

JOHN CALVIN AND JAMES B. TORRANCE'S EVANGELICAL VISION OF REPENTANCE

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Abstract: *At the heart of James B. Torrance's theological project was a concern to demonstrate the importance of an evangelical account of repentance, over against a legal account. This was a concern that he inherited from John Calvin, who stood as the greatest theological influence on Torrance. Out of his respect for Calvin, Torrance did not seek to commandeer Calvin's work on this topic for his own project. Rather, he sought to communicate Calvin's own vision of evangelical repentance to a new generation. Accordingly, this essay will primarily devote itself to exploring Calvin's position. Before so doing, however, I shall provide a brief analysis of the distinction between the "covenant God" and "contract God," which underlays Torrance's emphasis on Calvin's distinction between legal and evangelical repentance. Also, following our exploration of Calvin, I shall look briefly at Torrance's own account of evangelical repentance, as it followed Calvin's trajectory.*

James B. Torrance was a minister and theologian, devoted to proclaiming the unconditional freeness of the triune God's love and grace for the world. This commitment came not only out of a concern for serious theological teaching but out of a pastoral devotion for those seated on the pews and, indeed, to society in general. In this respect, he followed in the footsteps of John Calvin, who stood as the most critical influence on Torrance's theology.

As Torrance sought to communicate the strengths of Calvin's theology to the church, the academy and society, it was Calvin's covenantal theology of the triune God of grace that stood at the forefront of his teaching. In particular, Torrance set out to follow Calvin by elucidating the way in which the God of the Christian faith is not a "contract God" but a "covenant God." Accordingly, this essay will begin with a brief analysis of Torrance's engagement with this

distinction. It was out of his concern to stress the covenantal nature of God's relationship with humanity that Torrance came to emphasise Calvin's distinction between legal and evangelical repentance.

This essay, however, will not primarily engage with Torrance's own discussion of legal and evangelical repentance. One of Torrance's real strengths was his ability to communicate key issues with a precision and clarity that is all too rare in the theological world. This is particularly the case in his discussion of evangelical repentance. Torrance was able to articulate the significance of the distinction between legal and evangelical repentance to a new generation with a clarity and passion that, in many respects, has been unsurpassed. It is for this reason that the relatively few words that Torrance wrote on repentance have had such a major impact on both the church and the theological world. However, due to the brevity of his engagement with the question of repentance, it would be very hard to devote an entire essay to his discussion of this theme. But Torrance did not leave his listeners and readers without anywhere to go for more detail on this subject. He was always very quick to point people towards the primary texts that had informed his thinking, which, in the case of repentance, was Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Accordingly, the majority of this paper will be devoted to engaging in a detailed analysis of Calvin's account of evangelical repentance, with a view to explore the background behind what is unquestionably one of the most central themes in Torrance's theology. We shall then look briefly at Torrance's account of evangelical repentance, as it followed Calvin's trajectory.

1. "Covenant God" or "Contract God"?

To understand the distinction that Torrance draws between "Covenant God" and "Contract God," we first need to be clear about the grammar of covenant and contract. In particular, with respect to God's covenant relationship with his people, we need to recognise that "the *indicatives of grace are always prior to the imperatives of law and human obligation.*" For example, "I have loved you, I have redeemed you (indicatives of grace) . . . therefore, keep my commandments (imperatives of grace)."¹ If, however, the order is switched around, making the imperatives prior to the indicatives, we end up with a contractual understanding of the relationship between God and his people: "If you keep the law (imperatives),

1 James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (1970): 56.

God will love you (indicatives). If you keep the Sabbath, the Kingdom of God will come."² In the case of a contractual relationship, God's gracious activity towards humanity is conditioned by human acts of obedience. Under these circumstances, human persons retain a level of mastery over God, insofar as God's creative purposes are contingent upon a particular form of creaturely activity.

For Torrance, "It is precisely against this inversion of the order of grace (which turns covenant into contract) that Paul protests in Galatians 3:17-22."³ When God gave the law to his people four hundred and thirty years after making his covenant with Abraham, God was not making his grace conditional upon the fulfillment of the law. God was not changing his mind and turning the covenant of grace into a contract. Rather, God was revealing to his people what was expected of them if they were to live lives that correspond to God's creative purposes, to his covenant of grace. That is, God spells out the obligations of grace in the form of a law so that the Israelites would not simply *be* God's people by the fact of God's covenant promise but would have a knowledge that would enable them to live out their lives as a testimony to the covenant of grace.

If this is the case, how are we supposed to interpret all the instances throughout Scripture where the language about God's relationship to the world does appear contractual? As Torrance contends in his lecture on covenant or contract at his 2001 Warfield Lectures at Princeton (currently unpublished), such appearance is "superficial." Again, for Torrance, God gives the law to his people out of love and grace, so that they might know what it means to live actively as God's people, in *response* to grace. In this way, the law lays unconditional obligations on persons, which, if broken will have consequences. Importantly, however, the reason that such transgressions do not go unpunished — the reason that they have consequences — is precisely because there is a covenant unconditionally in place, on the basis of which our transgressions will (unconditionally) have negative consequences. That is, God does not passively ignore the transgressions of his people.

To put this in context, let us consider the example of a mother's loving relationship to her son. The nature of this relationship will normally be such that she will expect certain activities from her son, which correspond to the nature of this relationship and the order that she seeks to maintain. For example, there might be the expectation that her son will go to bed at a certain time so that he can function properly at school the next day. Under these circumstances, it may well be the case that *if* her son stays up past his bedtime, *then* he will be

2 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 56.

