity. He turned it around, turned our lives around, perfectly obeying the Father on our behalf in his life and death. With his resurrection he offers to us a renewed and righteous life.

As Christians we are called daily to share in Christ's death to our sin and to the world. We are able, through the Holy Spirit, to die with Christ, and therefore also to rise. As Paul said in Romans 6:3-4, "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life."

As representative man, Christ's death has affected us all. Death followed as a consequence of sin. With Adam, sin, accompanied by death, entered the world like a flood. When the Son of God took the sins of the world on himself in Jesus, and took on himself the divine punishment (his own divine punishment) for the sins of all and died on behalf of all, so all in him are made to die. By his death our death is sealed! We must die! As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:14, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and *therefore* all died."

Because all, through union with Christ, died, so through union with Christ, all are made to share in Christ's resurrection. Here, however, we have the mystery of sin. Even in the resurrection, sin can interpose between a person and Christ. Whereas all are made to share in his resurrection, not all will rise to the new life of righteousness. As Jesus said, "Those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:29). Christ

has forgiven and redeemed us. We are summoned to repent and believe and therefore rise in Christ to a life of righteousness.

The Resurrection

Christ rose vicariously as man on our behalf. To express the meaning of the resurrection, the New Testament uses the words *synzaō*, which means "I live along with," and *synegeirō*, which means, "I rise from the dead." God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ (or, as in the King James Version, "quickened us together with Christ"). God raised us in Christ, *en Christō*; he raised us "in union with Jesus." When Jesus rose from the dead, we rose with him and in him. Christ's resurrection is the cause and guarantee of our resurrection.

Jesus was physically resurrected as man. He rose in the body — a glorified body, able to suddenly appear and to disappear. But it was nevertheless a physical body, the same body, although now glorified, he had on earth. He continues in the resurrection to have the scars of the nails in his hands and feet and from the spear in his side. In the resurrection he continues to be clothed with our humanity. Jesus said to his disciples, "Look at my hands and feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have" (Luke 24:39). At his request, he ate fish with them and had breakfast with them on the lakeshore. The fact that he rose as man on our behalf means that we are made to rise in him.

The Ascension of Christ

Jesus ascended vicariously as man on our behalf. Generally, and for far too long, the church has neglected the doctrine of the ascension. Many ministers rarely if ever preach on it. At most, the ascension is mentioned in prayer or hymns. Yet the doctrine of the ascension is vitally important! Without it, our salvation would not be accomplished. Jesus not only rose from the dead, but he also ascended to the Father and ascended to reign as man and yet God. Of course Jesus was always king. But with his ascension he entered heaven to reign as man on our behalf, and yet also God.

Jesus ascended clothed with our humanity. He ascended vicariously as man. He did not lay aside our humanity when he ascended and entered the presence of the Father. In his ascension he raised our humanity, cleansed and renewed through his atoning life and death, to heaven so that in him we have entered the presence of the Father. Through Christ's vicarious ascension we are restored to fellowship with the Father. As Paul said, "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men" (Eph. 3:8, which is a quotation from Ps. 68:18). "You have been raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1).

The ascended Christ continues to be our High Priest. He offered to the Father his perfect life of obedience, in our name and on our behalf, together with the sacrifice of himself on the cross. Jesus, in his ascension, took the offering of his blood into the true Holy of Holies, which was not on earth but in heaven. He took it into the presence of the Father. His offering and sacrifice, in our stead, was accepted. Christ in his own person reconciled God and man. He brought peace between God and man, between man and God, and between man and man. His continuing presence on the throne continually declares to God and man that we are once and for all and forever redeemed.

It is an amazing fact that in Christ, through union with Christ, we are made to enter the presence of the Father and are made members of his family. When Christ lives within us, when we are clothed with Christ and Christ's human life which he lived for us becomes by grace our life, we are restored, re-created in the image of God, and able to share in the fellowship of the Son with the Father through the Holy Spirit.⁵ By grace we share in the fellowship of the Triune God, are made heirs of the heavenly kingdom. In Christ, God the Father treats us as if we are his only beloved Son. So he says, "Come inherit the kingdom." Only the Son and heir inherits the kingdom. In Christ, as part of our sharing in Christ in the fellowship of the Triune God, the Father treats us as his Son and heir.

The ascended Christ continues to be the mediator between God and man. The ascended Christ continues to reveal the Father and himself to us through

5 "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20, King James Version).

the Holy Spirit. Equally in his ascension, he continues to represent us to the Father. I quote from my brother Tom Torrance:

It is as our Brother, wearing our humanity, that he has ascended, presenting himself eternally before the face of the Father, and presenting us in himself. As such he is not only our word to God but God's Word to us. Toward God he is our Advocate and High Priest, but toward man he is the acceptance of us in himself. The very Spirit through whom he offered himself eternally to the Father he has sent down upon us in his High-Priestly blessing, fulfilling in the life of his Church on earth that which he has fulfilled in the heavenlies.⁶

Put another way, *the ascended Christ continues to intercede for us*. This is part of his High Priestly, mediatorial office, which is mentioned in the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need" (Heb. 7:24–26). The ascended Christ prays for us. On earth, Jesus prayed for his disciples. He prayed for Peter and the others that their faith may not fail (Luke 22:32); that Satan should not have them and sift them like wheat. If it comforted them to know that Jesus was praying for them, it should be marvelously comforting for us to know that the ascended Christ continues to pray for us.

It is also part of his High Priestly ministry that the ascended Christ leads us today in worship through the Holy Spirit; that through the Holy Spirit, at all times in every area and activity of life, he continually gives himself to us; he gives us his life of obedience, of holiness, of righteousness. When the Lord says, "Be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Pet. 1:15), the Lord is not casting us back on our ourselves, as if we out of our own resources can make ourselves holy, even with his help. He is not just saying, "Be like me; follow my example," because in our sin we cannot. He in his own person, who was and is the Holy One of Israel, is our holiness. It was his presence in the midst of Israel that separated Israel from all the other nations. Moses said to God, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. . . . What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (Exod. 33:15–16). His holy presence sanctified Israel and set them apart from the other nations. His presence with us and in us by

⁶ T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Continuum, London: 1993), 14–15.

his Spirit sanctifies us. We are holy, set apart, to the extent that we have Christ within us. He gives himself to us vicariously.

Likewise in demanding that we be righteous, God through Christ's vicarious atonement confers on us Christ's righteousness. Jesus Christ is the Righteous One. When he lives within us through the Holy Spirit, his life becomes our life and his righteousness our righteousness by grace. As Paul said, "It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). When we look back over our lives and ponder how disobedient we have been and continue to be, it is marvelously comforting to know that Christ gives us his life of righteousness and obedience to the Father. It is Christ's righteousness and obedience that counts. We are saved by his righteousness and obedience, not ours.

Prayer

As a student I often wondered why Jesus, being the Son of God and himself God, prayed. Jesus as man, as representative man, on our behalf, prayed. He prayed vicariously. In our sinful state we are not able to pray. Accordingly, Jesus prayed on our behalf, voicing the prayers that we are unable to pray. Jesus taught us how to pray. Yet, in ourselves we are weak and we do not know what to pray. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the power to pray and assists our prayers. Through the Holy Spirit, our prayers are cleansed, united with, and incorporated into Christ's prayers and in Christ are presented to the Father. To pray in this way is to pray "in his name," and all such prayers, as Jesus assured us, are heard and answered (John 14:14; 15:16; 16:23-24). As Karl Barth rightly said, in true prayer we are never alone. True prayer, like true worship, is where we pray together with Christ and in union with Christ.

Faith

Jesus Christ perfectly trusted God. Jesus trusted God the Father while tempted in the wilderness; as he slept in a boat during a storm at sea; when facing opposition by the religious leaders; and in the Garden of Gethsemane. When

dying on the cross he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Jesus lived a life of confident, perfect faith in the Father. And he lived that life of faith vicariously for us, so that he might give his life to us. It is through *his* faith, when we receive it through the Holy Spirit, not through our faith, that we are justified, saved.

Paul said, "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live *by the faith of the Son of God*" (Gal. 2:20). That is according to the King James Version (KJV), which, I believe, correctly translates the Greek, which reads *en pistei zō tē tou huiou tou theou* ("by the faith of the Son of God"). The same occurs twice in verse 16, where the phrase *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* is translated correctly in the KJV as "by the faith of Jesus Christ." The New International Version (and other modern translations) alters the texts to make them read, "by faith *in* the Son of God" and "by faith *in* Jesus Christ" — something altogether different! It is by *his* faith (not ours) that we are saved and live!

There are other passages that indicate the difficulty translators found over the reality of the vicarious humanity of Christ. In Romans 3:21–22, Paul says, "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested . . . even the righteousness of God which is by faith *of* Jesus Christ [*dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*]." In Mark 11:22, Jesus says, *echete pistin theou*, which the KJV this time translates, "Have faith in God." Yet the Greek says, "Have the faith *of* God." In Revelation 2:13, the Greek reads, *kai ouk ērnēsō tēn pistin mou*, — "you did not deny *my* faith." The KJV translates it "hadst not denied *my* faith." The NIV translates it "You did not renounce your faith in me." In Revelation 14:12, we have the words, *tēn pistin Iēsou*, which the KJV translates "the faith *of* Jesus," and the NIV translates, "faithful *to* Jesus."

These modern translations take away from the vicarious nature of Christ's life of faith which the original Greek conveys. I believe we should be prepared to accept the original text as we find it in Greek and not seek to alter it according to our theological misconceptions. Such misconceptions deprive us of the great relief and marvelous comfort of knowing that we are saved by Christ's faith, not by ours!

Worship

Not all that we call worship — gathering together in church, singing hymns, hearing a sermon, or even sharing in the administration of the sacraments — can rightly be called worship. True worship involves our encountering God in Christ. It involves our actual meeting with God, our hearing him speak, our receiving a fresh revelation, our seeing his glory. That can only take place in union with Christ.

Moses said, "Now show me your glory" (Exod. 33:18). Jesus prayed for his disciples to "see my glory" (John 17:24). Worship can only take place in and through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Only in Christ, in union with him, can we see God's glory. Christ has a dual role in worship. On the one hand, he is God whom we worship. We pray, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20). On the other hand, he worshiped vicariously on our behalf so that we may in him worship the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Worship is not simply what we do when we gather together in church on the Lord's Day. It involves the whole of our life. We cannot rightly worship God and go out and deliberately sin. To worship rightly, our whole life must be in harmony with God. Paul said, "Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). Jesus lived a holy life of intimate fellowship with God, in harmony with God. The Father said, "This is my Son with whom I am pleased." He gives us his perfect life through the Holy Spirit, so that with Paul we can say, "It is not we who live but Christ who lives in us." Clothed with Christ (and his righteous life), we also are made to live in fellowship with God and are able to worship God. In worship we are altogether dependent on Jesus Christ. Only in union with him can we encounter God, hear him speak, and see his glory.

Conclusion

If the ascended Christ did not continue in heaven to vicariously have the human body he had on earth, he could not today through the Holy Spirit give himself to us when he comes to live within us. He could not give to us his human life of obedience to the Father, his life of faith in the Father, his life of prayer to the Father, his life of worship in which he takes us by the hand and brings us into the

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Father's presence. In that case, we would not, could not, be sanctified and be made members of his family and heirs with Christ of the heavenly kingdom. It is through the Holy Spirit of Pentecost that Christ as man lives within us. Clothed with Christ's humanity, through the Holy Spirit, we are made to share in all the fruits of his atoning life, death, resurrection, and ascension, and are made to live and reign with Christ. As man and as God he will welcome us at the end of our journey on this earth, into the heavenly kingdom. There we will see him face-to-face, as man and yet God.

GOD'S COVENANT OF GRACE, ISRAEL, AND THE ATONEMENT

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Introduction and Summary

With Scripture I wish to stress the centrality of Christ. The Old Testament is the preparation for the coming of Christ, and the New Testament announces that Christ has come, has redeemed the world, and offers his salvation to everyone.

God made a covenant of grace with all humanity which embraces all creation. At the heart of the covenant is God's call for men and women to enter into fellowship with himself. Sin has entered the world and spoiled all creation so that for reconciliation with God to take place there must be atonement and reconciliation involving death and resurrection.

In order to accomplish his purpose of redeeming the world and calling men and women into communion with himself, God chose Israel. In and through Israel God has revealed and continues to reveal himself to the world. As God's servant, Israel is made, in a unique way, to share in Christ's atonement for the world, being made, as a nation, both to die and rise with Christ — as we all must. As a nation, Israel died in AD 70 and was resurrected in 1948 as the modern state of Israel. Israel in her sinful refusal to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ continues to witness to God in his mercy and judgement. In our times, the state of Israel and the Jewish people remain central to God's redemption of the world, and therefore must be central in the Church's mission to the world.

Sin entered the world through Adam and death passed over upon everyone; salvation and life come only through Jesus Christ.

The Centrality of Christ

"In the Person and work of Christ the Fatherly will of God for communion with man is actualised in incarnation and reconciliation, and it is in the light of that fulfilled communion that all else is to be interpreted."¹ Christ and his saving work are central to the message and preaching of the Apostles.

Christ is central to the book of Revelation

The book starts with, "The revelation of Jesus Christ." It contains three sections and each section commences with a Christophany. With the second Christophany in chapters 4 and 5, we see "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne."² Only the Lamb can break the seals and open the Book of Life, the Book of Destiny. Christ is the key to all our Christian understanding of the events of history and to the way that God is present and active in the world.

Christ is central to the whole of the New Testament

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."³ "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."⁴ Peter said, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."⁵ Paul said, "God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."^{6#}

1 T. F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (James Clarke, London: 1959), LV-LVI.

2 Revelation 5:6.

3 John 14:6.

4 John 14:7.

5 Acts 4:12.

6 Ephesians 1:22.

Our understanding of Christ and of what he does follows the order in which we came to know him

Our understanding of Christ follows the order of our salvation. As John Calvin made clear in his Catechism, Q 14,⁷ Jesus Christ is the foundation for faith. Our salvation is grounded in him. Our Christian understanding and theology commences and continues with Christ. In that light, Karl Barth often said to his students, "I know no God but the man Christ Jesus." In this, Barth was saying with New Testament authority that he dismissed any theology that was not Christ-centred. He was also affirming with the New Testament that "all God's fullness dwelt in Christ."⁸ Jesus was and is God.

The person of Christ: hypostatic union

In Christ, God assumed our flesh and blood and became man. He was God and man in one person. We cannot separate nor yet identify his divine nature and his human nature, his divinity and his humanity. He is one person. Between his divinity and humanity, as the Early Church and the Reformed Fathers said, there is a hypostatic union, that is, a union in one *hypostasis* or "person." Our minds cannot grasp how Jesus can be both God and man in one person. We accept that in faith. Our faith and our theology are grounded on that fact.

