

# Participatio

Journal of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship

Volume 11 (2023)  
"The Priority of Grace  
in the Theology of T. F. Torrance"



HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI, 1890. Christ and the Samaritan Woman.  
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## ***Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship***

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

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Volume 11 (2023), "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance"

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**PART I**

**GRACE AND NATURE IN T. F. TORRANCE**

*PARTICIPATIO: PRIORITY OF GRACE*

Paul D. Molnar, "Conflicting Visions of Grace and Nature: Appraising the Views of Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Rahner," *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 3-59; #2023-PDM-1. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

**CONFLICTING VISIONS OF GRACE AND NATURE:  
APPRAISING THE VIEWS OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND KARL RAHNER**

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Among contemporary theologians, few are as clear or as consistent as T. F. Torrance in asserting and maintaining that grace, as he put it following St. Paul, is "actualised among men in the person of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Invariably, Torrance insists that grace cannot be detached from the Giver of grace, that is, from Jesus Christ himself. This simple statement has profound and wide-ranging implications. Torrance insists that grace is not "something which merely comes to the assistance of man in his own efforts for righteousness."<sup>2</sup> Instead, it is "the will of God to constitute man's life afresh on a wholly new basis and in a renewed world, to set him free from sin and Satan; to endue him with the Spirit, to make him the possessor of a supernatural life."<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Torrance noted that for Paul grace, as the gift of God, "is none other than the risen Christ who confronts men

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 30. This volume was first published by Oliver and Boyd in 1948 and was Torrance's doctoral thesis written under the guidance of Karl Barth.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

through the word of his Gospel. *Charis* is not here, therefore, in any sense a quality adhering to Paul, but a particular manifestation of the gracious purpose and power of Christ."<sup>4</sup> For Paul grace, which is "the new supernatural order which breaks in upon men, but which manifests itself in their faith and in their Christian life," cannot be understood as "a transferred quality."<sup>5</sup> In other words, Torrance rejects any idea of infused grace. For Torrance, "Grace is not something that can be detached from God and made to inhere in creaturely being as 'created grace'."<sup>6</sup> This is the case because grace is identical with Christ himself as the active giver of grace.<sup>7</sup>

For Torrance, "Grace means the primary and constitutive act in which out of free love God has intervened to set our life on a wholly new basis, but also means that through faith this may be actualised in flesh and blood because it has been actualised in Jesus Christ."<sup>8</sup> In his cross and resurrection, Jesus Christ becomes "our salvation, our righteousness, and our wisdom. Thus any attempt to detach grace in a transferred sense from the actual embodiment of God's grace in Jesus Christ is to misunderstand the meaning of the Pauline *charis* altogether."<sup>9</sup> For Paul, Torrance insists, grace [*charis*] is not some energizing principle as it came to be understood due to Hellenistic influences in later Christian writings.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology," *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 182.

<sup>7</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; reissued in a Second Edition in the Cornerstone Series with a New Critical Introduction by Myk Habets, 2016), 24 and 140-41 and *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); reissued in a Second Edition in the Cornerstone Series with an Introduction by Paul D. Molnar, 2016), 21, 147. Because the Spirit cannot be separated from the Word, the gift of grace cannot be separated from the Holy Spirit either as the one who enables knowledge of the Father through his Son.

<sup>8</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace* 33.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Torrance adds: "To detach grace from the person of Christ and to think of it as acting impersonally upon man is inevitably to land in determinism. That was Augustine's mistake", *ibid.*



Rejecting this Hellenistic approach, Torrance opposed the idea that grace could be understood as “a detachable and transferable divine quality which may inhere in or be possessed by the human being to whom it is given in virtue of which he is somehow ‘deified’ or ‘divinised’.”<sup>10</sup> Torrance therefore rejects translating *theosis* as “deification” because he thinks that suggests a change in human nature. So he prefers to translate 2 Peter 1:4 to say we are “partners of the Deity” but not “partakers of divine nature.”<sup>11</sup> Understood in a properly Christological and trinitarian way, there is no confusion of divine and human nature or divine and human activity because it is through our personal union with Christ that we share in his humanity, which is uniquely united to his deity by virtue of the hypostatic union. Thus, we are “partakers of the divine nature” through union with Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Torrance thought Athanasius’s statement that “He [the Word] became man in order to make us divine” was problematic. Noting that Georges Florovsky himself admitted that “The term *theosis* is indeed embarrassing” if it is conceptualized “in ‘ontological categories’” because “man simply cannot become ‘god’,” he preferred, with Florovsky, to understand *Theosis* as “a personal encounter. It is the ultimate intercourse with God, in which the whole of human existence is, as it were, permeated by the Divine Presence.”<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, Torrance consistently rejected notions of “divinization” and “deification” to the extent that they implied confusion of Creator and creatures precisely by thinking of “grace as deifying man or heightening his being until he attains the level of a supernatural order” because this view “appears to do docetic violence to creaturely human nature.”<sup>14</sup>

Instead, for Torrance, “Christ Himself is the objective ground and content of *charis* in every instance of its special Christian use.”<sup>15</sup> In the New Testament, grace (*charis*) “refers to the being and action of God as revealed and actualised in Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 95.