3 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 56.

in trouble. Now, if we were being superficial in our analysis of this relationship, we could jump up and say "look the mother's relationship to her son is clearly contractual; look at the 'if . . . then . . .'" To this, one would retort "of course this instance doesn't imply that this relationship is contractual because the 'if . . . then . . .' that occurs in this instance is not representative of the nature of the relationship as a whole but of the order that is maintained by the mother in this relationship." That is, the "if . . . then . . ." is *descriptive* of what will happen in this order, when certain rules are broken; it is not *prescriptive* of the nature of this (already established) order. The "if . . . then . . ." is indicative of the fact that, out of love, the mother wants to maintain a particular order for her son.

In short, Torrance does not deny a place for "if" language, but he insists that, with respect to our relationship to God, this language needs to be understood descriptively, not prescriptively. In order to understand his position rightly, it is extremely important to grasp this point.

In this way, Torrance recognises that the law is key for instructing persons in what it means to correspond to God's purposes — to live the kind of lives that God seeks for his people within the covenant of grace. Accordingly, Torrance is quite happy to acknowledge that, under God's covenant, *if* the Israelites transgressed the law, *then* they would be punished. However, he firmly denies that the particular nature of the Israelites' response to the law is prescriptive of the nature of God's covenant purposes. So, therefore, God does warn his people that *if* they do not follow his law, and transgress the commandment, *then* disaster will come upon them. However, when God does so, the "if . . . then . . ." is describing what will happen in accordance with the order that God has established and purposed for his people, under the covenant of grace. As such, the transgressions of God's people do not somehow alter or interfere with God's covenant commitment to his people, as if this commitment were conditional upon the Israelite's performing in a particular way.

Because, for Torrance, God's covenant promise to his people is not conditioned by human action, human transgression does not threaten God's covenant purposes for creation. It does not stop God our Father from loving us; it does not take away from the fact that Jesus Christ has redeemed us; and it does not stop the Son from sending his Spirit to draw us into the body of Christ. Why? Because, there is something much greater going on in God's covenant relationship with humanity than could ever be stunted by creaturely failure. This does not mean that Torrance fails to take sin and disobedience seriously; he simply takes them less seriously than the love of the triune God and his eternal purposes of grace. Accordingly, Torrance not only distinguishes the concept of

the "Contract God" from the "Covenant God;" he also distinguishes the "Contract God" from the "Triune God of love and grace" — the God who *is* love and whose being cannot be separated from his gracious activity.

In light of his theological commitment to the covenant God, Torrance was highly critical of accounts of the Christian existence that were primarily based on religious and moral duty. To interpret the Christian faith primarily in terms of a religious or moral existence, is to prioritise finite human activity over and above the gracious activity of the covenant God. Consequently, such theologies end up reducing the Christian faith to a human venture that is removed from covenant relationship with the God who actively relates to us in history, in and through the mediation of Jesus Christ. For Torrance, the Christian life flows from the "three great moments" that correspond to the "one work" of the "of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:"

. . . the moment of eternity, the eternal love of the Father; the moment of history, when Christ died and rose again nineteen hundred years ago to fulfil for us in time God's eternal purpose, so that (in Calvin's phrase) "all parts of our salvation are complete in Him;" the moment of experience when the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and brings us to personal faith and repentance.⁴

For Torrance, this refers to "the basic trinitarian structure of the first three books of Calvin's *Institiutio*."⁵ And Torrance believed that he arrived at his own position by drawing deeply from the theology of Calvin. As we turn to consider Calvin's understanding of repentance, we see the very clear influence that Calvin had on Torrance's covenant theology.

2. Calvin on Repentance

In Calvin's Catechism of the Church of Geneva, written for a minister and a child, the minister asks, "What is repentance?" To which the child responds:

Dissatisfaction and hatred of sin, and love of righteousness, arising out of the fear of God; for these things lead us to denial of self and mortification of the flesh, so that we yield ourselves to be ruled by the Spirit of God, and bring all the actions of our life into obedience to the divine will.⁶

4 Torrance, "The Incarnation and Limited Atonement," *Evangelical Quarterly* 55, (1983): 84.

5 Torrance, "The Incarnation and Limited Atonement," 84.

6 John Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva" in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1954), 107; see also Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (two volumes), ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia:

What does this passage tell us about Calvin's understanding of repentance? It gives us the basics. As we can see from this passage, repentance, for Calvin, involves an active and conscious turning away from sin. But it does not only concern a subjective change of mind—a change in the way that a person finds self-fulfilment. It would be mistaken to reduce Calvin's understanding of repentance to a self-conscious effort to turn away from wrongdoing. Why? Because, for Calvin, repentance is not grounded in a person's self-oriented existence. Rather, repentance is an expression of the fact that something world-changing has happened, is happening and will continue to happen from beyond the sphere of person's immanence. As we shall see, it is indicative of the fact that the Christ-event has inaugurated an entirely new way of being human within history. In light of this event, Christian repentance involves the realisation of a person's complete failure to function properly, in and of herself, to the extent that she humbly realises that she has nothing to contribute, not even an act of repentance. It involves the realisation that she is so deprived that a mere reorientation of the flesh is not enough; dying to the flesh is required.

What does this mean? As the passage above tells us, repentance requires us to "yield ourselves to be ruled by the Spirit of God, and bring all the actions of our life into obedience to the divine will."⁷ For Calvin, this means that repentance requires God to "extend his hand towards us, and animate us to penitence."⁸ Like Irenaeus, however, this is not simply one hand, but the two hands of the Son and the Spirit. At the same time, because God's Word and Spirit are inseparable for Calvin, there is also a complete oneness to these two hands.⁹ Indeed, for Calvin, there is a tri-unity in the way that God relates to creation. For the believer, this means that repentance involves a process of becoming reborn in Christ, through his Spirit, "into participation in the Father."¹⁰

Westminster Press, 1960), III.3.5 (*Institutes* hereafter).

7 Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," 107.

8 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the first twenty chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel* vol. 2, trans. Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 245.

9 *Institutes*, I.9.3; see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103506.htm (accessed 21/1/2014), V.6.1.