The Old Testament is a preparation for Christ

All that God did in the Old Testament — his covenant of Grace, his revelation to his people, his promises, and salvation — anticipate and prepare the way for the coming of Jesus Christ in whom everything that went before was fulfilled. Christ is the "locus" or focal point (*scopus*) of all Scripture and of all God's purposes for humanity. God's revelation of himself in the Old Testament is a necessary preparation for a right understanding of Christ in his person and saving work. As we read in Luke, on the road to Emmaus Jesus, "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets . . . explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."⁹ In the coming of Christ, however, and with the knowledge that we are

7 Torrance, *School of Faith*, 7.

8 Colossians 1:19.

9 Luke 24:27.

given in the New Testament, we are enabled to look back and understand in greater spiritual depths what is revealed in the Old Testament. Throughout the Bible, Christ is central in all our understanding of the Christian Faith.

God's Covenant of Grace with all Humanity

God in his love made a covenant of grace with all humanity, calling men and women into fellowship with himself. The word "covenant" does not occur in the early chapters of the Bible. The creation narratives simply say that God saw all that he created and it was good. He affirmed it. The Reformers were right to conclude, based on God's revelation in Christ, that in affirming all that he created, God made with all creation a covenant of grace.

God's covenant embraces all creation

God's covenant with men and women embraces the whole of creation. God first created the natural world, and then men and women, so that men and women had a good, safe, comfortable place in which to live. His covenant with all creation meant that men and women should not live in an alien environment. God's covenant with all humanity and all creation was reaffirmed in his covenant with Noah, and reaffirmed from time to time through the course of Old Testament history.

God manifests himself through creation but reveals himself only through his Word

In so far as the covenant embraces not only humanity but all creation, so "the whole universe of creaturely existence, visible and invisible, is brought into a relation with God in whom it is appointed to reflect his glory and be the sphere of his revelation."¹⁰ It is God's will and decision that creation is the sphere in which he chooses to reveal himself and his love, for it is his gracious will that we should live in fellowship with him as members of his family, he as our Father and we as his dear children. As Calvin put it, "God wrapped himself up in earthly signs and symbols and representations as the means through which in his mercy and gentleness he draws near to men, reveals his Presence, and adapts men to

10 Torrance, *School of Faith*, LI.

receive his truth. Thus the whole of creation is a mirror, a theatre, a world of signs, which God uses in the fulfilment of his covenant relations with men, as the tools and instruments of his Word.”¹¹

When Adam sinned, the gates were opened and sin came in like a flood and spoiled all creation. As Paul said, “Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.”¹² Because each man sinned as Adam sinned, each man was guilty for his own sin. Adam was simply the first among equal sinners. That meant that God’s covenant of grace with humanity and all creation could only be fulfilled through atonement, through the putting away of sin by God and his loving restoration of man to fellowship with himself. Reconciliation with God is the purpose of God’s covenant of grace and belongs to its heart. God’s covenant of grace and reconciliation belong together in Scripture.

Man in his sin is still aware of the presence of God. But in his estrangement from God because of sin, he is unable clearly to discern the voice of God and find his own way back to fellowship with God. Man can only recognise the presence of God and hear his voice in creation with the help of God’s revelation through his covenant of grace that is fulfilled in Christ. Only through God’s Word spoken and revealed in Christ can we discern clearly God’s voice through his created world.

The covenant finds its fulfilment and is sealed only in Christ

Covenant and creation can only be understood in the light of incarnation and atonement. Atonement in Christ, and its prefiguring in all the Old Testament sacrifices, is an essential part of the covenant itself and of its fulfilment.

The New Testament uses two words for God disclosing himself to his people — *phaneroo*, which the Authorised Version (AV) translates “manifest,” and *apokalupsis*, which the AV translates “revelation.” *Phaneroo* is God speaking and revealing himself through creation or in the course of life, but man is unable clearly to hear. Because of sin there is a veil over his mind and heart. He remains in bondage to sin. Although God speaks and manifests his presence, man does not hear for salvation. As Paul said, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven

11 Ibid., LII–LIII.

12 Romans 5:12.

against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.”¹³ *Apokalupsis* is when the veil is removed so that man can, as it were, see and hear God, and at the same time he himself is uncovered. He sees himself as a sinner before God and is “born again.” Revelation only takes place through the Word spoken in the Old Testament to and through Israel, and only clearly in and through Jesus Christ. “This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.”¹⁴ Only in Christ is the veil removed and salvation takes place. Revelation and reconciliation, revelation and new birth, always go together.

The Purpose of God's Covenant

With man's disobedience, sin swept in like a flood threatening to destroy humankind and all creation, but God in his love refused to let his creation go. In his love he was determined to overcome sin and restore humankind to fellowship with himself and restore all creation. The goal of the covenant was, and is, the restoration of humanity to fellowship with God. At the heart of the covenant is God's determination to restore humanity to fellowship with himself. Covenant and redemption belong together in the Bible.

God's covenant with Israel¹⁵

In his love and determination to redeem humankind and all creation God chose a particular people, Israel, so that in and through them he might redeem the

13 Ibid., 1:18–19.

14 Jeremiah 31:33.

15 Karl Barth has studied and written more than any other theologian of whom I am aware about God's covenant of grace with Israel and all creation. I commend and encourage you to read his *Church Dogmatics*. Concerning Israel and the Church, see *Church Dogmatics* II/2 *The Doctrine of God* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1957), 3–506, particularly 195–305; and *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1956), 3–78. For the relation of creation and covenant, see *Church Dogmatics* III/1 *The Doctrine of Creation* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1958), 42–329.

world. Within God's wider covenant with all humankind and all creation, he made an inner covenant with Israel in order to work out the redemption of the world and fulfil the loving purpose for his wider universal covenant with all humanity and all creation. God's covenant with Israel was both for Israel's sake and for the world's sake. When God delivered Israel out of Egypt it was so that Egypt and the whole world might know that the Lord is God. David said to Goliath that God would give him into David's hand, and he would be slain so that "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel."¹⁶ King Hezekiah prayed that God would deliver Jerusalem from the hand of Assyria "so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God."¹⁷ That is a common theme in the Psalms where the Psalmist says, "The Lord reigns, let the earth tremble";¹⁸ or in Isaiah, "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth."¹⁹ Through the course of Israel's long history God revealed himself to Israel in his love, judgement, mercy, and forgiveness, and through Israel to the world.

Israel was chosen to be a representative nation

God did not call Israel because she was more numerous than other nations,²⁰ nor because she was more righteous.²¹ God chose her because Israel was a sinful nation like the other nations of the world. If she was not sinful, she could not represent the other nations of the world. Through the course of Israel's long history, God revealed himself to Israel — and through Israel to the world — as a God of love, mercy, forgiveness, and judgement. He revealed himself as a God who is holy, and who in his divine holiness bound to himself a sinful people, whom he would never let go. Such was his determination to purge sin and to redeem his people, recreating them for fellowship and communion with himself.

The Bible uses remarkable language about the relationship of God to his people. It speaks of God's relationship with Israel, and God's relationship with the people

16 1 Samuel 17:46.

17 2 Kings 19:19.

18 Psalm 99:1.

19 Isaiah 12:5.

20 Deuteronomy 7:7.

21 Deuteronomy 9:1–6.

of the world, as a covenant of marriage which can never be broken. A covenant is different from a contract. A contract is external to the contracting parties, where the two parties make a mutual agreement with conditions attached. Marriage is a covenant where two people are called to give themselves totally, or unconditionally, to one another in love. In human marriage both the man and the woman are responsible for maintaining the covenant. Their covenant is bilateral. The covenant which God makes with his people, however, is unilateral. God initiated it, and God forever maintains it. It is an unconditional covenant of grace in which God promises his people to be their God, to make them cherished members of his family, and to bless them. Israel is called to respond and acquiesce to God's covenant.

God's covenant of grace with Israel and the world is unconditional and everlasting

If Israel does joyfully acquiesce and obey God, she will enjoy all the blessings of the covenant, and so will the world. If Israel does not and rebels against God, she will not enjoy God's blessings. She will suffer and be banished temporarily from the Promised Land, but God will not break his covenant with Israel. The Lord said, "Yet, in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the Lord their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the Lord."²² This is affirmed many times in the Old Testament. Israel's *enjoyment* of God's blessings is a consequence of her obedience. It is the same with God's covenant of grace with all humanity. The enjoyment of God's blessing requires obedience. His covenant with Israel and the world, however, is unconditional and everlasting.

The covenant is not external

God's covenant of grace with Israel is not something external to her life and being. It does not simply call for Israel's acquiescence and obedience. It enters into her life and affects her entire life and being. This is essential to our understanding of God's covenant. Husband and wife in their commitment to each other in love

22 Leviticus 26:44-45.

become, in the language of Scripture, “one flesh,” one whole person. The man discovers his manhood through this — and only this — woman (his wife), and the woman discovers her womanhood only through this man (her husband). The entire life and being of both is altered and changed through their covenanted union one with another. Henceforth what affects one affects the other. Their life and destiny are forever intertwined. God’s relationship with his people in his covenant of grace is a deeper and more intimate covenant of marriage. It is everlasting and affects the whole life and being of his people. Israel and God, by God’s choice, are wrapped together in the same bundle of life. The same is true of Christ and all humanity. When God became man in Christ, he became man for all eternity, and all humanity became joined with Christ in the same bundle of life.

External signs and seals

The signs and seals of God’s covenant with Israel were circumcision and Passover, the covenant meal. Circumcision was the older sign given to Abraham and prior to the giving of the Law. Passover was given through Moses.

Circumcision. Circumcision was the sign cut into the flesh of the covenant people. There are many references to circumcision in Scripture, but it was only gradually through the years that the meaning of the sign was unfolded. Although it is not clearly stated, I believe that we are right to draw the following implications concerning its meaning for Israel:

As a sign that could not be erased, it was a perpetual reminder that God’s covenant with Israel was an everlasting covenant.

As a sign that could not be erased, it was a perpetual reminder that Israel was sinful and deserved to be cut off, to die, because of her sin. Israel, however, was not cut off. The sign helped them to anticipate the day when God would himself come in Christ and be circumcised, cut off, die, for his people.²³

As a sign cut into their flesh, it was a sign that the covenant was not, as it were, external to the parties participating in the covenant. It involved on God’s side, God forever becoming man to be one with his people and in Christ being cut off for his people. On Israel’s side, it meant the people becoming changed or altered in their being and existence as the Word became flesh in them. That is

23 See Colossians 2:9–12.

what is meant in Jeremiah 31:33. There we read, "This is my covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law [my Word] in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people." In Deuteronomy we read of this change of life resulting from God's covenant with Israel. The Lord says, "The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."²⁴ That is the interpretation of the sign in the New Testament.²⁵ In Colossians, circumcision means a "putting off of the sinful nature."

As a sign cut into the flesh, it meant that as a people united in covenant with God, Israel must be cut off, die to herself and her sins. Only so, could she be cleansed and enabled to receive a new life and live in fellowship with God.

Passover. We will simply note that the Passover feast involves blood and the killing of a lamb. Because of the blood sprinkled on the lintel of the door and the meal that was eaten, the angel of death passed over the people of Israel and they lived by God's grace. Atonement had been made for their sins. The lamb anticipated Christ, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."²⁶

There is only one covenant of grace

God confirmed his covenant of grace with Israel on different occasions; for example, with Abraham, Moses, and David. On these different occasions the covenant was revealed in greater depths, and different aspects of God's covenant were affirmed as God worked out his purpose of redemption for Israel and the world. Ultimately there is only one covenant of grace with Israel and the world. The one covenant of grace was totally fulfilled and is grounded in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son and Word of God.

The confirmation of the covenant with Moses is particularly important in that God gave to Israel, through Moses, both the Law (the Ten Words) and the Laws of Worship (the liturgical laws). So we have the twin ministries of prophet-priest represented by Moses, and liturgical-priest represented by Aaron. It is important

24 Deuteronomy 30:6 and also 10:16.

25 Philippians 3:3; Colossians 2:11.

26 John 1:29.

to recognise that these God-given liturgical acts had no efficacy in themselves. It was God who appointed them. They pointed beyond themselves, witnessing to God who alone can cleanse and forgive the sin of his people, and as such anticipated Christ. In both Old and New Testaments atonement is an essential part of the one covenant of grace and its fulfilment.²⁷

The Ten Words are intensely personal and cannot be separated from the Person of God. They are a partial revelation of God and reveal how God wanted his covenant people to live and behave. The Laws of Worship, with the five great offerings, were given because Israel was unable to keep the Ten Words and required constantly to seek God's cleansing and forgiveness. The offerings involved blood in the killing of bulls, sheep, goats, or birds, and helped people to look forward to Jesus Christ, to understand why he came and what he did in sacrificing himself as an atonement for sin. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. For sins that were not covered by animal sacrifice, sins that were done deliberately and which in the language of the AV are called sins of a "high hand," the sinner had to cast him or herself on the mercy of God. This was the case with King David concerning his sin with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

God's servant

God's covenant with Israel was a call to serve. It was through Israel, as God's servant, that God chose to reveal himself to the world and call the world into fellowship with himself. The word "servant" occurs almost 800 times in the Old Testament. It is not always used of Israel, but frequently is. We read, for example, "O Israel my servant, Jacob I have chosen . . . I said, 'You are my servant: I have chosen you and have not rejected you . . .'"²⁸ and ". . . do not fear, O Jacob my servant . . . You will be my people, and I will be your God . . .";²⁹ and "This is what the Sovereign Lord says, 'When I have gathered the people of Israel from the nations, where they have been scattered, I will show

27 See T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: the Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Paternoster, Milton Keynes and InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 2009), 17–21.

28 Isaiah 41:8–9.

29 Jeremiah 30:10–22.

myself holy among them in the sight of the nations. Then they will live in their own Land, which I gave to my servant Jacob."³⁰ Quite clearly from these and other passages about Israel, God's covenant with Israel was a call to serve. Israel, God's covenant people, is God's servant, called to make known and further his will to redeem the world.

Servant Songs

Now let us turn to what are called "The Servant Songs" in Isaiah:³¹

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope . . . I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles.³²

God says,

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob, and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.³³

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all . . . Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong.³⁴

Note what is said of the servant in the Songs. The servant is the one who fulfils God's mission of redemption. It is redemption not only for Israel but for the whole world. He accomplishes redemption through suffering and death, which he bears on behalf of others. He is raised from the dead and exalted by God.

30 Ezekiel 28:25.

31 Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-9; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.