<sup>12</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church Vol. I, Order and Disorder* (Eugene, OR Wipf and Stock, 1996), 110.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 96.

<sup>14</sup> Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace,” *Theology in Reconstruction*, 180.

<sup>15</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace*, 21.

Christ, for He is in His person and work the self-giving of God to men ... Grace is in fact identical with Jesus Christ in person and word and deed ... neither the action nor the gift is separable from the person of the giver, God in Christ.”<sup>16</sup> The connection between Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial in understanding Torrance’s view of grace. Because Torrance thinks God is the content of his revelation to us in Christ, he maintains that “In Jesus Christ the Giver of grace and the Gift of grace are one and the same, for in him and through him it is none other than God himself who is savingly and creatively at work for us and our salvation.”<sup>17</sup> Because God is the one who is savingly present in Christ, that also means that “The Holy Spirit is no less than the Son the self-giving of God, for in him the divine Gift and the divine Giver are identical. This is why the *homoousion* was applied to the understanding of the nature and identity of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, Torrance insisted that grace is never to be conceptualized as “a created medium between God and man” since as God’s self-giving “in his *incarnate* Son in whom the Gift and Giver are indivisibly one” grace itself is “governed by the oneness of the Father and the Son” and therefore grace “cannot be regarded as a detachable and transferable divine quality which may inhere in or be possessed by the human being to whom it is given in virtue of which he is somehow ‘deified’ or ‘divinised’.”<sup>19</sup>

With these important nuances and distinctions, Torrance could consistently maintain that our true humanity as it is in Christ is not dissolved in any way but intensified by being exalted in Christ to “share in God’s life and glory.”<sup>20</sup> However, because Torrance’s Christology and trinitarian theology function seamlessly together, Torrance insisted that it is through the Holy Spirit and not through anything we find in ourselves, such as our moral sense or our acts of will, that we know God and participate objectively in God. When thinking of our sharing in God’s

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 138

<sup>18</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 147.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 140.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998; reissued in Cornerstones Series with an Introduction by Paul D. Molnar, 2019), 135.

life and glory eschatologically Torrance held that even now, we experience "communion in the consummated reality which will be fully actualized in us in the resurrection and redemption of the body."<sup>21</sup> That means at our resurrection, we will not be transformed into another nature but that our human nature will become "imperishable." The point here, however, is that Torrance noted that in considering these matters, there is what he called "the danger of 'vertigo'," because people tend to conceptualize this participation in the divine nature by identifying their own being with God's being in mystical or pantheistic fashion. Torrance adamantly opposes any such thinking because it would destroy the historical connection between the resurrection, ascension, and the historical Jesus as the one point in history where we have communion with the triune God and have hope for Christ's promised eternal life. Torrance thus held that "we share in the life of God while remaining what we were made to be, men and not gods."<sup>22</sup>

Torrance's rejection of infused grace is no small matter because it connects decisively with his view of truth. Specifically, Torrance insists that God "is himself the truth who reveals himself as he is and who remains faithful to what he reveals of himself."<sup>23</sup> Put bluntly, for Torrance, truth must be understood "as the truth which God is in his own eternal being, and the truth which he shines upon us from and through himself."<sup>24</sup> Following this line of thought, which he held was fundamental to patristic and early medieval theology, Torrance then maintains that

Face to face with God, we are up against the ultimate truth of being in God's own self: it is only as we are cast upon him in this way, as the ultimate source of all truth who is not closed to us but who by his nature is open to us, that we may know him truly, for then, we know him under the immediate compulsion of his own being, in the power of his self-evidence.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "Truth and Authority: Theses on Truth," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (3) (September 1972): 215-42, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

I mention Torrance's discussion of our knowledge of God as truth here to show exactly why it is such a major problem to conceptualize grace as infused grace. Torrance firmly maintains that theology, and in particular, knowledge of God and God's grace, can only be properly understood when *the truth of being* shapes our thinking. This means that we know God's being when in Christ, and through his Spirit, God makes himself known to us. We do not just know something about God metaphorically. We really know God in his eternal being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in faith. That means truth, as the truth of God, is grounded only in God and not in us and that if truth is condensed to what is conceptualized by us, then Kant's disjunction between idea and reality could not be overcome. The important point then is if grace is properly conceived, then there would be substantial agreement between Catholics and Protestants about the truth of who God is in himself and for us and who we are in Christ. That agreement would be reached based on *the truth of being* itself rather than being based on either our moral sense or our faith or our act of will or some external authority other than God himself. Understanding truth as grounded in the being of God rather than in us or some other external authority needs some explanation.