10 *Institutes*, I.8.26. In this way, Calvin goes so far as to affirm that we become "united to God." (*Institutes*, I.15.6). For further clarity on this issue, see J. Todd Billings, "United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification," *Harvard Theological Journal* 98, (2005): 315–34. It should be noted here that Calvin's grammar of participation normally emphasizes participation *in Christ*. This quote is an exception to this.

By becoming united into this fellowship with the triune God, the Christian experiences repentance as “a kind of second creation.”¹¹ She experiences it as an activity that is qualitatively new to anything she has experienced before and, as a result, becomes a new creation. Repentance, therefore, is not an act that a person can perform in and of herself, through the working of her imagination or ritualistic practice. It requires the person to be reconciled by a triune activity that cannot be anticipated and certainly cannot be summoned up by the activity of the creature.

As we shall now see, however, repentance itself is not the start of a person’s subjective journey with God. The newness of life, which Calvin sees as the goal of repentance is “conferred on us by Christ” and “attained by us through faith.”¹² The Christian life begins with the Spirit uniting us with the person of Christ in faith such that Christ takes residence within us, “governing us by the Spirit and directing all our actions.”¹³ In Christ, we participate in the one who is the objective ground of repentance. More specifically, as we shall see, the central turn to which repentance corresponds, is the turn from death on the cross to life in the resurrection. However, before looking further at how repentance relates to the person and work of Christ in Calvin’s thought, it will be helpful to gain some clarity on the way in which Calvin distinguishes repentance from faith.

(a) Faith and Repentance

. . . it ought to be a fact beyond controversy that repentance not only constantly follows faith, but is also born of faith.¹⁴

Faith, for Calvin, is “the origin of repentance.”¹⁵ Over against the Lutheran tradition, he asserts that repentance is not possible without faith.¹⁶ Why does he insist on this? Because unless a person is faithfully participating in fellowship with God, and, therefore, embracing the grace of God, a person would have no true reason to turn away from disobedience to follow the commands of God. Moreover, as Randall Zachman points out on Calvin, if a person did not have the

11 Calvin, *Commentaries on the first twenty chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel* vol. 2, 245.

12 *Institutes*, III.3.1.

13 Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, ed. David W. and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1965), 43.

14 *Institutes*, III.3.1.

15 *Institutes*, III.3.2.

16 See Augsburg Confession, Art. xii.

faith to know God's forgiveness, it would be impossible for her, as a sinner, "not to flee from God."¹⁷ Accordingly, Calvin thinks that it is "madness" for the Anabaptists and the Jesuits to try to begin with repentance by prescribing "to their new converts certain days during which they must practice penance," which are *only then followed* by their admittance into the "communion of the grace of the gospel."¹⁸ The problem is the suggestion that penance (outward expressions of repentance) can be considered as possible apart from the life of faith and communion that is grounded in and inspired by the grace of the gospel. For Calvin, a person cannot come to know the grace of God by first penitently turning away from the sin which itself cannot be truly known without faith. Also, a person certainly cannot come to know the grace of God by simply practicing penance. Rather, repentance comes from first knowing the grace of God in faith.

So where does faith come from? Faith arises as a person is awakened by the Spirit to hear the gospel message that she has been "freed from the tyranny of Satan, the yoke of sin, and the miserable bondage of vices."¹⁹ For Calvin, a person comes to faith by the Spirit uniting her to Christ, in whom she is adopted as a child of the gracious Father. In unity with Christ, faith is received as "a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit."²⁰ As such, faith is not merely a strong conviction about Christianity, nor is it simply an objective gift that God passes on to or implants in a person. Rather, faith arises as an awareness of reality: an awareness that she belongs to God by discovering that she is participating in the Kingdom of God, in which God has graciously claimed her for himself, in Christ. For Calvin, it is only by consciously participating in this fellowship with God that a person starts out on a journey of repentance.

While Calvin stresses the priority of faith over repentance, he does not suggest that repentance merely presents itself as a possible option to a person once she has come to faith. He insists that repentance flows from faith. As a person is engrafted into the vine of Christ, repentance "is produced by [faith] as a fruit

17 Randall Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith – Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 155.

18 *Institutes*, III.3.2. Derisively, Calvin then adds, "Obviously that giddy spirit brings forth such fruits that it limits to a paltry few days a repentance that for the Christian man ought to extend throughout his life."

19 *Institutes*, III.3.1.

20 *Institutes*, III.2.7.

from a tree.”²¹ “No one,” he maintains, “can embrace the grace of the gospel without betaking himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance.”²²

A challenge that may confront the contemporary reader of Calvin as she tries comes to terms with his ordering of faith before repentance is his interpretation of “repentance” as conversion to God. Is it not strange to consider conversion as subsequent to faith? For Calvin, the Hebrew term for repentance, *shuv*, means “to return,” and the Greek term for repentance, *metanoia*, refers to the transformation of the mind. From his analysis of the Hebrew and the Greek, he interprets repentance as a movement in which, “departing from ourselves, we turn to God, and having taken off our former mind, we put on a new.”²³ When he does so, he does not interpret a person’s conversion as her coming to faith. Rather, conversion refers to the lifelong process of repentance in which a person gradually comes to correspond to the fellowship she has with the Father, in Christ, by the Spirit.²⁴

On this journey, the active changes that the Spirit effects in the life of the Christian are grounded in a union with Christ that awakens “the inclination of righteousness, judgment, and mercy.”²⁵ So, while Calvin affirms the importance of self-denial, he does recognise a role for the conscience, albeit for a renewed conscience. Indeed, he asserts that anyone who “is moderately versed in Scripture will understand by himself, without the admonition of another, that when we have to deal with God nothing is achieved unless we begin with the inner disposition of the heart.”²⁶ Thus, for Calvin, it is a faithful heart and mind that is the beginning of repentance, informed by a Spirit-inspired knowledge of God’s love and grace.