32 Isaiah 42:1-4, 6.

33 Isaiah 49:6.

34 Isaiah 53:4-6, 12.

Those who had rejected him are constrained to recognise that he had suffered for their sins.³⁵

Who is this servant whose suffering and death accomplishes salvation not just for Israel but for the world? What was in the mind of the prophet when he spoke these words? As my brother Tom has rightly said, most likely the prophet thought of Moses as the archetype of the servant of the Lord. In the mind of the prophet, Moses, more than anyone in his person and work, foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah. Moses led Israel out of Egypt. When Israel sinned, Moses prayed for Israel, standing before God "in the gap on behalf of the Land,"³⁶ that God in his wrath would not destroy Israel because of her sin.

It was because Moses stood in the gap, because he interceded for Israel in its great sin, acting as the representative and mediator of the people before the wrath of God, that God consented to renew the covenant, reissue the warrant of the covenant in the decalogue, and take Israel to be his people in covenant mercy and pardon. Nor can we forget the fact that at last Moses is cut off from entry into the Promised Land and disappears like a scapegoat into the mountains to be buried by God in an unknown grave, while Israel under Joshua crosses the Jordan to enjoy the promised deliverance. It is surely the figure of Moses, his intercession and vicarious suffering for Israel, that ultimately lies behind the conception of the servant in Deutero-Isaiah.³⁷

In the Servant Songs, is the servant Israel or is he Christ? Scholars are divided, despite the fact that Israel in the first and second Servant Song is stated to be the servant. Many of an evangelical persuasion have argued that these songs cannot refer to Israel. They argue that they are prophecies about Christ.

I believe that we must say that they refer *both* to Israel and to Christ. As a prophet, Isaiah was preaching to Israel in his day. Israel is God's servant. Through the Lord's covenant, Israel is united with the Lord in a way in which no other nation is. The Lord has revealed himself to Israel and bound her to himself

35 J. Y. Campbell, "Servant," in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1950), 224.

36 Ezekiel 13:5; 22:30.

37 Torrance, *Atonement*, 42–43.

in a covenant of love and marriage that is unique among the nations.³⁸ As a nation, Israel is united with the Lord in the same bundle of life and is made to participate in whatever the Lord does.

These remarkable prophecies in the Servant Songs, however, clearly cannot just refer to Israel. They can only be fulfilled in and by Christ. Through his suffering and death alone can Israel and the world be redeemed. Because of her unique relationship with the Lord, Israel is called not only to be the bearer of God's Word to the world, but to participate through the Holy Spirit in Christ's atonement for the sin of the world. She is made as a nation to share in Christ's death and with Christ to become a scapegoat. This becomes clearer when we turn to the New Testament.

God's Covenant in the New Testament

Peter in Acts 3 states quite clearly that through Israel "all peoples on earth will be blessed."³⁹ In his sermon in Acts 2, Peter says two remarkable things.⁴⁰ On the one hand, he says it was by "God's set purpose and foreknowledge" that Jesus was handed over to be put to death. That is, he says that *Christ's death was God's doing*. God planned it and brought it about. On the other hand, Peter says, "You, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death by nailing him to the cross, but God raised him from the dead." That is, he says that *Christ's death was man's doing*. It was what man did in his sinful rebellion against God. How can we reconcile these two statements?

Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him to be a slave in Egypt, "Don't be afraid . . . You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."⁴¹ God graciously overruled their sin and made their sin his saving act, for the saving of many lives. God overruled for good.

38 Psalm 147:19–20.

39 Acts 3:25–26.

40 Acts 2:23–24.

41 Genesis 50:20.

It is likewise with the death of Christ. The sin of putting Christ to death on the cross was the greatest sin of all. All sin boiled over in that act of rebellion by humanity against God. But God over-ruled the greatest sin of all and made it his saving act for the world. Not only so, but he undid the past, put it right, rectified it, and made it his saving act from the foundation of the world.⁴²

No one can undo the past. When you and I sin, we cannot undo what we have said and done. Only God can, and God does. When we seek God's forgiveness and surrender our lives to God, we can still suffer the consequences of our sin, but the wonderful thing is when God forgives, he undoes the past. He makes our sin a positive means of blessing for us and for those we have sinned against, and a testimony for others. An astonishing act of grace!

Israel was chosen by God to represent the nations, and chosen (and here we need to put our hand over our mouth in awe before God) to put Christ to death. In so doing she was not more sinful than the other nations. She was simply chosen to be our sinful representative. God lovingly, graciously, overruled that sinful act for the salvation of the world. What is more, God overruled all Israel's past sins down the long years of her history (and he continues to do so), so that we have learned from them for our salvation, and they have become a blessing to us and to the world. We would not have learned of God's resistance to sin, his judgement, mercy, and forgiveness, apart from Israel's sin. Apart from Israel's sin, we would not have the Old Testament. God has overruled Israel's and the nations' sin of putting Christ to death by making it his saving act for the world. No wonder that Paul says, "Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles."⁴³ Jesus himself said, "Salvation is from the Jews."⁴⁴

Death and resurrection central to salvation

God's concern in his covenant of grace with Israel and all humanity was redemption for everyone. Death and resurrection were therefore central. Only through dying to sin and rising to a new life could the redemption, which God accomplished in Christ, be enjoyed. In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 we read, "For

42 Revelation 13:8.

43 Romans 11:11.

44 John 4:22.

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."⁴⁵ Christ's atoning death did not take place independently of humanity, any more than it took place independently of Israel. As God bound Israel to himself in an everlasting covenant, so in Christ, God bound the whole of humanity to himself in an everlasting covenant of grace. God in Christ, in his becoming man, united himself, identified himself, with each one of us. Hence when Jesus died, all of us were made to share in his death. Our death is not just something natural. It is because of our sin that Christ died for us. Hence, all of us, having shared in his death, will die, as Paul says.

But if we died with Christ, we will also rise with Christ through his resurrection. Here however we have the mystery of sin. Even in the resurrection, sin can interpose between a person and Christ. Whereas all are made to share in his resurrection, not all will rise to the new life of righteousness within God's Kingdom. As Jesus said, "Those who have done good will rise to righteousness and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."⁴⁶

God's covenant of grace with Israel was such that God in his love would never let her go despite all her sin. Israel's hope for redemption lay in God's steadfast keeping of his covenant, and in his loving determination to redeem her. Here we are speaking of Israel as a nation, not of individual Israelis or Jews. Redemption could only be brought about by Israel's dying to sin and rising to a new life. In his covenant of grace Christ identified himself with Israel. He became Israel. In the Old Testament Israel is likened to a vine. Jesus said in John chapter 15, "I am the true vine."⁴⁷ Because of her union with Christ, through the Holy Spirit, when Jesus Christ died, Israel as a nation had to die. Because of God's covenant of grace and love, Israel was made to share in Christ's death. The death as God's servant was necessary for Israel's sake "so that she might be pardoned, healed, and restored to fellowship with God. The covenant thus mediated would be transformed to extend far beyond the bounds of Israel, for all nations would

45 2 Corinthians 5:14.

46 John 5:29.

47 John 15:1.

come at last under its light and salvation and share in the fellowship it bestowed between God and man."⁴⁸

If Israel had welcomed Christ as her Redeemer, in dying she would have been raised in Christ as a new nation and as a holy people of God living in fellowship and communion with God, "a light for the Gentiles."⁴⁹ Israel, however, continued in her rebellion against God. In her sin, because God would not let her go, Israel shattered herself on the rock of God's grace, love, and faithfulness. She died as a result of Christ's death, but did not rise to a new life of righteousness and as "a light to the Gentiles." In AD 70 she was destroyed as a nation, and because of sin, banished from the Promised Land — not for 70 years as in the first captivity in Babylon, but for nineteen hundred years.

With Christ's death and resurrection, and with Israel's death (despite Israel's continuing sin), God's covenant of grace was transformed and extended far beyond Israel. Life and salvation in Christ was offered to the world. His covenant embraced all nations. Salvation was for everyone. God wanted all to enjoy fellowship and communion with himself, and God had made that possible in Christ.

God's inner covenant with Israel, despite her sin, remained, "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."⁵⁰ Israel is still God's servant and God's witness to the nations. The continuing practice of circumcision in the New Testament and by the Early Church witnesses to that fact.⁵¹

Israel as a nation participated in Christ's death. But Israel as a nation had to rise from the dead and be raised through Christ's resurrection. Israel was resurrected in 1948, having as a nation been dead for some nineteen hundred years. The acted parable of the cursing of the fig tree⁵² which was Israel, was fulfilled in AD 70 when Israel ceased to be a nation. In the later parable, Jesus said when you see the fig tree that has been dead from the root become green

48 Torrance, *Atonement*, 346.

49 Isaiah 42:6.

50 Romans 11:29.

51 Luke 2:22; Acts 16:3.

52 Matthew 21:18-20; Mark 11:18-20.

again, then know that summer is near.⁵³ When Israel is restored to the Promised Land as a nation, then "summer is near." What that means we do not know except that, from what Jesus said, it is a sign that God is about to do something momentous in his world. Israel's restoration as a nation to the Promised Land, under the hand of God, keeps us on the tiptoes of expectation.

At present, Israel the nation remains sinful and does not know the salvation of Jesus Christ. Paul says "they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge."⁵⁴ Israel, however, is still God's covenant people and servant. "For God's gifts and call are irrevocable."⁵⁵

For those who have eyes to see, Israel in her sin and as God's covenant people witnesses to God today before the nations in the following very powerful ways:⁵⁶

- 1 Israel witnesses to God's continuing covenant of grace not only with Israel but also with the world.
- 2 Israel's death and resurrection witnesses to the bodily death and resurrection of all humanity.
- 3 Israel witnesses to the historical nature of divine revelation. We know God by what he has actually done in history, and in his incarnation.
- 4 Israel witnesses to salvation as a gift of God's grace. She witnesses to the fact that despite our antagonism and rebellion against God, God is a God of both judgement and mercy.
- 5 Israel witnesses to man's continuing sin and rebellion against God, despite God's love, patience, and mercy. Israel continues to be a sinful nation, yet God's servant.
- 6 Israel witnesses to God as a Person whom we actually encounter in history.
- 7 Israel witnesses to the fact that there is a hidden process of judgement going on all through history and every nation has to give account to God.

53 Mark 13:23-31; Luke 21:29-33.

54 Romans 10:2.

55 Romans 11:29.

56 The following 9 clauses are largely quoted from my article. See David W. Torrance, "The Witness of the Jews to God: Their Purpose in History," in *The Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David W. Torrance (Handsel Press, Edinburgh: 1982), 2-12.

8 Israel witnesses to the coming day of the Lord, to a new creation when Christ will come back to the earth in mercy, judgement, and renewal.

9 Israel, as we have already indicated, by her very presence in the Promised Land, witnesses to the fact that God is about to do something great and dramatic in history.

The prophet Ezekiel prophesied that in his love and in faithfulness to his covenant, God would gather Israel from the nations to which they had been scattered and bring them back to the Promised Land. Back in the Promised Land the Lord said, "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean . . . I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you."⁵⁷ After they had been restored to the Land they would come to faith in God.

When Israel returned to the Promised Land and was resurrected as a nation in 1948, something profound began to happen to Jewish people. Since that time, more Jews have been coming to faith in Jesus Christ than since the days of the Early Church. Forty five years ago there were no Messianic congregations in Israel. In 1973, at the time of the Yom Kippur war, there were five Messianic congregations in Israel. Today there are over 100. There has, in the last few years, come about in Israel a greater awareness of Messianic Jews and a greater openness to the Gospel despite the opposition of the ultra-Orthodox. According to a recent documentary film, if New Testaments were today offered free in a market place in the UK, nine out of ten people would decline the offer, whereas today in Israel nine out of ten people would accept the gift of a New Testament. It is possible that world-wide there are over two hundred thousand Jews today who believe in Jesus. Because more than half are integrated into Gentile churches, it is impossible to know exact numbers.

As Gentiles it is our responsibility to pray for Israel and take the Gospel of Christ to the Jewish people in a way that is appropriate, not as to a pagan people, but to those who worship the same God. We have a God-given responsibility to take the Gospel to the Jew. The Church's mission to the world must have at its heart the taking of the Gospel to the Jews. Recall the words of the Apostle Paul:

57 Ezekiel 36:25-26.

Because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! . . . For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?⁵⁸

When Israel comes to faith in Jesus Christ it will be like a new Pentecost. There will be a great leap forward in world mission.

There is only one way of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles, and that is through Jesus Christ and his atoning work. Jews and Gentiles are loved equally by God. God's choosing of Israel to be his servant was in order to bring about the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. Only in Jesus Christ is there salvation.

Christ is the Elect One, the One Chosen and Elected by God

In Christ, Israel and all humanity are elect. For God in his love and grace has chosen to call all humanity into fellowship with himself. He does not want any sinner to perish, but for all to turn to him in repentance and to receive the salvation that he has accomplished for everyone in Christ. We are called to be diligent and make our calling and election sure.⁵⁹ If we do not, we will be lost and perish without his salvation. Only those who receive Christ and his new life of righteousness are truly among the elect. That is to say, there is an inner company of the elect, namely those who love the Lord, within the wider company of the elect of all humanity. In the same way, within the elect of Israel as a nation, there are the inner elect, the inner remnant who truly believe in Christ. Paul in Romans anticipates the day when "all Israel will be saved."⁶⁰ By "all" I do not think that he means every single Jew. He seems to anticipate that one day a majority of the nation of Israel will come to faith in Jesus Christ and be saved. Much remains a mystery to us.

Jesus has warned us about the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction.⁶¹ He has revealed to us the Father's will to call

58 Romans 11:11-12, 15.

59 2 Peter 1:10.

60 Romans 11:25.

61 Matthew 7:13-14.

everyone into communion and fellowship with himself in Christ and warned us in his parables and in his teaching of the need to receive his forgiveness and salvation.

In conclusion, I will seek to gather up what I have said. According to Karl Barth, "The history of humanity is the history of God's covenant with man."⁶² It is the history of humanity's sin and of God's loving determination to redeem humanity and restore humanity to fellowship and communion with himself. With that purpose he chose Israel with the result that, "The whole history of Israel in all its stages is the revelation of man's sin, in shameful identification with the sin committed by Adam in Genesis 3."⁶³ Israel was not more sinful than the other nations, nor yet was she less so. She was chosen by God in her sinfulness to represent the nations and to teach the nations in their sin of the way that God deals with sin in his love, holiness, judgement, and mercy, culminating in his atonement in Christ for Israel's and the world's salvation.

All other people after Adam have only repeated in some form the original sin of Adam. Between all of us there is a formal relationship with Adam, but there is a vast difference between our relationship with Adam and our relationship with Christ. Our relationship with Adam only dimly prefigures, and is a preliminary shadow, of our relationship with Christ. Between the two relationships there is the "greatest and most fundamental disparity."⁶⁴ Adam cannot bring us to Christ nor help us to understand Christ. It is only through Christ that we can understand Adam and the nature of humanity's sin. For Christ in his grace embraced Adam and united Adam and all humanity with himself in his work of redemption.