Torrance helpfully explains what he means here by contrasting the views of Thomas Aquinas and Anselm. He begins by noting that for Anselm, "when we really know God we know that we know him under the compulsion of his being who he is and what by his nature he must be."<sup>26</sup> We thus know God truly "under the light of his truth which is his divine being coming to view and becoming in our understanding and knowledge of him what he is consistently in himself and in all his relations with us."<sup>27</sup> To clarify matters, Torrance here distinguishes between voluntary and involuntary objects of knowledge. The former refers to some object without will, such as one's hand. A hand is an object simply by being what it is. This object compels me to know it as it actually is precisely by being what it is. However, the latter refers to personal agents who can only be known to the extent that they allow themselves to be known to us by freely and willingly giving themselves to be known. Thus, knowledge in this case for medieval theologians involved "willing

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

consent” because it involved “a moment of the will.”<sup>28</sup> In this regard, Torrance refers to Duns Scotus to stress that even though such a moment of will is involved in others and in our knowledge of God and others, whenever that other reveals himself to me, “my mind still falls under the compulsion of what is there—and it is that which is finally compelling, and finally self-evidencing.”<sup>29</sup>

Torrance states that it is the second point that is either omitted or forgotten in Thomist thought. He says that St. Thomas taught “that that to which the understanding gives assent does not move the understanding by its own power but by the influence of the will” so that our intellect is not sufficiently moved to assent “by its proper object, but through an act of choice, i.e. because it is enough to move the will but not enough to move the understanding.”<sup>30</sup> This is an important point because Torrance is here claiming that basing knowledge on choice or will detaches our understanding of the truth of God “even in the assent of faith, from the self-evidence of God in his own being and truth.” Such a problematic approach means that faith then must rest on “moral grounds and operate only with an indirect relation to the *autousia* and *autexousia* of God.”<sup>31</sup> And the key problem here is that this move creates a division between faith and the object of faith which then “is occupied by an *authority other than the truth of being*.”<sup>32</sup> That authority of course is filled by one’s human act of will through some imagined infusion of grace. Torrance even wonders whether there is an element of “voluntarism” in Thomas’s view of knowledge of God that would open the door to a kind of nominalism which Thomas certainly opposed theoretically.

Torrance’s key point here, however, is crucial because he is claiming that this gap between faith and the being and action of God himself in his grace in Jesus Christ became the basis of Kant’s separation of faith and its object. That encouraged the view that,

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

because of the alleged non-evidence of its object [since we only know phenomena and not the noumenal] faith was moved to assent through the will, so that its understanding of God was made to rest on moral grounds. But once a gap is opened up in this way between the understanding and its proper object and the will is allowed to move in to assist the understanding in giving assent, then sooner or later some form of the active intellect or active reason comes on the scene and there takes place a shift in the basic notion of truth.<sup>33</sup>

What then was that shift, and what was the result with regard to grace and knowledge of the truth of God through his self-revelation? Torrance's answer is instructive. He says this shift led to the idea that truth came to be understood more as the connection between our understanding and our intellect than as a connection between our intellect and reality itself. This shift in thinking, Torrance believes, occurred in medieval thought and can be seen today in both Protestant and Catholic thought. Torrance maintains that this approach to knowledge of the truth finally suggests that we are the ones who "control and manipulate what we know, and as Kant used to say, make it the object of our thought."<sup>34</sup> He notes that in Roman Catholic thought, this thinking can be seen in "Roman phenomenological theology, in which theology tends to be converted into some form of theological

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

anthropology.”<sup>35</sup> Torrance further states that, in his view, “the movement in Roman theology from Maréchal to Rahner which brings St Thomas and Kant together, instead of overcoming Kantian phenomenalism serves rather to bring out the latent phenomenalism in Aquinas, and thus accentuates the retreat from the truth of being.”<sup>36</sup> This problematic attempt to bring St Thomas and Kant together in this way is an enormously important point because Torrance thinks the transcendental Thomists did indeed retreat from the truth of being by grounding their theology in transcendental experience.

Here it is worth considering Torrance’s critique of transcendental Thomism as it relates to his understanding of truth and, thus, of God’s grace. He says if we follow Anselm’s approach, which held that faith cannot know the being of God without concepts, then theology would operate properly by allowing *the truth of being* rather than our moral acts or acts of will to shape our understanding of the truth of God and God’s grace. That is why he believes that when the truth of being

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Rahner’s theology certainly fits into that category as he claims that “The question of man and its answering may not be regarded ... as an area of study separate from other theological areas as to its scope and subject-matter, but as the whole of dogmatic theology itself” Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations 23 vols.* (Hereafter TI), TI 9 *Writings of 1965–1967*, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 28. Among other things this leads Rahner to maintain that “anthropology and Christology mutually determine each other within Christian dogmatics if they are both correctly understood” (ibid.). From this he concludes that “not only is it important for a true Christology to understand man as the being who is oriented towards an ‘absolute Saviour’ both *a priori* and in actuality, (his essence having been elevated and set in this direction supernaturally by grace), but it is equally important for his salvation that he is confronted with Jesus of Nazareth as this Saviour—which cannot, of course, be transcendently ‘deduced’” (ibid., 29-30). Torrance rejects all three of these ideas because for him the logic of grace is identical with Jesus himself and cannot be detached from him. And for Torrance there is an irreversible relation between grace and our response to Christ in faith. Moreover, we do not have any *a priori* on the basis of which we can know Christ and God himself because the condition of the possibility for that knowledge is the action of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father. Finally, while Rahner claims he is not deducing salvation from his *a priori*, that is in fact what he does, because he misses one of the crucial points of Christology, namely, that incarnation and atonement cannot be separated. Thus, what is revealed by the cross is that we, as fallen sinners, are not orientated toward Christ as the savior but are opposed to him and need to experience his judgment and grace by taking up our cross and following him alone to know God through Jesus himself. From our encounter with Christ we learn that on our own we are enemies of grace and become true children of God by not relying on ourselves at all and turning to Christ alone as our savior.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