21 *Institutes*, III.3.1.

22 *Institutes*, III.3.1.

23 *Institutes*, III.3.5.

24 As Alexander Ganoczy writes, Calvin understood conversion “in the biblical sense of ‘repentance,’ i.e., the fundamental penitential act of the believer.” (Ganoczy, “Calvin’s Life” in *Cambridge Companion to Calvin*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9).

25 *Institutes*, III.3.8. For Calvin, this inclination comes from the grace and promise of salvation. So, when both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ proclaim “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2, 4:17), Calvin does not see this as a challenge to his ordering of faith before repentance. Rather, he interprets this as suggesting that both John and Jesus “derive the reason for repenting from grace itself and the promise of salvation.” For Calvin, the words “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” would have no impact on the person who did not have a faith to know the grace of God and the promise of salvation. (*Institutes*, III.3.2).

26 *Institutes*, III.3.16.

Again, however, we need to be clear that Calvin does not view either Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit as being purely instrumental in the life of the Christian. "Christian" action is not the goal of God's covenant purposes. Rather, in Jesus Christ, God establishes a union with human beings, which is itself the fulfilment of God's covenant purposes (rather than a means to enabling "Christian" action). While it is God alone who brings about this fulfilment, in Christ, this fulfilment is not closed off from the world. Rather, it establishes a new mediation between God and humanity that makes way for a new fellowship (*koinonia*) between God and human beings, which is characterised by adoption into God's family. Within this fellowship, it is not simply a person's inward existence that is transformed. She shares in a new way of being that is *outwardly* defined by fellowship with the person of Jesus Christ, by his Spirit. It is out of and within this fellowship that a person exists Christianly. At the centre of this fellowship, for Calvin, is not interactivity (God's activity seeking responsive human activity) but the Holy Spirit engrafting persons into union with Christ.

Basic to this new way of being in *koinonia*, as I mentioned above, is human self-denial. This self-denial, however, involves much more than a process of the human denying her previous selfhood. It involves God denying the human self to continue in sin, through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Accordingly, Christian self-denial involves participation in God's denial of the sinful human self, through indwelling of the Spirit, who delivers the sinner from inwardness of the flesh and clothes her in Christ. Accordingly, as Joel Beeke writes on Calvin, "self-denial is not self-centred, as was often the case in medieval monasticism, but God-centred."²⁷

By being outwardly God-centred (living in union with Christ, by his Spirit), the Christian faith distinguishes itself from all merely immanent forms of belief. And, given that Christian repentance is the fruit of this faith, Christian repentance is qualitatively distinct from all merely "natural" forms of creaturely repentance. Christian repentance refers to the change that a person goes through as she is created anew in fellowship with the triune God, who takes her beyond the self-centred sphere of the flesh. In this respect, as Torrance was clear about, Christian faith and repentance are the fruit of covenant rather than contract. That is, they are an expression of something greater that is going on for humanity, according to the grace of God: something *holy* that God would never leave to be conditioned by the totally depraved dynamics of the fallen world. As we shall see, this theological understanding is at the very heart of the distinction that both

27 Joel Beeke, "Calvin on Piety" in *Cambridge Companion to Calvin*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 143.

Calvin and Torrance draw between legal and evangelical repentance. However, before looking specifically at this distinction, let us look a bit further at what it means to “die to” and “come alive” in Calvin’s evangelical vision of repentance.

(b) Mortification and Vivification

As we have seen, Calvin understands that, on the hand, repentance involves a self-denial that is characterised by a dying to the flesh: *mortification*. On the other side, it involves a renewal that is animated by the Spirit, who makes persons alive in Christ: *vivification*. Together, these two movements involve a dying to the self-centred self to make way for a reconciliation into a new way of being-in-*koinonia*, which is the ground of Christian repentance: a way of being in which “believers live outside themselves (*fideles extra se vivere*), that is, in Christ.”²⁸ In these terms, “we do not view him [Christ] as at a distance and without us, but as we have put him on, and been engrafted into his body, he deigns to make us one with himself, and therefore, we glory in having a fellowship of righteousness with him.”²⁹ As Paul Helm clarifies, however, this should not be taken to suggest that Calvin argues for “a gross mixture or transfusion of Christ into us.”³⁰ He explains, quoting Calvin,

The agent of this union is the Holy Spirit, Christ’s Spirit. ‘The Holy Spirit is the bond by which Christ effectually binds us to himself’, by calling us to Christ and imbuing us with virtues and graces, principally faith. ‘For it is by the Spirit alone that he unites himself to us. By the same grace and energy of the Spirit we become his members, so that he keeps us under him, and we in our turn possess him.’³¹

So how does this relate to Calvin’s understanding of repentance as mortification and vivification? Again, for Calvin, mortification and vivification occur in Christ, by his Spirit. On the one hand, this means that mortification requires us to participate in Christ’s death, which brings an end to the wickedness of our being: “our old man is crucified by his power and the body of sins perishes’ (Rom. 6:6), that the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive.”³² In this way,

28 Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 42–3.

29 *Institutes*, III.11.10.

30 Helm, *Christ at the Centre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 210.

31 Helm, *Christ at the Centre*, 210; quoting *Institutes* III.1.1; III.1.3–4; III.1.3.

32 *Institutes*, III.3.9.