Although Adam's sin opened the way for sin and death to pass over and embrace all humanity, each person in his or her freedom has sinned. We are not held to account by God because of Adam's sin but only by our attitude to Christ and whether or not we receive his gift of salvation. In the Roman Empire many became slaves because they were captured in a war that was not their

62 Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, trans. T. A. Smail, *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers*, no. 5 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 25-26.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

responsibility. If we saw twelve such slaves in a Roman court, we could not blame them for being slaves. The war that had taken place was probably not their responsibility. It was not their fault that they were captured and enslaved. If, however, someone came into the court, laid down a large sum of money and said "If anyone gives me his or her name, they can be free," anyone who continued to be a slave would be a slave on their own responsibility. Christ has paid the ransom. Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, God has redeemed us. God in Christ has worked out the redemption of the world. It is ours simply to receive it with gratitude. Those who do not wish to receive it are rendered guilty and are judged by their refusal of Christ's salvation.

May we all grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and make his salvation known to the world. To Christ be glory both now and forever! Amen.⁶⁵

65 2 Peter 3:18.

THE BOOK OF REVELATION – ITS MESSAGE FOR TODAY¹

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The Book of Revelation has been regarded as perhaps the most difficult to understand within the canon of Scripture. The early church found difficulty with it. Luther would have denied to the Revelation a place in the New Testament. In it, he said, Christ is neither taught nor acknowledged. Zwingli was equally hostile to the book. Revelation is the only book in the New Testament on which John Calvin did not write a commentary. Other commentators, however, have loved it. Some eccentric Christian writers have tried to take out of it all sorts of remarkable, chiefly futuristic, interpretations. Today, it remains for many Christians largely a closed book, and many preachers rarely turn to it. Nevertheless, we must wrestle with it prayerfully until it begins to give us its blessing and open its riches to us.

The Revelation is part of Scripture and is in complete harmony with the rest of Scripture, so that an adequate understanding of it is essential for a right appreciation of the biblical message as a whole. This is all the more true today when people and nations are living through a time of crises, and there is so much sin in the world with all its consequences.

Ordinary people are asking about the meaning of life. Are people completely at the mercy of their fellows, or of blind, impersonal, economic forces? Will the forces of materialism prevail? Does God control the purposes and plans of

¹ This paper was originally presented to a conference on the theology of T. F. Torrance in April, 2011, in Fribush, Scotland. In the writing of it I was much indebted to the following sources: T. F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1959), D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible: A Study of the Book of Revelation* (SCM Press, London: 1964), and J. H. B. Masterman, *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (SPCK, London: 1919). In its present revised form, I am grateful for the practical help of the copy editor of *Participatio*, Ben Taylor.

peoples and nations? Will God's love and patience break the power of sin? What of the Church and its future? What of its witness to Christ? How does the Church, in these days of crises when sin is rampant, discharge its task?

The Book of Revelation has light to shed on all these questions. It had a profound and stirring message of hope to give to the Church of John's day, to the Church of every age, and perhaps, in a special way, to the Church of our day, despite the fact that much within the book will probably always remain a mystery.

The Occasion of the Book's Writing

John wrote his book at a time of grave danger to the Church. Savage persecution had broken out, and many had already suffered for the Faith. John himself was an exile on the island of Patmos. Although the name of only one martyr, Antipas,² is mentioned, many more had been slain for the Word of God and for "the testimony of Jesus." The book makes clear this was the result of sinful earthly power rebelling against its Heavenly King — Christus Imperator, Christus Pantokrator, Christus Victor.

The first main source of hostility was unbelieving Jews. This hostility was present right up to the time of John and in the year 155 AD was effective enough to cause the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna. Apart from martyrdom, the Christians suffered at the hands of the Jews from periodic outbursts of mob violence which issued in looting and physical cruelty.

The second and more serious source of hostility was the Roman State. During the period of the early emperors, there was a growing suspicion of Christians. This afforded a pretext for emperors like Nero (AD 54–68) to indulge in sporadic outbursts of great cruelty against the Church. Gradually, with the growth of emperor worship, this changed for the worse. Attitudes on the part of the State hardened. The issue of conformity to the State religion became the real cause of persecution of Christians. With Domitian, in whose reign (AD 81–96) the Revelation was probably written, persecution was the result of deliberate, calculated decision. The State felt that the Christian faith endangered the unity

2 Revelation 2:13.

of the empire and challenged the position and status of the emperor. Therefore, it had to be suppressed.

Domitian decreed that all his subjects should burn incense to him "as Lord and God" (this was an act of prayer), and that those who refused should be punished. Those who supported the Caesar cult were to wear a "mark," and those without it were boycotted in the markets and ostracised in social life.³ For Christians, prayer to Caesar and the acceptance of the religion of the State was impossible. The State was claiming the absolute obedience and surrender of its citizens, body and soul, and claiming to be divinely autonomous! This, Christians could not accept. Jesus Christ alone was Lord of the individual and of the nation. He who was man's Saviour from sin was also the Ruler of the kings of the earth. This refusal to conform to the religion of the State precipitated the most terrible and determined persecutions in which thousands perished.

Third, the Church was threatened not only by the State but also by those Christians who compromised and found the pressures too great. The latter John calls "Nicolaitans," "Balaamites," and "followers of Jezebel." They were a source of great weakness in the Church. The Revelation is as much a warning against them as it is a warning against the claims of Rome.

Authorship

We will not concern ourselves with the author of the Revelation. It neither affects the inspiration of the book nor our understanding of its content and message. Some believe, as I do, that the author was John the Apostle. Others, no doubt also with good cause, believe it was another John. No matter! It is "enough to know that John the Seer, was one of the greatest gifts of God to the Church of his day; and that the Church of all ages has cause to be thankful for the strength of his faith, the certainty of his hope, the clarity of his vision, the glow of his imagination, and the fervour of his writing."⁴

It is clear from the book itself that the author saw his visions and wrote his book on the island of Patmos where he had been banished, no doubt to work in

3 Revelation 13:15-17.

4 D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, 21

the stone quarries, for his testimony to Christ. In reading his book, one can feel his soaring triumphant spirit defying the hardness of his own condition and the weariness of his own body.

Apocalypse

The word by which John describes the message which he communicates is the word "apocalypse." It is a revelation, an unveiling, an uncovering of Jesus Christ and his purposes for mankind and creation. God the Lord is unveiled as the Author and Finisher of the course of human history, the Initiator and Fulfiller of the course of the world redemption, the Beginning and Ending of the course of divine judgment. Here in the Revelation it is affirmed that God's plan in creation will be fulfilled and consummated, that Christ's work of salvation will be concluded. The Holy Spirit will perfect his work of restoring in man the image of God.

Other apocalyptic literature

Although in many respects the Revelation is unique, in its outward form it is not. There are a number of other books written in a similar style. Among canonical writings there is Daniel, along with certain chapters in Ezekiel and in the Gospels. Outside the canon of Scripture — and written in the last two centuries BC and in the first two centuries AD — are Enoch, The Sibylline Oracles, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (claiming to be the last words of the twelve sons of Jacob), The Assumption of Moses, The Ascension of Isaiah, The Apocalypse of Baruch,⁵ and so on. The authors of these books tried to follow in the steps of the Old Testament prophets. They did their best to keep alive the faith of the prophets in times when the flame of faith and hope burned low. Not infrequently, they were motivated in their writings by the activities of tyrants who oppressed the people of God. They therefore tried to convey messages of hope for God's saints in dark days. Above all, they looked for the fulfilment of God's promise of a kingdom in which sin and death and sorrow would be swallowed up.

Large tracts of apocalyptic writings are written in the style of the old prophets, but especially characteristic of them are descriptions of visions received in trance or dream. Many of these visions take the form of highly coloured parables in

5 Baruch was the scribe of Jeremiah.

which angels and demons abound, and people and nations are depicted in the guise of animals. No doubt, people accustomed to reading books and hearing sermons that used this kind of symbolism would not experience our difficulty in understanding them. Probably the closest modern parallel to such a method of communication is the political cartoon, which is a fairly standard feature in the daily press of most countries. The purpose of these cartoons is the embodiment of a message relating to the concrete situations of the day. They reflect judgements on the doings and fluctuating fortunes both of national and international groups and alliances. Cartoonists often employ stereotyped symbols of people and animals to represent parties and nations, and frequently they set them in bizarre and exaggerated situations, or portray their characters in bizarre ways, in order to convey their message more plainly. Consider the following cartoon headings: "Uncle Sam and John Bull ought to shake hands"; "They cannot afford another Boston Tea Party"; and again "The American Eagle and the British Lion should woo the Russian Bear, for the Chinese Dragon is breathing fire over the nations." A cartoonist would enjoy himself and amuse his readers by giving beasts suitable faces resembling the leaders of USA, Britain, Russia, and China.

The ancient apocalyptists did something like this in their own day. Many of the symbols which they used in portraying the political powers of their times — as well as the spiritual powers which they saw behind them — were as traditional as Uncle Sam, John Bull, the Russian Bear, and the Chinese Dragon. For example, the many headed, many horned dragon of the Revelation, who in Chapter 13 is said to emerge from the sea, is none other than the sea monster of primitive Middle East religious traditions. In an ancient saga, which circulated throughout the lands of the Middle East, the sea monster was an evil spiritual power that defied the power of heaven, but finally was defeated and rendered powerless. In due time, the monster became the standing traditional symbol for evil political powers.⁶ The application of the figure to oppressor nations indicated both the nature of their evil government and their certain down-fall through the judgement of God. In the Revelation this symbol is applied to the anti-Christian empire and its ruler. Above all, it is applied to the devil who stands behind all the evil of the world.

6 For example, see Isaiah 27:1, 51:9–10, and Daniel 7:21–25.

Principles of Interpretation

Some suggested broad principles will be helpful to guide us in our interpretation of this book. Firstly, it is important to distinguish in a broad sense, between “prophecy” and “apocalypse.”⁷ Prophecy is a thrust of the Word of God into the present, summoning people to repentance and obedience, often calling for social, economic, and political justice. Apocalypse is characteristically an unveiling of the meaning of the present in the light of the final end. Whereas far too often apocalyptic literature outside the canon is a flight from history, the Revelation is a genuine attempt to interpret history, the whole sweep of history, in the light of the final end. It is an unveiling of the present relationship of the Church and the world to the Risen Christ, who will come again to consummate his reign.

Even so, it is significant that in addition to the apocalyptic form, John adopts the prophetic posture: “Thus saith the Lord.” He affirms that he is proclaiming a direct word from God to present and future generations, and not teaching (speculative) doctrine. The substantiation of John’s claim lies in the fact that his message applies to every age. It is not helpful to give particular definitive interpretations to particular visions. Because it is prophecy that John writes, it illuminates the meaning of every time and age, and affords guidance for living in every generation. This does not preclude the possibility that there may come about in the end a yet more literal fulfilment than what has been manifested previously.

Second, it is important to distinguish the Book of Revelation from other apocalyptic literature by noting the primarily canonical source material of its pictures and symbols. The language of apocalyptic literature depends to a large extent for its effectiveness and power on the fact that it draws pictures and symbols from contemporary literature, particularly from the other writings of its genre. The Revelation, however, draws its symbols and pictures from the Old and New Testaments. D. T. Niles notes that “within the four hundred and four verses of the book, there are five hundred and eighteen quotations from the Old Testament, apart from countless suggestions of it.”⁸ Likewise, there are many quotations that indicate that the writer of the book is familiar with the sayings

7 Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, 27.

8 *Ibid.*, 32.

of Jesus and the Gospel story. Whereas the study of the non-canonical books of apocalyptic literature can help us appreciate the use of dramatic pictures and symbols commonplace to a specific genre and period of history, it is to the Old and New Testaments that we must turn to understand the imagery in Revelation.

Third, the message is symbolically coded. This was partly for the purpose of ensuring secrecy. It would have greatly worsened the situation for the Church had the book explicitly mentioned Rome and fallen into Roman hands. Rome would have deemed such writings subversive. It was thus written in code and therefore unintelligible to the outsider! It was spiritual marching orders issued in code! Our problem today is to discover the code, without which much of the book will continue to remain unintelligible.

However, another reason for this symbolism is to arouse lively, emotional responses to the message. To achieve this result, John employs various devices. In the first place, he uses archetypal images with a naturally strong emotional content — for example, dragon, beast, abyss, throne, feast, horse, key, war, warrior, crown, blood, and pit. He also assaults the imagination with a tremendous array of colour — for example, a red horse, a red dragon, a scarlet beast, a woman in purple, white robes, a white throne, a white horse, golden harps, golden crowns and so forth. In the third place, he uses sound — for example, thunders, trumpets, the sound of many waters, a lion's roar, harps, hail, a multitude of song, an earthquake, a voice from the altar (the shout "Hallelujah"), the cry "Fallen is Babylon," and "Woe," the call "Come," and the announcement "It is done." Finally, he uses dramatic pictures and forms — robes dipped in blood, blood up to the bridles, drunk with the blood of the saints, fire from heaven, fire upon the altar, eyes and lamps of fire, lightning in the sky, the fallen star, the hurled mill-stone, an angel in mid heaven, a beast upon the shore, and so forth.

However, John intends his symbols to be interpreted in a distinctive way. "As John makes plain, this exuberance of symbolism offers no license for arbitrary allegorising. His symbols, to use his own word, are intended to 'signify'; that is, they should not so much be interpreted as to be allowed to awaken imagination. They are neither representative nor allegorical; but are, as it were, habitations in which the thoughts expressed dwell, and the atmosphere of the habitations is indicative of the nature of the occupants. The apocalyptic sculptor, or painter, is not so much concerned with portraying the person who sits, as with creating

an image in which the sinner's spirit can dwell. The reader is invited to visit these images and to hold converse with those who dwell in them. He cannot be a mere spectator. He must participate in the total activity. The drama is the drama of men and women in real history, and the reader too is included."⁹

The failure to take seriously that the terms used are symbols, not actual representations, as well as to logically follow the consequences of this fact, has led many commentators into error. For this reason we cannot accept the view of liberal scholars who regard the prophecies of this book as wholly concerned with the circumstances of John's day. Nor can we accept the historicist interpretation of many Reformed scholars who construe the visions as a preview of history from the time of the writer to the end of the world. Nor can we accept the future view (held in the earliest centuries and fairly widely by evangelical Christians today) which places the relevance of the visions entirely at the end of the age, largely divorcing them from the prophet's time.