is considered "in light of the teaching of St Anselm, it becomes very apparent that the root difficulty lies in the admission of a *non-conceptual element* in our basic knowledge of God."<sup>37</sup> For Anselm "we cannot have experience of Him or believe in Him without conceptual forms of understanding—as Anselm used to say: *fides esse nequit sine conceptione*."<sup>38</sup> It is just because for Anselm "it is through his Word and Spirit" that we know God "in his own Being and according to his own nature" that he "could reject a non-conceptual relation to God."<sup>39</sup> Anselm's view cuts the ground out from under the Protestant liberalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that continues today in the form of Neo-Protestantism. It also cuts the ground out from under the transcendental Thomist view, which Torrance claims does not really overcome Kant at all because it grounds knowledge of the truth in some sense in us and our intellectual actions that supposedly respond to God, but actually are responding to the God which we equate with our non-conceptual transcendental experiences of reality.

Torrance is direct: "There can be no knowledge of God, no faith [which for Torrance and Calvin means knowledge of the truth], which is not basically conceptual, or conceptual at its very root, and therefore there is no non-conceptual gap between God's revealing of himself and our knowing of him."<sup>40</sup> Thus, our human concepts "which arise in faith under the creative impact of the speech of God are grounded beyond themselves in the *ratio veritatis* of the divine Being."<sup>41</sup> The point here is crucial. It means that unless the truth of God's own being determines the truth of theology and of our knowledge of grace, then a supposed "non-conceptual" relation to God which always breaks the connection between our concept and God's actual being as the triune God, will have to mean that "instead of terminating upon God himself as their rational ground, our concepts bend back and terminate upon our own consciousness, so that in the last analysis it is our own

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 170.

<sup>39</sup> Torrance, *Truth and Authority*, 228.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.



self-understanding which is the criterion of their truth or falsity: they never get beyond what the medievals called the *objecta mentis*.”<sup>42</sup>

Let me make several more key points here. First, the non-conceptual element in knowing God not only does not overcome Kant, but it always leads to a kind of subjectivism. Torrance certainly knows that when we understand reality by understanding the truth of being and not just our conception of the truth of being, then there is also a “subjective counterpart” to that knowledge. Obviously, this is the case since it is we “who conceive, think, formulate and our knowledge of God grounded upon his own self evidence is not cut off from the fact that it is, *deo dante et deo illuminante*, our knowledge of him.”<sup>43</sup> Importing some non-conceptual element into knowledge of God at this point leaves out the decisive fact that true knowledge comes only from God encountering us in his grace and love as he meets us in Christ himself. Second, allowing this non-conceptual element into the picture leads to the problematic view of Thomas that since “the object [God] is not sufficiently compelling of itself to our understanding,” we then would need “some kind of *lumen infusum* or some kind of *gratia infusa* or indeed *fides infusa*, which then comes, as it were, from behind in order to enable us to assent to the truth in spite of its non-evidence.”<sup>44</sup>

This approach, Torrance astutely claims, leads toward fideism and authoritarianism because for this view, assent to the truth requires “submission of the will to what is not evident to the mind rather than through a direct yet willing assent to the truth of being.”<sup>45</sup> Here the non-conceptual element in knowledge of God is overcome, Torrance says, “through an infused grace motivating assent.” Torrance claims that “sooner or later, however, that roundabout way is bound to collapse, and then thought breaks apart, and tension arises between authoritarian pronouncements of truth and the consciences of the faithful.”<sup>46</sup> The result in Roman

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 229-30.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 226-7.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Catholic theology is that “both the theologians of the Curia and the advocates of ‘the new theology’ still rely on St Thomas’s analysis and solution of the problem” so that neither side has sufficiently thought through the problem here by allowing the “*truth of being*” rather than something in us to shape the meaning of God and God’s grace.

Third, let me make more of a direct connection with Torrance’s view of grace to illustrate his reasoning. In his important book, *Theological Science*, Torrance speaks of the logic of grace and claims that since that is the way the truth of God has come to us in history, therefore our thinking about God and God’s grace must allow all our ideas about God and revelation to “reflect the movement of Grace.”<sup>47</sup> Recall that for Torrance one cannot separate grace from the Giver of grace, namely, Christ himself. With that in mind, Torrance maintains that there is an “unconditional priority of the Truth as Grace and the irreversibility of the relationship established between the Truth and us.”<sup>48</sup> This priority of grace makes perfect sense when you consider Torrance’s insistence that knowledge of the truth, as knowledge of God, cannot be detached from *the truth of being* and thus cannot be grounded in some supposed non-conceptual relation to God. Any such idea detaches grace from the Giver of grace and locates it in us.