"we must acknowledge that in ourselves we are dead."³³ On the other hand, it means that the Spirit needs to vivify us into sharing in Christ's resurrection, in and through which, "we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God."³⁴ In these terms, Calvin interprets repentance as an act of regeneration, through which we are "restored in the image of God that has been disfigured and all but obliterated through Adam's transgression."³⁵

Repentance, therefore, does not simply involve a process of bettering one's humanity in mind of one's wrongdoing. It involves a process of being made alive into one's true humanity, in the image of God. What is important to understand here, for Calvin, is that human beings are not self-sufficient entities but are dependent upon the life-giving grace of God. The life-givingness of this grace does not just enliven persons by keeping their hearts beating and blood pumping but by drawing them into *conscientious* fellowship with God in Christ, in whom persons long "to live in a holy and devoted manner."³⁶ With respect to the heart of the believer, this means that *mortification* of the flesh inspires contrition and *vivification* by the Spirit inspires consolation.³⁷ So "when a man is laid low by the consciousness of sin and stricken by the fear of God, and afterward looks to the goodness of God – to his mercy, grace, salvation, which is through Christ – he raises himself up, he takes heart, he recovers courage, and as it were, returns from death to life."³⁸ This should not be misinterpreted to suggest that Calvin understands mortification and vivification in purely experiential terms – as though "vivification [is] the happiness that the mind receives after its perturbation and fear have been quieted."³⁹ He writes,

It is true that for a sinner to beg for forgiveness demands a sorrow of conscience and displeasure at himself. But it is wrong to infer from this that repentance, which is the gift of God, is contributed by men as the movement of their own heart.⁴⁰

33 Calvin, "Treatise on the Lord's Supper" in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1954), 150.

34 *Institutes*, III.3.9.

35 *Institutes*, III.3.9.

36 *Institutes*, III.3.3; see also Calvin, "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," 134.

37 *Institutes*, III.3.8.

38 *Institutes*, III.3.3.

39 *Institutes*, III.3.3.

40 Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark & Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 223 (on Luke 15:20).

For Calvin, the mortifying and vivifying movement of the heart, which characterises repentance, is only made possible when a person is adopted by the Father into union with Christ through his Spirit.

(c) Legal Repentance or Evangelical Repentance?

Prior to Calvin, much of the medieval church, coming out of Rome, had reduced repentance to a legal step that a person is required to make, in advance, in order to be forgiven and restored. To provide guidance as to how a person should go about repenting, the church instituted the sacrament of penance, as an expression of repentance. It was seen to be through a process of penance that a person could find forgiveness and restoration, and thereby enjoy a life of fellowship within the Body of Christ. In response to this situation, Calvin set out to reform how society interpreted repentance by putting forward an account of "evangelical repentance" (*evangelicam poenitentiam*) which would challenge the "legal repentance" (*legalis poenitentiae*) that was being advocated in the church's promotion of penance.

Legal repentance, for Calvin, refers to the repentance that puts the onus on the sinner to try to escape his sin and guilt. It presents itself as an option to the sinner who finds himself so overwhelmed and caught up with a fear and anxiety over God's wrath that he does not know where to turn. He does not know how he can get beyond the consequences of his sin because he can only conceive of God, "as Avenger and Judge."⁴¹ As Torrance presents it, the sinner cannot get beyond the interpretation of God as lawgiver, as "contract God." This can be seen, for Calvin, in the torment of Cain (Gen. 4:13), Saul (I Sam. 15:30), and Judas (Matt. 27:4). In each of these figures, the gravity of their sin is acknowledged with a feeling of utter hopelessness. Accordingly, "their repentance was nothing but a sort of entryway of hell, which they had already entered in this life, and had begun to undergo punishment before the wrath of God's majesty."⁴² In each instance, repentance finds the sinner looking to himself and his own inabilities, trying hopelessly to escape his wrongdoing and guilt.

Legal repentance is also evident, for Calvin, in the theology of the Scholastic Sophists who "never understood what repentance is."⁴³ For them, repentance "is sorrow of heart and bitterness of soul for the evil deeds that one has committed,

41 *Institutes*, III.3.4.

42 *Institutes*, III.3.4.

43 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

or to which one has consented."⁴⁴ Calvin acknowledges that there was a place for this attitude towards sin in the theology of the church fathers. However, he asserts that the fathers merely saw this sorrow and bitterness as a deterrent to discourage believers from "falling again into the same transgressions from which they have been rescued."⁴⁵

It was not, however, just the overbearing anxiety, sorrow and a bitter feeling of hopelessness that bothered Calvin about legal accounts of repentance. This context of misery prompted sinners to find release in a whole manner of different practices.⁴⁶ Repentance came to be seen as an activity that could summon the grace of God into one's life – a routine that a person could go through in advance, akin to the penitent speech that the prodigal son prepared for his father. For the Scholastics, this routine was characterised by "contrition of heart [*contritio*], confession of mouth [*confessio*], and satisfaction of works [*satisfactio*]."⁴⁷ As Torrance shows throughout his writing, this massively shaped the way people came to interpret worship. Rather than seeing worship as an opportunity for fellowship, rejoicing and gratitude, which participates in the Son's communion with Father, by the Spirit, it came to be seen as a time to appease an angry God; everything became about penance. Consequently, outward exercises became so emphasised that repentance became "a discipline and austerity that serves partly to tame the flesh, partly to chastise and partly to punish faults."⁴⁸ With this emphasis, Calvin felt that the Scholastics ended up being "wonderfully silent concerning the inward renewal of the mind, which bears with its true correction of life."⁴⁹ The Scholastics, he writes, "torture souls with many misgivings, and immerse them in a sea of trouble and anxiety. But where they seem to have wounded hearts deeply, they heal all the bitterness with a light sprinkling of ceremonies."⁵⁰ What bothered Calvin most was not simply that the

44 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

45 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

46 It should be noted, here, that Calvin affirmed a place for ritual symbols of repentance (such as fasting), so long as they were not interpreted legalistically; that is, so long as they were not interpreted as ways of inciting the grace of God. As Randall Zachman points out, "Calvin reinforces his desire to see times of public and communal fasting and weeping [as testimonies of repentance] in the third edition of the *Institutes*." (Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 370; see 369-72).