The book and its visions have distinct order and form (though not chronological order). John is dealing with and interpreting real historic fact. He wrote for the churches under his pastoral care with a practical situation in view, that is, the imminent possibility of the popular Caesar worship of his day being imposed on all Christians. Grasping the spiritual issues involved, John saw the logical consequence of this imposition, with mankind divided between obedience to Christ and obedience to anti-Christ. John saw the real correspondence between the crises in his day and the last great crises of the world which would inevitably come about. Just as the Church in John's day was faced with a devastating persecution by Rome, so will the Church of the last days find itself violently attacked and persecuted by the prevailing world power. The outcome of that final struggle, as of every other previous struggle, will be the coming of Christ in Glory and the establishment of the Kingdom of God in power. Christ is "at hand" and will ever be "at hand" until finally he comes in a way in which "every eye will see him." The message of this book has within it a past, present, and future reference, and its message is for every age.

The fourth guiding principle of interpretation is an understanding of the specific meanings of John's symbols. For example, John intends eyes for vision,

9 Ibid., 29.

horn for power, and *white* for purity. He also uses numbers with given meanings. This numerology, largely rooted in Jewish story and history, is fairly simple and can be easily set out:¹⁰ *two* is the symbol for "adequate witness"; *three* for completeness; *four* for anything that concerns the earth (earth is thought of as a square with four corners); *five* for smallness; *six* for sin; *seven* for "perfection," or perfect unity in diversity (three and one half is the symbol of imperfection, or evil perfection); *ten* for fullness, or completeness achieved in aggregation (not integration as with *seven*); *twelve* for the Church; *twenty-four* (i.e., twice twelve) is the symbol for the continuous Church of God through Old and New Testament times; *ten thousand times ten thousand* for an innumerable number, a vast host; and 666 is the symbol for a trinity of evil.

This last symbol requires further comment. The principle of interpretation is, as John says, that of counting. In the Hebrew and Greek alphabets each letter had a certain numerical value. It was common practice in John's day to add the numerical value of the several letters of a name and to use the total as a symbol of that name. This type of calculation was known as *gematria*. John says that 666 is the number of the beast. He also says it is the number of a man. The beast then is sin personified. He is 666. We can note that by counting up the numerical value of the letters we can get both the word "therion" (the Greek word for beast), and also "Nero Caesar," the terrible and cruel persecutor of the Early Church.

However, I suggest that we should not press the name of any one person too closely. For the real meaning of 666 would appear to be deeper. 666 is a trinity of evil that falls short of the Holy Trinity of 777 (7 being the number of perfection and 6 the symbol for sin). In this case, 666 is a trinity of evil imitating the Holy Trinity. As each 6 falls short of 7, so all the plagues (6 seals plus 1, 6 trumpets plus 1, 6 bowls of wrath plus 1) are not complete in themselves. They are held in the hand of God. In spite of appearances, God rules over all the chaos of the world. Evil does not have the final mastery. The victory and triumph is the Lord's. The Revelation is a very uplifting book; it is a great encouragement to faith.

10 Ibid., 30.

Revelation is the Unveiling of Jesus Christ

This is the significance of the first verse in chapter one. God was veiled, hidden, in the Incarnation. God the Son came among us in such a fashion that the full glory of his divine majesty was veiled in the humanity of Jesus. God was concealed in Jesus behind his flesh and suffering. In this book he will be unveiled; the curtain will be drawn aside. Although the working of the cross is still veiled to the outward eye, God is, even now, overruling the world and its sin. Until we have seen in the Spirit Jesus Christ in the unveiled richness of his glory, we cannot understand this book.

In chapter 1 we are given a vision of Jesus Christ. It is the same Jesus about whom we read in the Gospels. Yet, how different! Now he is transfigured and seen in the full power of his Resurrection. John seeks to write what he sees. He reaches out after all sorts of symbols and pictures to try to convey the full reality of Christ, but words fail him and he falls down as one dead. He worships him who stands before him in the full blaze of his holiness and majesty. Behind the thunder of the trumpets is heard the immortal, gracious voice of him who spoke like no other man. This is the same Jesus of Galilee and Judea, of the cross and empty tomb.

This unveiling of Jesus Christ means an unveiling of history which has already been invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. "Apocalypse" means the tearing aside of the veil to reveal the decisive conquest of organic evil by the Incarnate Son of God. It means the unveiling of the new creation, as yet hidden from our eyes, behind the ugly shape of sinful history. There is to be a new creation which is the outworking of the cross in the teeth of all the principalities and powers of darkness. In the advent presence of Jesus Christ, there is to be a new heaven and a new earth. God is in complete control. He governs the course of history. When Jesus Christ comes at the last, we shall see with our eyes that which we see now only by faith.

Order and Outline of the Book

As this unveiling is unfolded, John's description follows a distinct order. That order, I believe, has been presented and largely shaped by the worship of God's

people in the Feast of Tabernacles. Only someone whose whole mind and being had been steeped in, and shaped by, the worship of God and by the Feast of Tabernacles, could have presented his revelation and message in this particular order and form. We can learn an immense amount about the worship of the Church in John's day from this book, but we cannot enlarge on that here. The design and pattern of it are themselves part of what the book is about. Its message is also in the form in which that message is articulated.

In addition to the introductory and concluding passages, there are three main sections.¹¹ Below is the general outline with the main sections and their principal themes:

Introduction: The title of the book, the address, greetings, preface, and statement of contents (1:1-11).

Section 1: The Lord and his Church — Christ's Person is unveiled (1:1 2-3:22).

Section 2: The Lord and his world — Christ's Purpose is unveiled (4:1-11:19).

Section 3: Christ as Lord of all — Christ's Power is unveiled (12:1-22:5).

Conclusion: The Seven Last Words (22:6-21).

Each of the three main sections opens with a Christophany, a vision of Jesus Christ. The first section begins with a vision of the Lord, the Bridegroom of the Church. The vision is followed by what the Bridegroom has to say to his Bride. He calls her to love and fidelity, and warns her against entanglement with false lovers. The complement to the vision of the Bridegroom at the beginning of the book is the vision of the Bride with which the book comes to its conclusion.

The second section begins with a vision of the Lamb amidst the throne. Here in this vision the hymn of redemption is already heard and the revealing of the sons of God is already sure. The Lamb has redeemed a people unto himself, and the Book of Life with their names written in it is already in God's hand. The Book is not yet open. Though Heaven's joy is the joy of certainty, it is also a joy in anticipation. Fulfilment comes only as the seals are broken. This fulfilment is the inner meaning of the judgements of God, for his judgements are also

11 Ibid., 97-98.

a call for repentance. Moreover, they are the means by which the remnant is gathered. The gathering of the remnant is one of the themes of Scripture in its treatment of history. As each age comes to its harvest, not only is it overtaken by judgement, but that judgement also discloses those who are the sons of God. It is this disclosure which mediates God's call to the world to repent. The "sons of God" suffer with and for the world, and in their suffering stand revealed. Those who repent because of them bear witness that "by their stripes we are healed."

Again and again in the course of human history events take place which correspond to the happenings that John portrays. Indeed, the simple fact that the happenings in Revelation have been identified with event after event through the centuries is ample proof of the sureness with which John understood the principles that determine the divine governance of the world, and of the appositeness of the symbols which he employs. The Kingdom of God is something which has come, is coming, and is to come, with the promise of fulfilment in the future when the "Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ."

The third section is a vision of the birth of Christ. Here we have a transition from that situation in which people face both the judgement and mercy of God into a situation in which God is seen in an active war with evil. God wars with the monsters, the trinity of evil, and overthrows them. The harvest of human history is reaped, and the great city in which people become adulterous and idolatrous is destroyed. In the midst of lamentations of people at the passing away of so much that they held dear, there comes down from heaven the eternal city into which have been gathered the honour and riches of the nations. Faith leaps across the chasms of time and sees the end-event as immediate and near.

Let us now go back and look a little more closely at the second and third sections, and select some of the important themes. In chapter 4 John looks through an opened door into heaven, and he sees things which shall be hereafter. He sees the throne of God and all history, like a sea, stretched out before him, smooth as glass. Today, history is like a boisterous, stormy sea, out of which emerge frightening creatures, evil creatures like those we read about in Daniel. But John sees history now as calm as glass. The Almighty Eternal God is Lord of all history and Lord of the universe. He is worshipped and adored by twenty-four elders representing the Old and New Testament Church, and by four creatures

representing all creation. The whole of creation is tamed and redeemed and now worships and adores Him who is on the throne. These are things which must be hereafter. What a tremendous message of triumph for a persecuted Church!

In chapter 5 we look back behind the process of history. We stand, as it were, at the beginning of time, and we see the unfolding of the drama of redemption. There is a book in Heaven in the midst of the throne. It is the Book of Destiny, a volume of ordered history and divine purpose written by God's hand in love and righteousness. No one, except the Lamb, can open the book. It is sealed with the seals of Almighty God. Only the Lamb of God can unravel the secret of human existence and the riddle of human history. What a tremendous vision we have here of the centrality of Christ and the Power of the Lamb. Christ, through his death and Resurrection, alone holds the key to all our lives, the key to history and to the universe.

There follows in chapter 6 the breaking of the six seals of the Book of Destiny by the Lamb of God. The first four reveal horses in the following order: the white horse, which is anti-Christ; a red horse, representing war; a black horse, representing food rationing; a pale horse, representing death and hell. The fifth seal reveals the Church that is persecuted in the world and cries out, "Lord, how long?", and, at the same time, it is clothed with the purity and righteousness of Christ. With the sixth seal there is both a heaven-quake and an earthquake. The astonishing thing is not only the earthquake, but the heaven-quake. This is a cosmic event. A movement runs through the whole universe. Even the stars are loosed from their courses. There is an upheaval among the spiritual powers. The world of spirit is shaken to its depths, and principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places become unseated and dislodged. This is the wrath of the Lamb in response to the cry of his Church. God cares for his Church and responds at once to the prayers of his people.

Six seals of the Book of Destiny in the hand of God have now been broken. One more, the seventh, remains to be broken. Before that happens there is recounted a pause in chapter 7 between the events of the sixth and seventh seals. It is a pause not so much in world events as in the progress of the vision, when we are given a look behind the scenes of history and catch a glimpse of God's angel holding back the storms and tempests and afflictions about to break on the earth in all their fury until other angels seal the servants of God with his

protecting grace. In the Gospel story of Jesus and his disciples in the boat, the winds and the waves obeyed only the Saviour of men. It is the same here. There is absolutely nothing that happens in this world but God, in Christ Jesus, governs it and uses it in the purpose of his grace. The four winds from the four corners of the earth cannot blow and vent their rage as they like, but only as they are made to serve the Church of Jesus Christ. Christ's sovereign rule, and his love and protection of his Church, is the recurring emphasis of this book.

In chapter 8 the seventh seal is broken, and there is a ghastly silence in Heaven for half an hour in which the whole of creation seems to choke and swallow its breath in terror and awe. But the end is not yet. The last seal reveals still more aspects and involutions of world history. Out of the seventh seal there come seven angels with seven trumpets. The final woe breaks up into seven more. Here we have, in part at least, a repetition of the first seven series of visions and a repetition from a new angle, where God's judgement descends on all creation, as well as on men and women.

Before the first angel with the trumpet sounds, we are made to see further and deeper into the secrets of God. We are shown two things. First, John shows us that though for a time the dark powers of the world seem to triumph over the cause of God, the real power behind the world is the prayer of God's people mixed with the fire of God. John tells us that he saw the angel take the censor which was filled with the prayers of the saints, kindle it with fire from God's altar, and cast it on the earth. With that there were voices, thundering and lightning, and an earthquake. Then the seven angels began to sound their trumpets one after the other and to let loose seven plagues on the earth. From that it is clear that the real cause of the world's disturbance is the prayer of the Church mixed with the fire of God. The Church may be small and persecuted, but its prayers mixed with the fire of God shake and disturb the world. What an exhilarating message! What comfort for Christ's suffering Church!

Surely we in the Church today need to understand afresh the power of prayer. It is through prayer that the Spirit of God comes upon the Church in tongues of fire. It is through prayer that Satan falls like lightning to the ground. It is through prayer that the voice of the Gospel thunders through clouds of darkness. It is prayer that causes earthquakes and shakes history to its very foundations. That is the deep secret of God's Book of Destiny and the first fact revealed in

the opening of the seventh seal. Jesus Christ came not only to bring peace but a sword. He came to cast fire on the earth. All history is tortured by that fire burning at its heart. All history moves at the impulse of prayer. The real initiative of history is held by the prayers of the saints and the fire of God mixed with their prayers.

The second thing that John sees in these chapters is that the rest of mankind refuses to repent, even to its own eternal hurt.

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the period between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Again we have a pause. Here we have an angel with a little book. This is a vision of the open Bible, the sovereign power of the written Word. John, like the rest of the Church, must eat the book. He must preach it, finding it both sweet and bitter. It is bitter because the preaching of it encounters trouble and persecution on the earth. How frequently a preacher today is tempted to hold back the Word of God because of the trouble it may cause. He is a peace-loving creature, yet the Word of God must come forth. It is God's fire. That is what Jeremiah found in the Old Testament.

John envisages a time when the outer courts of the Church's witness will be ravaged and trodden underfoot by unbelievers, and when the Church, ravaged and harrowed, will shrink to measurable proportions. Its worshippers will be able to live and bear witness only in sackcloth, which in this context means repentance. This is the moment of the Church's supreme power over mankind. An unreformed, unrepentant Church loses its grip over the world and quenches the Holy Spirit. A repentant Church is full of power. Such a repentant Church, with her prayer kindled by the fire of God, and with the mighty Word of God in her mouth, will seize such a hold upon the world that at last the great dragon will be raised from his abysmal lair and seek to destroy her as he tried to destroy her Lord.

The seventh angel sounds and a voice proclaims, "The kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of God and his Christ." With this we move on to the third section of the book.

In chapter 12 we have another panoramic view of world history, but this time from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. It is the same expanse of time or history that lies before us. Now, however, we look at it all from a higher dimension. God is actively at war with evil. Again we look right into Heaven and

see something of the eternal purposes of God and the way in which he works out the redemption of mankind through the ages. The child Jesus is born of a woman. Here we have a retelling of the story of the Incarnation within an apocalyptic setting. The woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet is symbolic of Israel appearing before the gaze of the world as the great miraculous sign of God's intervention in humanity. She comes standing upon the reflected light of the Old Testament revelation, and she is clothed with the New Testament revelation which is as the sun shining in its strength. Out of this Israel of God there is born the Saviour who is Christ the Lord. There is war between God and the dragon as it launches its desperate attacks to destroy the child and God's purpose of Redemption.

The dragon is many headed; it keeps cropping up in history in many new guises. It deceives the world, and it accuses the brethren, the servants of God, keeping up that accusation day and night. John sees, however, that the servants of God overcome the devil, the dragon, by the blood of the Lamb, by the Word of their testimony, and because they love not their lives unto death. Here is faith.