It is important to note that for Torrance, knowledge of the Truth, which follows the logic of grace, “requires acts of obedience on our part.” Of course, he does not mean obedience to our conscience or obedience to church authority; those alternatives would shift the weight from obedience to grace in its identity with Christ to other external factors grounded in us or the church. Torrance says obedience involves decision and makes an interesting distinction. He claims we do not need to make a decision when we say  $2 \times 2 = 4$  because such a statement is simply timeless and necessary; that is not something that “becomes true, and has to operate in order to be true. No choice, no decision is involved. The conclusion is necessary; it is not reached through a free act.”<sup>49</sup> The truth of theology cannot be understood this way because the truth of theology can only be grasped in the

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 214.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

decision of faith. Here Torrance makes another crucial point that is missed by all of those who speak of faith in a general sense as faith in a higher power or faith in something greater than us, or faith in a supreme being. That is not at all what he means because he is claiming faith, as knowledge of the truth, must reflect the unconditional priority of grace and thus the irreversible relation between the triune God of revelation and us.

Another decisive point Torrance makes is to insist that we must not "think of faith or decision as an organ for perception or as a means of 'making real' the truths of the Gospel."<sup>50</sup> Such a view annihilates the common concept of faith as faith in a higher power. Torrance says, "personal decision or the act of believing by itself tells us nothing. The act of faith reposes upon the prior act of Christ, a final decision made by Him on our behalf. Our decision for Christ answers to His decision for us, and relies upon it as its objective ground."<sup>51</sup> Because our personal decision is based on God's decision for us in Christ, "our act of faith is grounded on God's decision of Grace to give Himself to us and to choose us for Himself." In other words, it is grounded in election, which for Torrance refers to "the prevenient movement of God's love that is so incarnated in Jesus Christ that in Him we have both the pure act of divine Grace toward man and the perfect act of man in obedient response toward God's Grace."<sup>52</sup>

In his life of perfect obedience, Christ himself "has appropriated God's Grace for us, because from beginning to the end of His incarnate Life He stood in for us and not only gave an account to God for us, offering our response to the Father, but actualised in Himself the Truth of God translating it into His human life, that we may know the Truth in and through Jesus Christ."<sup>53</sup> For these reasons, our personal act of faith, that is, our personal decision, is thus based on his actions for us. Therefore, "we do not relate the truths of the Gospel to one another by our decision, but in and through our faith we discern how the truths are already related

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

in the decisive movements of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ."<sup>54</sup> That is why everything said in theology must reflect this unconditional priority of God's grace to be faithful to the truth: "It is the logic of Grace that shapes the inner form of every true theological statement."<sup>55</sup>

It will be noticed here that for Torrance, one cannot detach the logic of Grace from Christ himself and thus one cannot know God truly apart from Christ. So, he also speaks of the Logic of Christ as well as the Logic of Grace. And what he says is extremely revealing. First, he says the logic of Christ is "the other side of the Logic of Grace."<sup>56</sup> Second, he begins his consideration by saying that he is not trying to impose a viewpoint on his theology, but rather, he wishes to understand its "material content" by letting it reveal itself as he directs his questions toward it. Third, when this is done correctly, then Torrance asserts, "we are directed to Jesus Christ, to the Incarnation, to the hypostatic union, the unique togetherness of God and man in Christ which is *normative for every other relationship between man and God*."<sup>57</sup> Fourth, Torrance then insists that the hypostatic union must not be understood statically but as the union of God and humanity in Christ "in the one Person of the Son running throughout all His historical life from His birth to his resurrection."<sup>58</sup> That, Torrance says, is the center from which we may consider the doctrine of the Trinity, that is, "of the Father and of the Holy Spirit as well as the Son, and therefore of creation as well as redemption."<sup>59</sup> All other doctrines have their proper place and truth "by reference to this central point in Jesus Christ."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., emphasis mine.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 216-17.

## Justification by Grace through Faith

Having said this, it is not at all surprising that when he considered the doctrine of justification, Torrance held that,

Because God has concluded us all under His mercy and justified us freely through grace, all men are put on the same level, for whether they are good or bad, religious or secular, within the Church or of the world, they all alike come under the total judgement of grace, the judgement that everything they are and have is wholly called into question simply by the fact that they are saved by grace alone.<sup>61</sup>

These remarks are loaded and comprehensive because Torrance is claiming that we cannot rely on our goodness or our religious consciousness, or any authority other than the grace of God, which meets us in Christ as judgment (by calling into question *all* our attempts at self-reliance) and mercy (by freeing us to live in obedience to Christ alone). That is why he says grace is costly for God and for us. It is costly for God because "it is grace through the blood of Christ." But it is costly to humanity because "it lays the axe to the root of all [our] cherished possessions and achievements, not least in the realm of [our] religion, for it is in religion that man's self-justification may reach its supreme and most subtle form."<sup>62</sup>

Torrance explains that when the Reformers spoke of justification by faith alone, they meant by grace alone. However, the notion of justification by faith is ambiguous because it could be and eventually was interpreted to mean that faith was quickly turned into a justifying work. That, for Torrance, is a disaster because it is not by our faith that we are saved but by the object of faith, namely, Christ himself and Christ alone. Whenever it is thought that "men and women are justified by God's grace *if* they repent and believe," then the unconditional love of God is compromised with some notion of "*conditional grace*," which Torrance says, "permeated Protestantism, Lutheran Pietism, and the Federal Theology of the

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<sup>61</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

Calvinists, Puritanism and Anglicanism alike."<sup>63</sup> He thinks that for Roman Catholics, we first need "an infusion of supernatural grace," which we receive "*ex opere operato*," without any cooperation on our part. But once that infusion takes place, we can cooperate with grace and merit more grace.

