"'I yet not I but Christ:' Galatians 2:20 and the Christian Life in the Theology of T. F. Torrance."


In the form “not I but Christ,” the doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ plays a central role in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance. 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 well function in a hermeneutical manner, giving us a significant point of access by which to interpret Torrance’s theology on the terms which he himself set. “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 us clues by which to identify the provenance of this identification of the significance of Galatians 2:20, sending his readers back to the Scottish theological heritage exemplified by his own teacher H. R. Mackintosh² and the great theologian from Argyll, John McLeod Campbell. A particularly felicitous and informative sentence from the conclusion to McLeod Campbell’s 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.”

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). Thus, "it is in and through our union with him, that all that is his becomes ours." 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 obedience, in his trust and his appropriation of the Father's blessing." 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 his deep indebted to Athanasius. This indebtedness is found, for example, in his development of what the latter spoke of as Christ exercising a two-fold ministry in which he "ministered not only the things of God to man but ministered the things of man to God," 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." Thus, Athanasius argues that Jesus Christ not only is 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 we may move 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, 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 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." 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 and as Jesus Christ, we have the Word that has found a response in our hearing and understanding. That is, we do not begin 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 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, 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 Saliah 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 in his lectures at New College - 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, 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 presented, 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. 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.

"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." It would be difficult to over estimate 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.

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." 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 anhypostatic, the act of God in becoming a man. The result is that the Son of God exists enhypostatically, as the man, Jesus, son of Mary, in the integrity of his human agency. Apart from this act of God in becoming human, 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. This means that the hypostatic union is to be understood not just in terms of incarnation, but also 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.”

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. We worship 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, now in the language of James Torrance, 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.* 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 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." So singular is the efficacy of the vicarious humanity of Christ that Torrance calls it 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. 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.”

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." 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. 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 to
finish." 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." We do not rely
upon our own believing, "but wholly upon (Christ's) vicarious response of faithfulness
toward God." 

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." 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." 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’s 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." 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 Torrance in a clear and persuasive manner, building perhaps on the insight of John McLeod Campbell that "Christ, as the Lord of our spirits and our life, devotes us to God and devotes us to men in the fellowship of his self-sacrifice." 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." The ministry of the church is not another ministry, different from the ministry of Christ or separate from it, but takes it 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." What this means for the proper practice of pastoral ministry I have developed at considerable length in my book Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation.

This completes my exposition of the vicarious humanity of Christ and the notion that the I yet not I but Christ is the proper theological ground for our understanding of
faith, worship, and ministry. I judge Torrance’s theology here to be both radical and compelling. Far too often, however, we fail to think radically enough concerning Jesus Christ. In particular, with the doctrine of the ascension pushed to the margins of liturgical and theological expression, the present ministry of the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ is largely lost to ministers’ experience today. The consequence for my own discipline of pastoral theology, for example, has meant the collapsing of ministry into a response to the moral influence of Jesus, exemplified by Seward Hiltner’s Good Samaritan Principle. That is to say, when the continuing and present ministry of Jesus Christ is lost, we are cast back upon our own resources, and ministry becomes what we do. Ministry then is characterized by a turn to an anthropological starting point, where pain and need set the agenda to which we must respond with the contingent skills that might be available to us. This, I believe, parallels a loss of confidence in Word and sacraments to convert and sanctify. The terrible burden which this imposes upon ministers is borne out in a number of recent surveys. I note just one: “Great Expectations: Sobering Realities,” by Michael Jinkins of Austin Theological Seminary, where attention is drawn to the familiar litany of competing commitments, conflict, loss of spiritual life, and loneliness in the practice of ministry.

Thinking radically concerning Jesus Christ in terms of Galatians 2:20, as expounded by Torrance, involves thinking through what it means to live in union with him where it is his faith, worship and ministry that are the ground of our faith, worship, and ministry. Let me close with two very brief observations, the first theological, and the second pragmatic.
First, I note the danger of a slide into antinomianism when the subtlety of the theological development goes unnoticed. When so much is cast on to Jesus Christ, it behooves us to be aware nevertheless that faith, worship, and ministry are still called for. In Torrance’s mind, our responses are required. As he himself says, our faith is laid hold of, enveloped, and upheld by Christ’s faithfulness. The imperative of discipleship is not cancelled by the sheer power and grace of the divine indicative. The point is: our responses are by the Spirit our participation in that which Jesus Christ is already on our behalf so that it is on his faith, worship, and ministry that we rely, not on our own. Thus, it is I yet not I but Christ.

Secondly, and relatedly, I have found through the years that this is very difficult material to teach. I do not mean only that it is conceptually demanding. I mean also that there seems to be something counter-intuitive about it. A good student may at some level come to apprehend the argument. More elusive is the deep conversion of mind, will, heart, and life in terms of the inner reality of our life being laid hold of by Christ in the Spirit such that we share in his filial life of active obedience to and communion with the Father. One has to teach awhile, realizing that the “ah ha” moment of a student’s being grasped by it may be long delayed.

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


8 *The Mediation of Christ*, 83. References to Athanasius include *Contra Arianos*, 1.41, 50; II.7, 12, 50, 65, 74; III.30, 38; IV.6.


10 Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* II.41.
11 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology," Theology in Reconstruction, 129.


13 For the following, see The Mediation of Christ, 83-6.

14 The Mediation of Christ, 86.


19 Royal Priesthood, 12.

20 The Mediation of Christ, 90.

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


23 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology," in Theology in Reconstruction, 184.


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


29 The Mediation of Christ, 108.


32 The Mediation of Christ, 92.

34 The Mediation of Christ, 94.


37 The Mediation of Christ, 97. See also "The Word of God and the Response of Man," 158.

38 The Mediation of Christ, 97-8.

39 Royal Priesthood, 30.

40 James B. Torrance, Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace

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." Cited in Torrance, Scottish Theology, 20.

42 Royal Priesthood, 35.