In chapter 13 John gazes through the open door of heaven and looks down on earth where he sees two more monsters: the beast and the prophet. The beast is the earthly counterpart of the dragon, or the devil. John sees its embodiment in the totalitarian state of his day. This monster of evil actually dares to imitate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He displays a mortal wound that has been healed, and all the world wonders after him, bewitched by his miraculous powers and hypnotised by his Christian likeness. The beast is accompanied and served by the prophet, another monster of evil who pretends to be a lamb but speaks like a dragon. As the false prophet, he is the propaganda power of evil. Perhaps John is thinking of the powerful and popular call to Caesar worship. Together with the dragon, the beast and the prophet make up a demonic trinity of evil, seeking to imitate the Holy Trinity. This evil trinity has a name and a mark — 666.

In chapter 14 we see the triumph of the Gospel. Here we see those who have not worshipped the beast, the first-fruits of the harvest of the world, God's harvest. How desperately urgent it is for people to repent before Christ comes to reap his harvest. For that which is not of the harvest will be trodden under and cast out. Surely the Church today needs to recover this note of urgency in

her proclamation of the Gospel. If the Church has lost its note of urgency and anguished constraint, surely it is because it has detached the love of God from the judgement of God and failed to fully understand God's action in Christ at the Cross.

Chapters 15 and 16 are about the wrath of the Lamb. After the third interlude, seven angels pour out each of their bowls of wrath upon the earth. The angels issue in solemn procession from the sanctuary, where those who gained the victory in Christ sing the song of Moses and the Lamb and worship the Lord. The angels are the ministers, not of mere vengeance, but of the stern justice that is the counterpart of divine love.

This third series of calamities is not meant to be taken separately from the previous two, but all three are superimposed upon one another. With the seven seals and the seven trumpets we discovered that behind the outward fashion of history and its parade of evil powers the real forces were the power of the cross, the Word of God, the prayers of the saints, and the testimony of God's people. Now we see that shot through them all are the judgements of God upon people's defiant pride and godlessness. From this angle, the history of the world is seen to be the history of God's judgement upon it.

In chapters 17 and 18 we again see the trinity of evil: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. The dragon is John's apocalyptic way of describing the devil. The beast is the entrenchment of that power in the passions of men. It is the devil's human embodiment on earth. The false prophet is the devil's messiah whose lying spirit seduces the nations. In the climax of divine judgement, the trinity of evil is revealed to be the emergence in history of Babylon all over again, in which the nations of the earth are gathered up and united in one great empire. Now, to the sorrow of the nations, Babylon is overthrown.

Sometimes John speaks of Babylon as a wicked woman flirting with the nations; sometimes as a woman sitting upon the many waters of the nations, or upon a scarlet beast. Who, or what, is Babylon today? Though there is much that is baffling in all this welter of symbol and apocalyptic image, we can say that Babylon is the worship of the world, the deification of economic power and worldly security. It represents human collectivity in its pride and defiance of God. It is finally overthrown by God and swept away.

In chapters 19–22 we see how the great day of the Lord will dawn, when all the holy aspirations and holy yearnings of God’s creatures, when all the snatches of triumphant singing shall reach their fulfilment in a magnificent paean of praise and victory as history breaks into eternity, as the Word of God rides forth in complete sovereignty over all.

In chapter 19 we have the triumphant song of praise to Christ our King, together with the proclamation telling of the marriage of the Lamb and his Church, which is now perfected and arrayed in Christ’s righteousness. We also see the final overthrow of the beast and the false prophet who are thrown into the lake of eternal fire.¹²

Chapter 20 is perhaps, for many people, the most difficult in the book.¹³ It has to do with the prelude to eternity, which is mysteriously bound up with a thousand years. Again we need to remind ourselves that these are apocalyptic visions, not history. The thousand years is symbolic of a period of time, just as the 1,260 days in Revelation 11:3 and the three and a half days in Revelation 11:11 are not to be taken literally but are symbolic of a period of time. I believe that the thousand years is the period of time stretching from the first to the final advent of Christ.

Ever since the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, the powers of evil have been defeated. Satan, the strong man in the parable,¹⁴ has been bound. Christ Jesus has the devil on a chain. Satan is alive and dangerous, but he can do nothing without our Lord’s permission. All power is in the hands of Christ. Christ holds the Book of Destiny. He controls everything, despite present outward appearances. That means that Christians, even now,

12 Here we may note that the Book of Revelation, despite its great use of symbolism, regards time as real, both for salvation and for judgement. There is time beyond death, time for the righteous in Christ and also for the damned.

13 Difficulty arises when people accept the symbolism of the earlier part of the Book of Revelation and accept that 1,260 days and three and half days are symbolic periods of time, and then mistakenly proceed to interpret a thousand years, and what follows, literally. The result of such mistaken interpretation has led to various dispensational theories.

14 See Matthew 12:28–29, Mark 3:23–27, and Luke 11:21–22.

although they are being persecuted, share in his victory over the world. They share in the triumph of the Resurrection.

All evil will be brought to a head, a final climax. So John tells us of a final desperate attempt on the part of Satan to delude the nations in the four quarters of the earth, from which he will gather them to battle against the Lord. In that ultimate spasm of wickedness, the devil will try his utmost to crush all that is of Christ. However, he will not succeed — he will be cast into the lake of fire.

In 20:11 a great white throne appears in Heaven, and the final judgement begins, which brings evil to its fulfilment and to its utter and absolute end.

In chapters 21 and 22 we are given visions of the eternal Kingdom. It is infinitely glorious and wonderful. There is a new Heaven and a new earth. Christ's glorious reign is manifest and complete.

In verse 19 of chapter 22 we also have this warning: "And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." It is a remarkable promise! I believe that it should not only apply to the book of Revelation but to the whole Word of God as witnessed to in all Scripture.

As we have seen, the Book of Revelation is a prophetic word of the Lord to each generation of the Church. It is in full, harmonious continuity with the rest of Holy Scripture. In its joyful declaration of the victory of Jesus, the Lamb of God, over death and the devil, it speaks to our deepest questions and concerns. There is absolutely nothing that happens in this world but God, in Jesus Christ, governs it and uses it in the purpose of his grace. In his advent presence there is to be a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation which is the outworking of the cross in the teeth of all the principalities and powers of darkness. The Kingdom of God is something which has come, is coming, and is to come, with the future promise that the "Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ." As such, it is a truly uplifting book and a great encouragement to faith. Would that God grant us ears to hear such an exhilarating and comforting message, and may we continue to wrestle with it prayerfully in openness to the boundless riches and blessings which are already ours in Christ.

***PRAYER AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST IN THE
REFORMED TRADITION, by Graham Redding***

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In a recent work, *Why Priests?*, a prominent American intellectual, Garry Wills, argued not only that Christian priesthood is "a failed tradition" but also that the Letter to the Hebrews went astray in recognizing the priesthood of Christ himself. "A polished writer" but no "profound thinker," the author of Hebrews produced "flimsy," "capricious," and even "fallacious" arguments in presenting Christ as "a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek."

One can and should take issue with Wills over various dubious claims: for instance, that, among the books of the New Testament, Hebrews stands alone in recognizing Christ as priest. Without explicitly using the title, the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Romans imply that priesthood. 1 Timothy 2:5 famously states that "there is one mediator between Christ and humankind, Christ Jesus." When Hebrews also names Christ as "mediator," Wills undercuts priestly implications by proposing to translate *mesitēs* as "guarantor."

But, rather than engage in debate with Wills over details, we would be advised to follow Graham Redding in reflecting on Christ's priesthood in the context of worship. He first explores ways in which the mediatorial role of Christ's priesthood has been understood (or misunderstood and/or marginalized) in the early church and then in the Reformed tradition. A careful examination of various (Reformed) Eucharistic liturgies shows how an adequate doctrine of Christ's mediatorial priesthood has often been absent or at least obscured. The modern liturgical renewal in the West has, however, helped to renew a sense of the way in which the priesthood of Christ is enshrined in the public prayer life of the church and, above all, in the Eucharistic liturgy.

Redding argues convincingly that, unless Christ's priesthood is properly appreciated, Eucharistic worship remains confused and impoverished. That priesthood must be expressed liturgically if the public prayer of the church is to function as it should — through conscious participation in the eternal offering Christ makes of himself (in the Spirit) to the Father. Thus Redding rightly recognizes the role Christ's priesthood plays for trinitarian faith and practice. Founded in the incarnation itself, this priesthood makes it possible for the church to pray to the Father, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. In short, appreciating Christ's priesthood opens us to a properly trinitarian conception of our common prayer.

Redding is surely right in pointing out the harm done to the worshipping life of the church where a proper doctrine of Christ's priesthood is missing. Worship can become more and more dependent upon the talents and personality of the minister or priest who leads the congregation in prayer.

Redding reaches his conclusions by a critical examination of the Reformed tradition, especially as found in the Church of Scotland. But he is rightly convinced that his conclusions can be applied to other Christian bodies. In the Roman Catholic Church, it was no accident that, even if much more attention should still be paid to the priesthood of Christ, the liturgical reform has gone hand in hand with some renewed sense of his priesthood. Witness the first document promulgated by the Second Vatican Council, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*). It insists that the liturgy "is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ." Every liturgical celebration is "an action of Christ the priest and of his body, which is the church" (art. 7).

Redding focusses on the life of the church at prayer — and especially on a theme wonderfully developed by Tom Torrance, the need for conscious participation in the eternal self-offering of the risen and ascended Christ. But Christ has exercised and continues to exercise his priesthood not only for members of the church who assemble for worship but also for the wider world. Is he not high priest also for all human beings, many of whom may never have heard his name?

Sacrosanctum Concilium stated: "'Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, when he assumed a human nature, introduced into this land of exile the hymn that in heaven is sung throughout the ages. He unites the whole community of humankind with himself and associates it with him in

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singing the divine canticle of praise" (art. 83). Earlier the same document had taught that the risen Christ is present "when the church prays and sings" (art. 7). Now *Sacrosanctum Concilium* sums up this singing as "one divine canticle of praise," led by the incarnate, high-priestly Cantor. He joins with himself not only the church but also "the whole community of humankind" in singing a heavenly hymn that he has brought to earth. This picture vividly presents Christ the High Priest as joining with himself, in virtue of his incarnation, all human beings without exception, including millions who go through life without ever hearing his name. Without consciously knowing this, they belong to his cosmic chorus and are constantly affected by his priestly work.

In short, Christ is priest not only for the church but also for the whole world. In a forthcoming article in the *Irish Theological Quarterly* I develop this theme and would cherish the chance of discussing it with Graham Redding. In the meantime let me express my admiration for his impressive and constructive study of Christ's priesthood.

WHEN BLIND MEN FACE THE LIGHT

John 9.1-38

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Last December I went up to the North Carolina mountains for three days of solitude at the beginning of Advent. I'm a bit of a hermit, so I packed up a box of books, and my schedule for each day was a reading list and stoking the fire every 30 minutes. An intended three-day retreat extended to five days after a foot of snow covered the region. I didn't mind the additional solitude and reading time, as I was becoming pleasantly acquainted with some new friends in the communion of saints through their books — T. F. Torrance and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, to name a few. Enriching as those hours were listening to the wisdom of marvelous teachers, I also felt inclined to bear witness to the beauty of creation and the splendor of winter all around me. Just before I left I had thrown our camera in the car, so I decided this would be a great moment to try my hand at photography, which I've always wanted to do.

As I finished an hour's walk, there were a few pictures in particular I couldn't wait to upload. When the pictures uploaded, I was mildly disappointed that some of my favorite scenes were much smaller. My memory recalled that the field of vision had been wider when taking pictures, but the camera didn't lie. I had cropped the field of vision without even knowing it. There was only one explanation for the diminished image: my eyes had not been trained to see through the lens I was given.

As the disciples walk with Jesus outside of the Temple in Jerusalem, it becomes apparent that their eyes have not been trained to see the world through the lens that Jesus has given them — the Kingdom of God. They happen upon a man who was blind from birth and their question reveals their diminished vision:

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“Who sinned? his parents or the man himself?” One question, two options, an entire life diminished, trimmed, and reduced. But Jesus sees a cropped picture — a prescribed frame much too small for a man born in the image of God. Their frame cut out the possibility for the in-breaking Light of God.

Jesus and his disciples are looking at the same man, but the disciples’ frame for the blind man’s life is limited by the parameters of the old order of creation. What are the parameters of the old order of creation? “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”¹ A man blind from birth must be some expression of divine retribution. This logic of the old order controls the disciples’ conversation. It is a conversation, no less, happening from a safe distance where one can speak *about* the blind man without speaking *to* him.

Jesus does not accept the logic of the old order of creation, with its diminishing parameters, nor does he keep the objective distance that this “theological” conversation observes. Jesus cannot stay stationary and continue this theological debate. He is the Light of the world, and it is the very behavior of light to be in motion, to cast out darkness wherever it may be found.

Within the past 150 years scientists such as Albert Einstein have devoted a tremendous amount of study to the properties of light. Through the work of theologians such as T. F. Torrance, we see that Einstein’s scientific work related to light has many places of correspondence with Christian theology. Einstein discovered that light has a unique status in our universe because of its constancy. The more that Einstein and other scientists studied the properties of light, they discovered that light is never stationary. Light is always in motion.²

Those patterns of motion in creation have their origin in the mind of the Maker. When the Creator comes to earth to re-create his world, the Light of the world will be known through the persons He illuminates. What is the nature of light? To cast out the darkness. The world was created when the Creator separated light from darkness in the beginning. When darkness invaded human hearts and subjected creation in weakness, the Creator entered his creation to dispel darkness so that a new creation might begin.

1 See Matt. 5.28 (English Standard Version).

2 T. F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 98.

This is precisely what John wants us to experience as we hear the story of a man blind from birth receiving his sight. Whether in the first century or the 21st century, this healing is a signpost for all to see, directing us to the heart and mission of God; that is, God's greatest desire is the restoration of everything and everyone He has created. The mission of Jesus is a new beginning, a new creation. All we must do is recognize that we have no light in ourselves. And that is why this blind man is the perfect candidate for the in-breaking of God's divine Light.

Because Jesus is the Light of the world, and because the nature of light is motion, we see Jesus move. He turns away from a static, stale conversation and faces this living, breathing son of Adam in a dynamic encounter. Observe how Jesus heals this man. It seems bizarre — a combination of Jesus' saliva and dirt applied as a putty of mud over his eyes. Why does Jesus heal this way? Perhaps we could answer this question with another question: when is the first time we see God with his hands in the dirt? "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."³ And with his hands in the dust of Jerusalem's ground, Jesus reveals his unity with the Creator God *as the Son of God*, who begins a new creation. St. John Chrysostom said that the Creator who brought together worlds out of nothing could have restored sight with any material (e.g. mud).⁴ But Jesus chose this manner of healing to show that He was making all things new — the blind will see, eyes will be opened to behold the glory of God. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."⁵

It seems so odd that we aren't given the name of this blind man given the length of this story, but make no mistake, no square inch of John's Gospel is accidental. John is too much of an artist to overlook details. There is a reason that John doesn't tell us the name of the man born blind, now healed. We've seen John do this before: remember the unnamed woman that Jesus encounters at the

3 Gen. 2.7 (ESV).

4 St. John Chrysostom, "Homily LVI," in *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 14, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 200-203, reference on 202.