47 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

48 *Institutes*, III.4.1

49 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

50 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

practice of penance came to define the church's understanding of repentance, but that it came to be seen as "necessary to attain forgiveness of sins."⁵¹ In Calvin's teaching, which was taken up by Torrance, "nothing is more miserable or deplorable" than making the forgiveness of sins conditional upon the sacrament of penance — especially when it is made conditional upon a "due contrition, that is just and full."⁵²

For Calvin, the legal accounts of repentance that were being put forward had lost sight of the gospel message of God's forgiveness in Christ. His resistance to this legalism, however, did not incline him to risk asserting that Jesus had come to abolish the law. He acknowledges that "the more earnestly a man measures his life by the standard of God's law, the surer are the signs of repentance that he shows."⁵³ Under this law, he acknowledges that the sinner would still struggle with the fact that he is a sinner, and he asserted that repentance begins with a sorrow and dread that hates sin (2 Cor. 7:10).⁵⁴ Indeed, he affirmed with an almost Lutheran voice that hatred of sin "first gives us access to the knowledge of Christ, who reveals himself to none but poor and afflicted sinners, who groan, toil, are heavy-laden, hunger, thirst, and pine away with sorrow and misery (Isa. 61:1-3; Matt 11:5, 28; Luke 4:18)."⁵⁵ Also, Calvin was firmly of the view that "repentance proceeds from an earnest fear of God" — that repentance "must be aroused by thinking upon divine judgment."⁵⁶ It is this fear that inspires a deep and earnest respect for God, with which a person hands her life over to the grace of God.⁵⁷

So what distinguishes Calvin's account of evangelical repentance? For Calvin, the evangelical believer remembers "to exercise restraint" in his sorrowful and fearful reflection over sin so that his conscience does not cause him to fall into

51 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

52 *Institutes*, III.4.1.

53 *Institutes*, III.3.16.

54 *Institutes*, III.3.20.

55 *Institutes*, III.3.20.

56 *Institutes*, III.3.7.

57 Accordingly, Calvin quotes the following wonderful passage from Bernard: "Sorrow for sins is necessary if it be not unremitting. I beg you to turn your steps back sometimes from troubled and anxious remembering of your ways, and to go forth to the table end of serene remembrance of God's benefits. Let us mingle honey with wormwood that its wholesome bitterness may bring health when it is drunk tempered with sweetness. If you take though upon yourselves in your humility, take thought likewise upon the Lord in his goodness." (Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs* xi.2 (MPL 183. 824 f.; trans. Samuel J. Eales, *Life and Words of St Bernard* IV. 55); cited in *Institutes*, III.3.12).

despair.⁵⁸ The evangelical does not trap himself in a self-absorbed anxiety over his depravity; he does not continually torture himself with a fear over God's wrath. Instead, he embraces Christ as the one who is "medicine for his wound, comfort for his dread, the haven of misery."⁵⁹ For Calvin, evangelical repentance is evident "in all those who, made sore by the sting of sin but aroused and refreshed by trust in God's mercy, have turned to the Lord."⁶⁰ It refers to those — such as Hezekiah (II Kings 20:2; Isa. 38:2), the Ninevites (Jonah 3:5, 9), David (II Sam. 24:10), Peter (Matt. 26:75; Luke 22:62), and, of course, Zacchaeus — who were confronted with the seriousness of their sin and turned toward God for forgiveness.⁶¹

For Calvin, it is in light of the fact that the triune God has taken away our sin in Christ that we are summoned to faith and repentance. Contra legal repentance, evangelical repentance denies that it is our penitent action that summons God to forgive us and restore us. It is only by the Spirit of God reconciling a person into union with Christ, that she participates in forgiveness and restoration: the forgiveness and restoration that has already been accomplished for her in the person and work of Christ.

By becoming united with Christ, the believer starts out on what Calvin describes as a "race of repentance."⁶² This is a "firm and constant" race, upon which believers are given to "battle against the evil which is within us, not for a day or a week, but without end or intermission."⁶³ This race, for Calvin, is the formative process of growing in Christ that constitutes the Christian life. As Brian Gerrish notes, Calvin saw repentance not as "a transient crisis-experience, but the entire life of the Christian."⁶⁴ On this race, "the children of God [are] freed through regeneration from bondage to sin," but without obtaining "full possession of freedom so as to feel no more annoyance from their flesh."⁶⁵ As such, Calvin follows Augustine in asserting that "there remains in a regenerate man a smoldering cinder [*fomes*] of evil, from which desires continually leap forth to allure and spur him to commit sin."⁶⁶ Yet Calvin also distinguishes

58 *Institutes*, III.3.15.

59 *Institutes*, III.3.4.

60 *Institutes*, III.3.4.

61 *Institutes*, III.3.4.

62 *Institutes*, III.3.9.

63 John Calvin, "Treatise on the Lord's Supper," 152.

64 Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 94.

65 *Institutes*, III.3.10.

66 *Institutes*, III.3.10.

himself from Augustine by disagreeing with Augustine's interpretation of sin as a weakness rather than a disease. He writes, Augustine "teaches that it becomes sin only when either act of consent follow the conceiving or apprehension of it, that is, when the will yields to the first strong inclination. We, on the other hand, deem it sin when man is tickled by any desire at all against the law of God."⁶⁷ For Calvin, sin is the "very depravity which begets in us [inordinate] desires [*concupiscentiis*]." Augustine, however, saw these desires as prompting sin rather than being sinful in and of themselves.⁶⁸

For the evangelical, however, the failures and weaknesses that the Christian experiences on her journey of faith are overshadowed by the knowledge that "Christ became redemption, righteousness, salvation and life (I Cor. 1:30)."⁶⁹ In Christ, the believer "is freely accounted righteous and innocent in God's sight."⁷⁰ This means that any attempt on the part of the individual to seek repentance and achieve righteousness by her own effort, will fail completely. Indeed, she will be committing an act of idolatry because she will be turning to a false righteousness that is nothing more than a projection of her own corrupt mind.