Torrance rejects this idea of merit as Pelagian because it carries with it the notion that we can rely on what we do to be saved when in fact, salvation comes freely to us only as Christ himself empowers that freedom through union with him in faith. Insightfully, Torrance notes that when righteousness was thought to be "offered to us by God under the condition of faith," then the Gospel is distorted and "a new legalism resulted."<sup>64</sup> Consequently, once "justifying faith" is turned into a work that we must do to become righteous in relation to God and our neighbors, then that in itself represents a legalizing of the Gospel of free grace. To avoid such legalizing, faith must be seen to be grounded on Christ's own active obedience and his complete sufficiency for our justification. Only then can we maintain the "unconditionally free proclamation of the Gospel."<sup>65</sup>

Torrance could not be clearer. He insists, "It is not faith that justifies us, but Christ in whom we have faith."<sup>66</sup> This means that if ever one holds that "people will not be saved *unless* they make the work of Christ real for themselves by their own personal decision, or that they will be saved *only if* they repent and believe" then that thinking makes Christ's own work "conditional upon what the sinner does."<sup>67</sup> That is a disastrous view of the Gospel because it "throws the ultimate responsibility for a man's salvation back upon himself."<sup>68</sup> That is not good news. That is bad news because, even in our goodness, we are sinners at enmity with God by virtue of our attempts to be self-reliant independently of grace. However, we need God's unconditional forgiving grace to live in freedom before God and others.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

While Christ's work for us calls for repentance and obedience, that cannot imply that we "can be saved on condition that [we] repent and believe" because this conditional view always shifts the emphasis "from 'Christ' to 'me', so that what becomes finally important is 'my faith', 'my decision', 'my conversion', and not really Christ himself."<sup>69</sup>

For Torrance, the ultimate negative example that shifts the emphasis from Christ to us is Bultmann's idea that we are saved by our existential decision, which then takes the place of Christ. Luther believed there was nothing we could do to escape our "in-turned, self-centred self;" he thus refused to hold that the truth of our justification could be equated with what the Gospel means to us. That is because faith "rests entirely on the objective fact proclaimed by the Gospel that Jesus Christ was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification."<sup>70</sup> Bultmann distorted this by claiming that all New Testament statements about what Christ has done for us must be "transposed to speak only of what *He means for me*."<sup>71</sup> It is certainly true that what Christ has done has meaning for me and for everyone else. But Torrance says that this objective action of Christ dying on the cross and being raised from the dead for us and our salvation is exactly what Bultmann ends up denying. He drops the objective events that occurred in Christ for us and substitutes what he considers its meaning for us. So, Torrance says, for Bultmann, the meaning of the Gospel is not found in the death of Christ on the cross, which, in itself, has no meaning for us, but in the preaching of the apostles about that event, which we then apply to ourselves. Bultmann shifts the weight from the objective actions of Christ for us to the meaning we construct from our hearing of the Gospel. For Bultmann I must "be prepared to give up any attempt at the kind of security that finds for faith an objective act of God in history, and take the road of radical decision in which I work out the meaning for myself in the present."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

With this thinking, Bultmann snaps the connection between faith and what Christ actually has done objectively for us because, for him, faith is faith in “man’s own human act, his existential decision, the process by which he gives meaning to the *kerygma* for himself in the present.” Torrance unequivocally rejects this thinking because “whenever we take our eyes off the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His objective vicarious work, the Gospel disappears behind man’s existentialized self-understanding, and even the Reality of God Himself is simply reduced to ‘what He means for me’ in the contingency and necessities of my own life purpose.”<sup>73</sup> Torrance perceptively noted Bultmann’s mistake, asserting that,

The difficulty of Bultmann’s position becomes clear when we find that even the fatherhood of God becomes problematic. In *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (p. 69), Bultmann says, ‘in the conception of God as Father the mythological sense vanished long ago’, but he says that we can speak of God as Father in an analogical sense. However, he also says that ‘we cannot speak of God as he is in himself, but only of what he is doing to us and with us’ (*op. cit.* p. 73). We cannot make general statements about God, only existential statements about our relation to him. ‘The affirmation that God is creator cannot be a theoretical statement about God as *creator mundi* (creator of the world) in a general sense. The affirmation can only be a personal confession that I understand myself to be a creature which owes its existence to God’ (*op. cit.* p. 69). Statements about God are not to be understood as objective (that is mythology) – they have to be understood as existential statements (*op. cit.* p. 61ff). But if we can say nothing about God in himself or about what he does objectively, can we still give any content to his actions in relation to ourselves, and can we really say anything at all of God, even in analogical language? Can Bultmann discard what he thinks of as mythological and still retain the analogical?<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 287-8.