5 John 1.5 (ESV).

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well. When a name is withheld, we're meant to see the universal, representative nature of these characters. Like the woman at the well, we are all adulterers by means of the idolatries within our hearts. Here a man born blind is presented to us so that we will recognize the truth he represents about every person: we are all blind.

So now we also find the reason that this passage is read in the Lenten season. When we read this story in Lent, we particularly notice the Pharisees, blinded by their self-confidence, discipline, and devotion to the Law. Pharisees are convinced that because they have been given the light of the Law, they see the truth about God more than others. The whole project of the Pharisees was to build a system of rules so that they would never transgress the Law of Moses. In a sense, they built this fence around the Law to eliminate any blind spots within their souls. But the desire to protect themselves from a blind spot through *their own effort* was itself a blind spot. Jesus plainly declares to the Pharisees later in John 9.41 that "because you say 'we see,' your guilt remains."

Could you go home this week and ask the person who knows you best, "What is the most obvious blind spot in my heart?" If you cannot ask that question, you are shutting out the Light of God. But in the presence of a gentle brother or sister and the merciful Spirit of God, entering that conversation may plunge you into the Pool of Siloam. It seems silly to have mud on your eyes and walk into a pool. But that's the step of faith. Who wants to ask, "What are the blind spots within my heart?" The person who wants to see; the disciple who is tired of walking in the dark, who is desperate for God's new creation; the one who desires mercy, healing, and cleansing. Your brother or sister is a gift to you to help you see the Light of God breaking through darkness, healing our blindness, and making all things new.

In the fall of 2005, my Sunday morning routine was to travel a circuit around Gateshead, England, leading between two to three services at two to three different churches. After three weeks of this routine, I noticed a small man, not even 5 feet tall, walking the same roads I was driving. About fifteen minutes into the first Sunday service I would see this man find a seat in my church, his face reddened by the brisk northeastern winds. A few hours later I would see him at my final morning stop, church no. 3, sitting quietly, a lone worshipper in his pew. During tea time following the service, I introduced myself. "Alan's my name," he

said. When I saw Alan up close for the first time, it became apparent he suffered from several physical afflictions. Whether his condition was a complication from birth, I cannot be sure, but clearly his condition diminished his height, disfigured some facial features, and left him legally blind. Gateshead is a vertical city. And every Sunday morning a blind man was navigating her steep ascents to find his way into worship.

By November my Sunday routine had changed a bit, and I would pick up Alan on my way to services. One of the first things Alan shared with me was how old he was. "I'm 20,700 days old, Jack." For those of us still on an annual calendar, Alan was in his 50s when I met him. But then he told me that everything changed for him in 1986. The Spirit of God moved in Alan's heart, giving his life a new beginning. That's when Alan's feet began pounding the pavement, climbing Gateshead's streets. If I thought I was something special, I learned quickly that Alan wasn't coming to see me. On Sundays he would worship at one of my churches, but by the time Sunday came around, he had already been to Mass at the Catholic parish church on Saturday night *and* Wednesday evening. When I dropped him off on Sunday, he would be headed out that evening for another worship service not my own. I wanted to make a difference in the churches I served. But Alan just wanted to worship — a lot. That little blind man was moving toward the Light of Jesus more than anyone I met in Gateshead, myself included. The steps he numbered each week equaled the days of his life, and with every step a blind man was teaching me how to see. When I think of Alan now, I pray, "Oh for a pure, fervent heart to worship the Lord."

I began these reflections with a story about what happens when I trust my own vision — beautiful images are left out. But it's right to close with a story about what happens when God guides our vision. Many of you are celebrating what is becoming known among American Anglicans as "The Miracle of Jericho."⁶ For those of you who haven't seen this video, a cameraman captured footage of a dramatic performance of a Gospel scene on a sunny day in Jericho. The performance took place on a hillside overlooking the Jericho valley. Ten of our congregation's members were present at this site. A singular vertical beam of light wasn't perceived by anyone present, but that light beam appeared in the

6 Brad Root, "The Miracle of Jericho," <http://www.anglicanchurch.net/?/main/page/211>

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final edited footage, intersecting a Jericho road in the shape of a cross. No eyewitnesses, the cameraman included, saw the vertical beam of light with their eyes at the moment of filming. But when our eyes are fixed on the Gospel, God breaks through with his heavenly Light and our eyes are opened. The Gospel story being performed on the video? Another story of Jesus healing a man suffering from blindness.

The Light of the world has come. While it is still day, let us face the Light so that he may heal our blindness and reveal the glory of his love, manifested by the Light of the Cross. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“GUARD YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS”

First John 5:13-15, 18-21

3 June 2012, Trinity Sunday

The Rev. David J. Webster

Concord Presbyterian Church

Knoxville, TN

Abstract: *The following sermon was the final in a series on 1 John, an epistle concerned with the relational and personal nature of God and God’s people. While we may not worship gold statues anymore, contemporary theology’s bend toward non-traditional Trinitarian language dangerously heads down the path of idolatry by ignoring the personal and relational nature of the Trinitarian God. Such a pathway leads to the frightening possibility of being unable to know God at all. The Gospel proclaimed by the Apostle John, and echoed by the late T. F. Torrance, points toward a radically personal and relational God who has revealed himself to humankind as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

Over two thousand people had gathered together in Minneapolis, MN to worship and reflect on the nature of God. Those gathered represented twenty-seven different nations, and most of the major denominations — Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and even Baptists.¹ Some saw the event as a beautiful representation of God’s people coming together in the name of God. Others saw it differently. And they saw it differently precisely because they could not agree with the name of God being used.

This event of which I speak was the 1993 conference “Re-Imagining God, Community and the Church.” The event’s organizers sought to make an explicit

¹ James Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity, Downers Grove: 1996), 96.

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call for new images of God to express the concerns of women. When they looked out on society and even the church they saw a male dominated world.

On the surface, their intentions were not terribly problematic — God is neither male nor female. Yet, even in the twenty-first century some in the church and society continue to treat women condescendingly, treating them as inferior to men. This conference, however, did not involve this kind of soft feminism. This was not some attempt to simply remind Christians of the equal status of women and men in the eyes of God. It was, literally, an attempt to re-imagine God.

The new language proposed for God not only stripped the traditional Father/Son language, but infused such names as to barely make the triune God recognizable to anyone. For instance, rather than Father, Son, and Spirit, they might encourage Mother, Child, and Womb. More common was simply to refer to the feminine name *Sophia* — the Greek word for “wisdom.” In many circles today, it has even become the norm to refer to the Triune God as the “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” The newly proposed “names” for God at the conference created widespread concern throughout churches in 1993, and it ought to concern us today, as well.

The only true and living God is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. And God is not simply *Father*, but always “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The relationship between the Father and Son always takes primacy over the relationship between the Creator and the created.² We call God our *Father* because the Holy Spirit has united us to Jesus Christ, who gives us the privilege of claiming God as our Father. We do not call God *Father* because God is male or because we are projecting our dreams of what a father should be like onto God. We call God *Father* because God the Father is the Father of Jesus Christ. Where the Son is, we always find the Father — the names of *Father* and *Son* refer to who God actually *is* in the relationships within the triune God’s self.³

2 T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (T&T Clark, London: 1995), 49.

3 “Thus Christian theology makes proper use of the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ to speak of God as he is in himself, when it allows them to refer imagelessly to relations eternally inherent in God which are in their uncreated transcendent form the creative ground of what on our creaturely level of existence we are meant to understand by ‘father’/‘son’ relations in human being” (ibid., 71).

Now, we do need to be fair to those who wish to re-name God *Sophia* or some other feminine name. Scripture does use some feminine metaphors for God, but these are only metaphors and not proper names. We also need to remember that feminine images are not the only ways we attempt to “re-imagine” God. Sometimes in the church’s history it has emphasized a fatherhood of God and the forceful power of God so much, that it has neglected the Son and the Spirit. When this happens, it does result in a “re-imagined” masculine God just as problematic as a “re-imagined” feminine God.⁴

This kind of masculine God has its own problems. Upon this God are often projected ideals of power and authority. This results in a God similar to the gods of the ancient Greeks. Gods like Zeus and Apollo rule with forceful and arbitrary wills, manipulating the lives of humans. Humans, then, are left to groveling at the feet of these impersonal, distant, and masculine gods. Neither this masculine God nor the feminine God is the true God.

The living God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To call God anything else is to replace God’s revealed name for our own name for God. In other words, to “re-imagine” God is to “re-create God” in our image. We become the creators, and God becomes the created. God becomes an idol crafted in our own image — our own ideals of who we would like God to be.

The assumption of the conference goers and others who want to rename God is that ultimately we cannot know God — that God is completely unknown and that it really doesn’t matter how we talk about God, as long as we believe in this thing we call God. To know him (or her!), you simply need to look deep within yourself and your life experiences to find language and images with which to describe the divine and your religious experiences.⁵

This is convenient if you want to run your life the way you want and not deal with the living God. When you can claim an unknown God, you can fill in the blanks of who you want or think God should be like. Even if you do not intend to project your dreams and ideals onto God, this often happens anyway when you believe God cannot be known.

4 Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 102-103.

5 *Ibid.*, 101.

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You can rename this God *Sophia* or whatever you like — it does not matter as long as it feels right to *you* — as long as the new name reflects your own perceived experiences of the divine in *your* life and *your* world. But such a God is, in fact, *not* God.⁶ Not only that, but if you are not sure *who* God is, how can you ever be sure you can talk or pray with God? How can you be sure that this God hears you when you pray? How can you be sure that this thing we call the Christian life is even a right and true way to live? How can you be sure that this Christian faith is anything more than a coping mechanism?

So it was that Pastor John ends his letter with the advice to “guard yourselves from idols.” It is an odd way to end a letter. Yet, Pastor John knew the danger of idols — the danger of false gods. This went to the heart of his letter: life is all about relationships.

An idol, as any good Sunday school teacher will tell you, does not have to be a statue made of gold or silver. Pastor John teaches us that an idol is a god with whom we cannot have a relationship — a god without personality, a god without the ability to hold a conversation.⁷ It is just a force, an abstract being beyond our senses. You can never really know an idol. You cannot have a relationship with an idol anymore than you can have a relationship with the wind or the stars or the concept of justice. You can pray to it, but it will get you nowhere.

The living God, on the other hand, is just that — a *living* God — a God constantly on the move, breathing new life into old bones, resurrecting the dead, drawing all things into a joyful relationship with himself. The living triune God is one with whom you *can* have a conversation. For Pastor John this Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit centered his theology and his understanding of the Christian life.⁸ Without it, our faith loses its substance and reason for existence.

6 “If you cannot say anything positive about what God is, we really cannot say anything accurate about what he is not” (Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 50).

7 Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 2005), 325.

8 I realize that it is anachronistic to suggest that the writer of 1 John centered his theology in the Trinity, as the official doctrine did not arise until later in church history. However, as with many New Testament writers, the reality of the Trinity seeps through their pages as they wrestled with and clarified their understanding of the nature of God in light of the Incarnation event of Jesus Christ.

This is why Pastor John goes to such great lengths in his little letter to emphasize the humanity of Jesus. Remember how Pastor John began? “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.”⁹

The Son of God — very God of very God, the one through whom God created the world — this Son of God became human flesh, someone whose skin we could touch, whose voice we could hear, and whose body we could see.

That the Son of God became human, and that God is a Trinity, means that we can *really* deal with God.¹⁰ When we deal with Jesus through the Holy Spirit, we relate really, truly, and fully with the living God — not some facsimile or hologram or imitation. That God is a Trinity and not an idol means that we can have a conversation with God.

When we pray to the Father in Jesus’ name, we can be confident that God *really* hears our prayers. And God hears our prayers because it is Jesus himself who carries them before the Father. Through Jesus and the Holy Spirit God speaks to us, and through Jesus and the Holy Spirit we can speak with the living God.

The problem with idols is that you cannot have a relationship with them. When you worship a god in your image, you are really worshipping yourself. When you project your highest ideals onto God — be they nurture and tolerance or unlimited power and absolute justice — you are really worshipping yourself.

It is no surprise that so many of the modern “re-imaginings” of God ultimately result in the modern quest of self-fulfillment and achieving a high self-esteem. This kind of religion simply degenerates into self-realization where the goal is to “know thyself.” At the “Re-imagining God” conference, one of the more radical leaders declared, “I found God in myself and I loved her.”¹¹ That is the perfect example of where the road leads when one tries to re-imagine God, using new

9 1 John 1:1 (English Standard Version).

10 “Thus, if we are to have any true and precise scientific knowledge of God, we must allow his own nature, as he becomes revealed to us, to determine how we are to know him, how we are to think of him, and what we are to say of him” (Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52).

11 Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 107.

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names for God. All you will ever find is yourself — your prayers simply echo off the walls as you express your deepest desires to, well, yourself.

Only through Jesus Christ can we properly know and understand anything about the living and true God. To turn anywhere else is to worship a false god, a facsimile, a hologram, an idol. Dear children, Pastor John writes, guard yourselves from idols.

And *guard ourselves* we do by constantly turning our attention to Jesus Christ. He has done everything necessary so that we can have confidence that through him and by the Holy Spirit, we truly deal with the living God.

Pastor John, against a large portion of our culture and even in the contemporary church, teaches that true worship begins with Jesus Christ and not ourselves. God created us for communion with him — for relationship with him — he did not create us to grope about in the dark re-imagining God's identity. Nor did he create us to grope about trying to find our assurance, confidence, and peace in ourselves or our highest ideals.

Instead, this triune, living God has given us himself so that we might know and love him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To gather in the name of Jesus is to gather in the presence of the true God. The Holy Spirit unites us to Jesus, through whom we see God himself as we find ourselves in the communion between Father and Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That God is triune means that we can stop running after idols. We can stop trying to find meaning in ourselves. We can stop trying to imagine what God might be like. We can stop trying to search for God. We can stop an endless search for truth and meaning that leads to nowhere. Instead, we can look to Jesus, through whom God seeks us and finds us.

What a joy, then, that the Holy Spirit invites us to this communion table, for it is at this table that we taste and see who this God is. Through the Spirit, God calls each of us by name, that he might reveal himself to us through the bread and cup. By the Spirit, God joins us with the Son, through whom he will converse with us and share with us his everlasting love. The search for God, the search for meaning, the search for full and abundant life ends right here at this table before us.

