

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

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

Christology from Below

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Fact of Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christology from Above

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13 Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 113.

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

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

Analogy and the Fact of Christ

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

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

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

Bultmann and Tillich

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Christ Is the Atonement

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

¹⁷ Torrance repeatedly insists that in the incarnation God the Son assumed our

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

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

Concluding Remarks

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

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

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

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

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

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