Notice that objectivity here means for Torrance that we must be able to speak about God in himself and not just about what we think God is doing for us because the latter view reduces the immanent to the economic Trinity. That's what Bultmann did by saying we cannot say anything about God in himself. Torrance rightly holds that we need to recover the fact that Christ himself is the one who gives meaning to our justification and sanctification. He says, "everything is interpreted by reference to who He was and is. After all, it was not the *death* of Jesus that constituted atonement, but Jesus Christ the Son of God offering Himself in sacrifice for us. Everything depends on *who* He was, for the significance of His acts in life and death depends on the nature of His person."<sup>75</sup> Bultmann's approach undermines this view of Jesus's death because in Torrance's estimation, for Bultmann God "is present and active in the death of Jesus Christ in no other way than he is present and active in a fatal accident in the street."<sup>76</sup>

For Torrance, because you cannot separate the gifts of eternal life and knowledge of the truth that are ours in Christ from Christ himself, all our personal relations can only be rightly understood from the "unique relation of divine and human natures in the One Person of the Son."<sup>77</sup> Consequently, we can only grasp "the interior logic of theological thinking" from "the inner life and being of Jesus Christ, in the hypostatic union."<sup>78</sup> This is a logic "that is in Christ before it is in our knowledge of Him."<sup>79</sup> Do not allow this remark to slip by unnoticed. It is a decisive remark because with this statement, Torrance is holding fast to his belief that there is no possibility at all of any *a priori* understanding either of Jesus Christ or of Christology and thus of God himself. Thus,

We cannot know Christ *a priori*, but only after and only in his action, but in *his* action. Thus to assert that we know the deity of Christ *a posteriori* is not to say that it is an *arrière-pensée*! The Divinity of

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<sup>75</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 64.

<sup>76</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 277.

<sup>77</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 217.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Christ can be no after-thought for faith but is its immediate asseveration in the holy Presence of the Son of God. After-thoughts as such are bound to degenerate into value-judgements, and thence into doubt and even disbelief.<sup>80</sup>

We know Christ only as he gives himself to be known and thus only *a posteriori*. That is why Torrance insists that "We cannot earn knowledge of Christ, we cannot achieve it, or build up to it. We have no capacity or power in ourselves giving us the ability to have mastery over this fact."<sup>81</sup> This is because "we know him in terms of *himself*. We know him out of pure grace as one who gives himself to us and freely discloses himself to us."<sup>82</sup> Christ gives himself to us "by his own power and agency, by his Holy Spirit, and in the very act of knowing him we ascribe all the possibility of our knowing him to Christ alone, and none of it to ourselves."<sup>83</sup>

So, when we know Christ, we apprehend the "logic that inheres ontologically and personally in Him but which is reflected noetically and sacramentally in us in the conformity of our life and thought to Him and in the directing of them through Him to God the Father."<sup>84</sup> Torrance is very clear that he does not want to make the hypostatic union into some "ideological truth" which we can wield at will because, like all theological concepts, that concept does not have the truth in itself. Its only function is to point us to Jesus Christ "who meets us as very God and very Man in one Person, who is Lord over all our knowing of Him and must remain Lord over all our articulation and formulation of the truths He communicates to us."<sup>85</sup> For this reason Torrance asserts "we must hold together 'the logic of Grace' and the 'logic of Christ', for it is only in the freedom of His Grace that God's truth has come into our

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<sup>80</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 22. With this remark Torrance was rejecting the approach of Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and those who embrace his method.

<sup>81</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 2.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 217.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

midst and assumed human nature into union with Himself, thus establishing the hypostatic union."<sup>86</sup>

From here, Torrance employs the two important theological categories of *enhypostasis* and *anhypostasis* to explain the function of grace in Christ. The hypostatic union can only be properly understood therefore "as the expression of the act of divine Grace and the irreversible relation between God's Grace and man."<sup>87</sup> He says, "*Anhypostasia* asserts the unconditional priority of Grace, that everything in theological knowledge derives from God's Grace, while all truths and their relations within our thinking must reflect the movement of Grace." Then he says, "*enhypostasia* asserts that God's Grace acts only as Grace. God does not override us but makes us free."<sup>88</sup> The fact that God makes us free and does not override us is an enormously important point that is sometimes misunderstood by commentators on Torrance who think that his emphasis on Christ leaves no room for us and our free decisions and actions. It is quite the contrary. It is just because his humanity is the humanity of the Word and cannot be separated from his being as the Word incarnate that he acts in human freedom spontaneously in relation to God and us. Torrance claims he brings us into union with himself so that we can share in his life and love. It is in this way that "He sets us on our feet as persons in personal relation with Him, affirming and recreating our humanity in communion with Him; He bestows His love freely upon us and asks of us the free love of our hearts; He takes our cause upon Himself and makes provision for true response on our part as we are allowed to share in the human life and response of Jesus to the Father."<sup>89</sup> In Torrance's view then, the doctrine of "*enhypostasia* asserts the full unimpaired reality of the humanity of the historical Jesus as the humanity of the Son of God" and also "affirms in our theological knowledge full and unimpaired place for human decision, human response, and human thinking in relation to the Truth of God's Grace."<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