Brothers and Sisters, may *you* taste and see that the Lord is good — this living and triune God — and may you *know* and *converse* with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the only God who will give you the acceptance, the joy, and the peace for which you long.

A RADIO INTERVIEW

with Todd Speidell, *Participatio* Editor, on a Christian radio station local to his home in Knoxville, TN, USA

Q: In your book *From Conduct to Character*, you make the comment that there are Western assumptions we bring to the table in discussions about ethics. What do you mean by that?

TS: When we in the West discuss moral issues, there are certain traditions that we don't necessarily know explicitly, but that implicitly affect the way we think about morality. These are traditions based on duty or consequences or virtue, which are really the three main traditions for us. There is also what I would consider a fourth and distinct tradition, which is based on God's covenantal commands to be who he created us to be as human creatures in the context of the world he's created. It's a world that is absolutely dependent on God for its existence, yet which he has granted a relative freedom and order of its own. When we look at moral matters in this way, in terms of being God's human creatures and ultimately his new creations in Christ, it casts a different light on these different ethical traditions in Western society.

Q: Can you give us an example of how thinking this way is different from the way we tend to think of things?

TS: Let me make a theoretical point first.

Q: Sure.

TS: Which is that these three different traditions are normally considered very different — like the difference between an ethic based on duty and an ethic based on consequences. For the first, an ethic of duty, you do what's intrinsically right or wrong; for the second, usually a utilitarian ethic, you look at what will produce or what you think will produce the best outcomes for society at large. Those seem like two different traditions, one that's intrinsically right or wrong, and the other measured extrinsically based on outcomes. But there's been a

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recent revival of an ethic of virtue, which bases ethical thinking not on these sorts of endless dilemmas that academics like to ponder: for example, if your family's out for a boat ride and you capsize and there aren't enough rations for everyone, what are you going to do? These kinds of silly, abstract, bizarre, extreme dilemmas that we don't face in our daily lives. The ethic of virtue folks say that ethics is not merely a matter of decision-making, but it's a consideration of who we are as persons. Now I think that's a helpful corrective, and I think that when you look at Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, that he, too, focuses on the heart, what comes from within, and who you are as a person, not simply behaviors. That was a big part of his problem with the Pharisees, since they were so focused on the outward. But with a perspective based on God and his filial obligations for us as his human creatures, those three usual options in Western society are really different ways of being human-centered — whether it is a question of what I shall do or what kind of person I am — the focus is on the self and not on God and what he expects of us. And that really is the original sin: autonomy, including moral autonomy, which is to say that we want to govern ourselves. An example in Scripture is that first decision of Adam and Eve that, contrary to God's concrete command not to eat of the tree, they considered it good for food. Not that they were doing something that was intrinsically wrong, but they were defying God's concrete command to them and for them, and thus violating their natures as human persons. I'll pause there and let you follow up as you like.

Q: What are the implications, then, if we view God and his commands as something that is objectively outside of ourselves, having a bearing on what we think of as right or wrong?

TS: Well, the implications are multifarious; there are all sorts of implications. From a Christian perspective it's a matter of listening to God and his commands in all of life. A contemporary but secondary example, I think, is posting the Ten Commandments in court houses. The Ten Commandments are the commandments of the God who has brought the people of Israel — who has brought us! — out of Egypt. The Ten Commandments start with, "I am the LORD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," and that important preamble cannot be left behind! The commandments are the commands of the

God who has been there for us and who has set us free! So it's important for us to witness to that God who has liberated us from slavery, and not merely to uphold his commandments as if the commandments in and of themselves have some great, saving impact on society. That's one example of how we need to appreciate the biblical witness and history as truly objective — and it's an example of how Evangelicals need to be more evangelical!

Q: Then what should be the implications for God's commandments in contemporary American society, especially for evangelicals with a theological conscience?

TS: The implications are that when we obey the commandments, which we are required to do, that we are following the living God. One of the commandments — Thou shalt not commit adultery — is one of my favorite examples of the type of relativism that is pervasive in our society. One of the textbooks that I used to use in Ethics courses, and it was this kind of frustration that led me to write my own book, has pro and con essays on whether one ought to commit adultery. That's absurd. There ought to be some things — even a few things! — that all of us in common can say are absolutes. Adultery, rape, torture, and genocide: there ought to be a short list of moral absolutes that all of us can say are indisputable. They're not up for grabs, and we're not going to debate them. But simply because one doesn't commit adultery does not mean that one has followed what Jesus considered the spirit or deeper and personal meaning of the command. For example, take someone who lusts after someone else, but hasn't technically committed adultery: Jesus said that person has violated the spirit of the command.

Now that higher standard Jesus implements puts us all in a situation that's much tougher, because we not only want to be right regarding outward behavior, but also with respect to the inward, our hearts. But I think the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' life and ministry, and his teachings, just like the Ten Commandments, should not be abstracted from Jesus himself. The Sermon on the Mount is a call to follow Jesus, not simply a command to follow certain rules.

Q: As a follow up to that, which comes first, the outward or the inward?

TS: God comes first! We acknowledge God as the one who has created us, who has restored us to who we truly are in Christ, and who as the objective one

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outside of us and apart from us comes first. Now God restores us from within! Jesus came as a human. He took our humanity, our broken humanity, upon himself and healed it. And he gives it back to us through his Spirit, and we are to be who we are and are becoming in him. So in a sense there is a priority of the inward. But that's not based on us, whether our behavior or decisions or character, whether on our own efforts at repentance and renewal, but on the act of God breaking into our history, and restoring us to himself and to one another in Christ.

Q: What's a good example in society today if we take seriously and acknowledge that the inward is basic for the outward, in other words, what is inside of a person is influencing the behavior rather than the other way around?

TS: I think a good example of that is so-called "affirmative action," which from my perspective unintentionally rebuilds the dividing walls that Christ has broken down. In Christ there is neither male nor female, slave nor free: Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility between us. Affirmative actions sets up new forms of racial stereotyping — and ironically they are based on what is now called "diversity," but what I think is a kind of *uniformity*, where diversity is merely seen as the color of one's skin and membership as part of the group. So affirmative action looks at external things, but the Gospel is concerned about internal things. When Onesimus went back to his master, Philemon, he went back as a brother in the Lord. He went back as a slave — that is the external — but the internal had been so radically turned around that the external was profoundly shaken up to the point where both slave and master must have a new type of relationship based on God changing our very humanity from the inside out. Affirmative action looks primarily at external matters, at the color of our skin and not the content of our character, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ shakes us and transforms us and heals us from the inner depths of our humanity to and throughout all aspects of our lives.

Q: You mentioned earlier when you talked about absolutes, isn't that itself an acknowledgement of an objective God who stands over against us and an assumption that needs to be brought into this discussion?

TS: Yes it is. There's a deep interrelationship between God's own objectivity and the objectivity of morality. The moral order of the universe, no less than the

physical, is part of the order which God has created and sustains by his Word. In other words, God has endowed his creation not only with an objective physical order, but with a no less objective moral order. Just as we cannot in good reason deny the laws of the physical order, so we cannot in good conscience disobey the laws of the moral order. Morality is more than a convenient way of arranging our lives for the greatest possible good or happiness. It's as much a part of the created order as gravity or light. That's why it cannot be reduced to the subjective preferences of individuals or cultures. But we need to be careful not to absolutize the moral order, or even God's commands, over God himself! God himself is the absolute. Recurrent throughout the Old Testament is the central theme: "I am your God; you *shall* be my people. That *shall* is a command to us: We are to obey God. But it is also a promise: You *shall* be my people. God who makes us into new persons, into a new people, he is the absolute.

That doesn't mean things like adultery and divorce are merely relative. No. God has created this world in such a way that this could never be no matter how many would like to have it otherwise. We don't have a vote in that matter. But by focusing on God and his commands within the context of the good created order in which he has placed us, we may steer both away from legalism and libertinism. In the Bible the indicative always precedes *and* includes the imperative. "I am your God" (that's the indicative); "In Christ all things are reconciled" (again, the indicative); "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt" (another indicative) — and the indicatives of grace always follow with God's commands and obligations for who we are as his chosen and redeemed people. The problem with legalism is that it tries to prioritize the imperative, so that we have the imperative without the indicative, the command without the promise, and we end up with legal relations rather than filial relations. The New Testament is very filial: focusing on the Father/Son relationship as the basis for our relationship with Christ.

Q: That was my follow-up question. What bearing does the Incarnation have on this?

TS: Everything. If you read the Old Testament, you see the story of the priority of God, the God who has created us, the God who put us in fellowship with himself and with one another, the God who has provided for us and liberated

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us. And the other side of that story is disobedient Israel looking after other gods, creating other idols. When we read that story, we need to read it with a mirror to ourselves to see our own disobedience. The New Testament is not a rejection of the Old Testament. Christ comes as the one true Israelite. He comes out of Israel as the true Israelite who brings God to us and reconciles us to God. He takes our humanity upon himself and heals it and gives it back to us that we may be whole. What's more, in Jesus Christ God has not only healed our humanity, but the whole created order. All things, visible and invisible, are reconciled and gathered up in Jesus Christ as their Head and Lord. All things are reconciled in Christ — the indicative. The imperative: We are to be who we are and are becoming in him and not reinsert disorder into the world by recreating dividing walls of hostility that he has torn down.

Q: Certainly we find ourselves — and I don't mean to politicize human matters — but is it possible to lay your paradigm over against governmental policies, some of the issues being discussed in society today, some of the things that we engage ourselves in regarding social and cultural issues?

TS: I think so. We always have to remember that the church is the church, and it needs to be the church, so it should not become another political institution or lobby group. Having said that, God has reconciled our world so that we do need to think and act politically and favor issues, items, and agendas that approximate our own theological convictions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany tried to balance a tension between thinking realistically about human nature on the one hand, never being naïve, and on the other hand thinking theologically of God's action in Christ and how we should thus live in society. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist who followed the Sermon on the Mount quite literally — turn the other cheek — and he thought that there were specific implications for society. But he was also a realist. He knew that he could not sit back idly and naively while Jews were being killed in his name, because as a German citizen his friends and neighbors were being killed in his name. So we need to act responsibly in society. Often times there isn't a clear right or wrong, but we do the best to approximate our convictions, and Bonhoeffer thought we need to ask for forgiveness and we need to be careful not to justify whatever we choose to do. For example, with Bonhoeffer, he joined the conspiracy against Hitler's

life, but he never attempted to justify that action because in the real world you sometimes have to make compromises, and if you're simply utilitarian, one of the Western ethical traditions I mentioned, you can say, well, to kill one to save 6 million, that's an easy calculation. But for Bonhoeffer, who had his own version of a biblical pacifism, he took "Thou shalt not kill" quite seriously and literally, and yet he still felt a need to act responsibly. Now that was in a situation in which he was acting in response to violence and genocide. Preemptive war, as we've witnessed in recent years, is a whole other matter. There is rarely a unanimous opinion anywhere, including in the Christian church, but from pacifists to just war theorists alike, preemptive war is not an option. War is a last resort; it's in defense. Conservatives in particular should speak out against preemptive war based on our view of sinful human nature and its consequent view of the limits of government, both nationally or internationally.

Q: Is it possible for the church to confuse Christian social responsibility with mere political activity?

TS: Yes, you see that on the Right and on the Left where the church becomes just another political action group. It fixates on certain issues. I have convictions about a variety of issues, but I hope the church never becomes merely another social service agency, another political lobby group, because when it does that it has failed its own mission and it has ceased to heed our Lord for our own agendas. So that is a big concern: the church needs to balance a fine tension between quietism and activism.

Q: What's the key for Christians to think clearly about these issues?

TS: Reading through the biblical story, God has acted in our lives, God has spoken to us, God has restored us. Christ has both revealed God to us and reconciled us to God and to one another. I like to keep that paradigm in mind as I think about different issues — for example, abortion is a big issue. When I think about that profoundly personal matter from my own paradigm, I want to acknowledge God as the Creator of humanity, and Christ through his Spirit as the redeemer of humanity, so it's important to uphold the humanity of the unborn child. This is not just my unborn child: this is a child of God, especially over and against the view of abortion as a legal right, as a matter of personal

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convenience, or as a way of dealing with the so-called *unwanted child* — such horrible language!

Of course, there are extreme exceptions which should remain extreme, like the life of the mom. This is something we had to deal with in my family. It started before my wife was even pregnant. She was 35 at the time, and her doctor said when she became pregnant that she should consider prenatal testing to evaluate the status and health of the fetus. At the time the very testing that was being recommended had predictable outcomes that could maim or even kill the unborn child, and yet the tests were strongly recommended and almost forced upon us without discussion, and they really had no other purpose than to consider an abortion or a very weak rationale of “emotional preparedness” for a Down’s baby. As it turned out, at only 22 weeks my wife’s water broke, which is such a critical period because it was on the borderline time of viability for our unborn child. So we saw a doctor in an emergency situation, and practically the first words out of his mouth were to recommend an abortion, which we decided against.

Two weeks later, having fought against the odds of an imminent and extremely premature childbirth, with all of its possible outcomes and problems, our baby went into cardiac distress and the doctor recommended *against* an emergency C-section. Now an emergency C-section maximized the best chance of survival for our child, but it did raise certain health concerns for the mom because it’s still early enough in the pregnancy that there could be serious, even if remote, repercussions for the mom. So this doctor, and we’d been in conversation with him for a couple of weeks, inundated us with calculations and odds about problems, etc., and even during this critical time he continued with those kind of consequentiality calculations. Another doctor, a Roman Catholic woman, simply walked in and said, “This baby has a real chance.”

She cut through all of the calculating consequences, which again is a kind of implicit ethical tradition where you focus on the outcomes, what could happen, all the possible outcomes, etc. This other physician simply said, “This baby has a real chance.”

And then my wife had the emergency C-section, and we were fortunate and grateful to have a healthy girl, even though we were prepared for worse. There was no guarantee of what would happen, but in our society there are all sorts of implicit assumptions about ethical models that we operate with, but we were

fortunate to have a doctor who walked in and simply announced: "This baby has a real and clear chance."

Q: Is there anything else you want to add?

TS: I think I've said my basic point. I guess the main thing I wanted to focus on is just that the church's role in society is to announce and embody the reconciling presence and ministry of Christ. *He* has come to break down barriers: barriers between us and God *and* barriers between us and others, whether male and female, Jew and Gentile, or maybe even Democrat and Republican! Through his Spirit he calls us and enables us to be who we are and are becoming in him, so that we may live in union with Christ by his Spirit in gratitude to God our Father. And we need to do that in our daily lives, personal, social, and political. Christ has assumed and redeemed our humanity, and he graciously grants us the freedom and opportunity and responsibility to be his brothers and sisters in society. That's my paradigm, for what it's worth.