A crucial point to note here, which James Torrance was always quick to point out,⁷¹ is that Calvin understood Christ's atonement as being sufficient for all. This meant, as Charles Partee writes, "[a]ssurance of salvation is possible because faith is christologically rather than anthropologically based."⁷² Objectively, in Christ, Calvin affirms that "God declares that he wills the conversion of all, and he directs exhortations to all in common."⁷³ Indeed, he affirms that "God wishes all men to be saved."⁷⁴ However, he then adds the critical qualification that this only becomes an actuality for persons "when they turn themselves from their ways."⁷⁵ In this way, Randall Zachman writes,

67 *Institutes*, III.3.10.

68 *Institutes*, III.3.10.

69 *Institutes*, III.3.19.

70 *Institutes*, III.3.19.

71 See, in particular, James B. Torrance, "The Concept of Federal Theology—Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?" in Wilhelm Neuser (ed.), *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 15-40; "The Incarnation and Limited Atonement," 83-94.

72 Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 208.

73 *Institutes*, III.3.21.

74 Calvin, *Commentary on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* vol. 2, 247.

75 Calvin, *Commentary on the First Twenty Chapters of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*

[Repentance] is the necessary condition for our acceptance of God's pardon . . . God makes the offer of reconciliation, forgiveness and pardon contingent upon repentance; for the serious abhorrence of sin, which is the beginning of repentance, opens the door for God's pardoning mercy. The pardon of God in Jesus Christ is not to be understood as yet another way in which hypocrites can escape a serious acknowledgment of their own sin and of God's judgment. Only those who anticipate the eschatological judgment of God by judging and condemning themselves by the testimony of their conscience shall be spared that judgment and receive pardon.⁷⁶

Importantly, however, this does not mean that Calvin makes the atonement (which is achieved objectively for us, in Jesus Christ) conditional upon subjective human acts of repentance. Rather, it means that a person's subjective participation in Christ's atonement (which involves a sincere acceptance of God's pardon) is conditional upon her being one of the elect who has been chosen by God to be enlivened by the Spirit of regeneration.⁷⁷ So, for Calvin, repentance and faith are not, in themselves, meritorious; they are not a condition of God's forgiveness. Rather, true repentance is an expression of the fact that a person has been freely elected by God for salvation in Christ and is thus renewed by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. In this way, for both Torrance and Calvin, repentance and faith are signs and seals of the covenant of grace. As Dawn De Vries writes, "Faith merely conveys God's adopting grace to those who believe."⁷⁸ For this reason, Calvin notes that "the hope of salvation is promised them when they repent."⁷⁹ In repentance, a person turns in a way that corresponds to the fact that she has been predestined to participate in the covenant of grace that is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. For Calvin, God renews "those he wills not to perish, shows the sign of his fatherly favor and, so to speak, draws them to himself with the rays of his calm and joyous repentance."⁸⁰ However, "he hardens and thunders against the reprobate, whose impiety is unforgivable."⁸¹

vol. 2, 247 (emphasis original).

76 Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 150.

77 *Institutes*, III.3.21.

78 Dawn DeVries, "Calvin's Preaching" in *Cambridge Companion to Calvin*, ed. Donald McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 117.

79 Calvin, *Commentaries on the first twenty chapters of the Prophet Ezekiel* vol. 2, 248.

80 *Institutes*, III.3.21.

81 *Institutes*, III.3.21. On this point, Calvin drew a dichotomy between the (predestined) elect and the (predestined) reprobate that was rejected by James Torrance, who followed his teacher Karl Barth in affirming a chrisocentric account of humanity that knew no such division.

The risk with this position (which Torrance devoted himself to challenging) is that believers end up looking to their own repentance to find assurance of their election, rather than turning to Christ. As Torrance shows repeatedly, this problem was prevalent in the scholastic Calvinism that distorted and misappropriated Calvin's theology (particularly in Scotland). While it was almost inevitable that this problem would arise, Calvin continually insisted, as David Willis-Watkins notes, that "the assurance of faith comes from focussing on Christ and not on ourselves apart from him."⁸² As Randall Zachman,

The object of faith, according to Calvin, is neither justification nor regeneration, but Jesus Christ himself, the image of the invisible Father, in whom the Father has taken away all the evil that afflicts us and has given us every good thing that we lack. The primary object of faith, therefore, is neither forgiveness of sins nor newness of life, but union with Christ. Jesus Christ offers himself to us in the gospel as the fountain of every good sent to sinners by the Father. The Holy Spirit illumines our minds and seals on our hearts the knowledge of Christ, thereby engrafting us into Christ so that we not only participate in all of his benefits but also in himself.⁸³

In Calvin's account of evangelical repentance, it is God's mercy that leads a person to repent, not human repentance that leads God to be merciful. Repentance is not "the basis of our deserving pardon."⁸⁴ Rather, "because the Lord has determined to have pity on men to the end that they may repent, he indicates in what direction men should proceed if they wish to obtain grace."⁸⁵ True repentance, therefore, does not come from our corrupt nature. It is grounded in the outworking of the Spirit in one's life, drawing a person into Jesus Christ. For Calvin, "it is certain that the mind of man is not changed for the better except by God's prevenient grace."⁸⁶

3. Following in the Footsteps of Calvin: Torrance on Evangelical Repentance

The thrust of Torrance's engagement with the question of repentance was directed at challenging the perception that the Gospel message of forgiveness

82 David Willis-Watkins, "The Unio Mystica and the Assurance of Faith According to Calvin" *Calvin: Erbe and Auftrag: Festschrift für Wilhelm Heinrich Neuser zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Willem van't Spijker (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991): 77.

83 Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 188.

84 *Institutes*, III.3.20.

85 *Institutes*, III.3.20.

86 *Institutes*, III.3.24. Calvin contends that because repentance is clearly "a singular gift of God", "there is no need of a long discourse to explain it." (*Institutes*, III.3.21).

was conditional upon individual repentance: *if* an individual repents of her sin, *then* God will forgive her. In these terms, individual repentance functions as an imperative (pre)condition for receiving the gift of grace. To affirm this, the Gospel message ends up being abstracted from God's unconditional and unconditioned covenant commitment to Israel, so that it can be interpreted legally or contractually. That is, the Gospel message of forgiveness is presented as a new deal that replaces God's covenant of grace, allowing God's purposes to become subject to the caprice of creaturely determination and circumstance. For Torrance, the inclination towards this theology is indicative of the fact that "[t]here is something in the human heart which makes men want to bargain with God."⁸⁷ As Alan Torrance point out, there are two reasons for this,

First, it reflects the human desire for control — to be able to condition God's response and earn our deserts, that is, to be in a position to claim credit for the way God treats us . . . Second, there is the desire within the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, to control and motivate its adherents . . . To translate God's covenant relationship into contractual terms in order to manipulate people into either repentance or conversion . . . is to supplant the free, loving and transforming activity of the Holy Spirit, with the worldly manipulation of people's self-interest . . .⁸⁸

This problem, for James Torrance, "emerges most clearly when the Church is most concerned about godly discipline and the relation between forgiveness and repentance," which "was the focal point of the Reformation."⁸⁹ While there were many problems with the way that the Reformed tradition engaged with this point (as Torrance shows in his ongoing critique of the so-called "Calvinist" tradition), Calvin's own insistence that our religious experience is not at the centre of the New Testament was invaluable. For Calvin and Torrance, the central theme of the New Testament is the "unique relationship between Jesus and the Father."⁹⁰ Torrance continues, following Calvin, "Christ is presented to us as the Son living a life of union and communion with the Father in the Spirit, presenting himself in our humanity through the eternal Spirit to the Father on behalf of humankind."⁹¹

87 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 57.

88 Alan Torrance, "The Bible as Testimony to Our Belonging: The Theological Vision of James B. Torrance" in *An Introduction to Torrance Theology — Discovering the Incarnate Saviour* ed. Gerrit Dawson (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 107.

89 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 57.

90 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 1996), 32.

91 Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 32.

It is in the person of Christ that God speaks to us “his word of forgiveness, his word of love which is at the same time the word of judgment and condemnation, the word of the cross.”⁹²

However, Torrance also qualifies, continuing to follow Calvin, “implicit in our receiving the word of grace and forgiveness, the word of the Father’s love, there must be on our part, a humble submission to the verdict of guilty.”⁹³ The New Testament informs us that forgiveness is unconditional but “nevertheless demands unconditionally the response of repentance.”⁹⁴ At the heart of Calvin’s account of evangelical repentance is the recognition that “God accepts us, not because of our repentance — we have no worthy penitence to offer — but in the person one who has already said amen for us, in death, to the divine condemnation of our sin — in atonement.”⁹⁵ This is evident in “the fact that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners” (Rom. 5:8).⁹⁶ And, for Torrance, “it is this Word of the Cross that leads a man to repentance.”⁹⁷ According to the New Testament, “*forgiveness is logically prior to repentance.*”⁹⁸ It is not the case, therefore, as in legal repentance, that ““If you repent, you will be forgiven . . . This do and thou shalt live!””⁹⁹ Rather, as in evangelical repentance, “Christ has borne your sins on the cross, therefore repent!” In this way, Torrance affirmed with Calvin that it is forgiveness that leads to true repentance, not the other way around.

This order has continually been neglected in the history of the church, particularly in Scotland, as Torrance showed throughout his authorship. Exhortation has dominated the proclamation from the pulpit in an attempt by preachers to “produce a conviction of sin and a fear of judgment” that would prompt “the sinner to repent and renounce his sin so that he might receive the word of forgiveness and hear the comforts of the Gospel.”¹⁰⁰ When legal repentance is preached in this way, it becomes “the false motives of fear of hell and hope of heaven” that drive the Christian life. Consequently, the person of Christ and the person of his Spirit come to be seen as utilities on a person’s venture to escape

92 Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 55.

93 Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 55.

94 Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” 57.

95 Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 56.

96 Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” 57.

97 Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” 57.

98 James B. Torrance, “The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 26, no. 3 (1973): 307 (emphasis original).

99 Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” 57.

100 Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?” 58.

hell and get into heaven. On this road, the Christian is continually haunted by the prospect that she might not be doing enough, undermining any assurance of her salvation. However, when evangelical repentance is preached, the Christian life is encouraged by the "the motives of gratitude and joy," with the Christian finding "assurance of forgiveness in Christ."¹⁰¹

4. Conclusion

At the centre of the debate over the meaning of repentance, for both Calvin and Torrance, lies the question of whether the covenant of grace is conditioned by human acts of repentance. That is, is God's covenant commitment to humanity in any way conditional upon persons self-consciously turning away from their wrongdoing, towards God? For both, God's covenant of grace is fulfilled unconditionally in the person of Jesus Christ. It is "made *for us in Christ*," such that our faith needs to be interpreted in the "non-contractual terms" of "union with Christ."¹⁰² Therefore, the fulfilment of the covenant of grace is not conditioned by individual acts of faith; rather, faith is our participation in the one in whom the covenant is fulfilled. Faith is our participation in both "who God is for us in Jesus Christ" and "what God has done for us in Jesus Christ." And, for both, repentance is an active expression of our awakening to this faith. Evangelical repentance "is our response to grace not a condition of grace."¹⁰³ It is by participating in a life of loving *koinonia* with the triune God of grace — in Christ, by his Spirit, with the Father — that a person starts out on a journey of repentance.¹⁰⁴

101 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 59.

102 Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?" 63.

103 Torrance, "The Contribution of McLeod Campbell to Scottish Theology," 307.

104 I would like to thank Forrest Buckner for his helpful feedback on an earlier version of this paper.