As we know Christ, we are conformed to him in thought and action so that it is “only in conformity to the movement of Grace in Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, that we may discern the interior logic of theological knowledge.”<sup>91</sup> As grace “from beginning to end” therefore, “it is Christ the Truth who adapts us to Himself” so that it is through union with him in his “own perfect humanity, that He both affirms our humanity and imprints upon it the pattern of His own life. That is the logic that is in Christ before it is in our knowing.”<sup>92</sup> In our faithfulness to him, as he reveals himself to us as “God and Man in one Person, there arise analogical forms of personal life and understanding within us” and that is the “interior logic of theology.”<sup>93</sup> Torrance thinks that Christ is the material logic here, and all our formal logic must be subordinated to him. Unless that happens, we will simply read logical necessities into Christ and into the nature of grace and of God himself.

### **Comparing Rahner and Torrance**

Now, let us compare Torrance’s reflections on grace and knowledge of God with the views of Karl Rahner by assessing their views of grace and nature in relation to Christology and the doctrine of God. At one point, Torrance thought Rahner could help bring Catholic and Protestant theology together by beginning theology

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

exclusively with the economic trinitarian self-revelation.<sup>94</sup> But Torrance later came to see more clearly than he did when he criticized Rahner for not consistently allowing the economic Trinity to determine his thought that there were serious problems in Rahner's approach. While Rahner formally held that proper view of beginning only with the economic trinitarian self-revelation and, while that view would have had a unifying effect, his actual method allowed him to read logical

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<sup>94</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) Chapter 4. Torrance summarized the results of a Colloquium that discussed Rahner's trinitarian theology in 1975. He wrote: "The basic approach by Karl Rahner from God's saving revelation of himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in history, pivoting upon God's concrete and effective self-communication in the Incarnation, has the effect of making the Economic Trinity the norm for all our thought and speech about God, and therefore of destroying the isolation of the treatise *On the Triune God (De Deo Trino)* from the treatise *On the One God (De Deo Uno)*," 77-8. With such a method there is the possibility of "rapprochement between Roman Catholic theology and Evangelical theology, especially as represented by the teaching of Karl Barth," *ibid.* I have demonstrated in detail that while Torrance's statement here is correct, the fact of the matter is that Rahner's transcendental theology does not explicitly, decisively, and consistently begin with God's self-revelation in Christ, but rather with our supposed experience of revelation in the depths of our existence which he then attempts to connect with Jesus Christ and knowledge of the Trinity. That is why he thinks natural theology and revealed theology and Christology and anthropology exist in a mutually conditioning relationship. See Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 74-88, 207-61, 323-36, 358-78. It is that mutual conditioning that Torrance consistently rejected by insisting on the irreversibility of grace and our experience of and knowledge of God's self-revelation and of the Trinity. Even in his hopeful summary of the judgments of the Colloquium on the Trinity Torrance noted the problem in Rahner's thought: "The main difficulty we have had with Rahner's treatise is with the way in which he has posed and framed the following axiom: 'The "Economic" Trinity is the "Immanent" Trinity and the "Immanent" Trinity is the "Economic" Trinity', and with the way in which he has set out the transition from the Economic Trinity to the Immanent Trinity, and grounded the former in the latter, for in spite of the relation of *identity* between the Economic and the Immanent Trinity as immanent, that is, as it is in God, in such a way that it precludes (sic) from God's free self-communication, and so a moment of abstraction appears to be introduced between what God is in himself and the mode of his self-revelation and self-communication to us," (79). That abstraction occurs precisely because of Rahner's choice to begin his reflections with our supposed transcendental experiences which for him include everyone's unthematic, non-objective, and non-conceptual knowledge of God, instead of exclusively with Jesus Christ himself. That is why Rahner could say: "Revealed theology has the human spirit's transcendental and limitless horizon as its inner motive and as the precondition of its existence" (TI 9, 34). Torrance would reject this assertion claiming that revealed theology is grounded only in Christ and not at all in our transcendental experience as its precondition; the only precondition for revelation is the fact that Christ empowers us through his Spirit to be one with him and to know God the Father through union with him.

necessities back into the Trinity. It is that failure to allow the material content of theology, namely, Jesus Christ (theology's material logic), to be his sole starting point and criterion for theology that creates difficulties and inconsistencies in Rahner's thinking. My hope in this article is to show that there can only be a genuine unity between the Reformed views of Torrance and the Roman Catholic views of Rahner if and to the extent that both theologians allow the logic of grace to be determined by the logic of Christ.

In a chapter on "Grace and nature" in his book on Rahner, William V. Dych, who is a highly regarded interpreter of Rahner, begins discussing Rahner's views by noting that in his discussion of God's hiddenness Rahner explains that his philosophical and speculative knowledge proceeds "from a conviction of faith, that is from a strictly theological proposition."<sup>95</sup> What is Rahner's theological proposition? Rahner says that the theological proposition that "forms the basis of all the reflections which are contained in [his] essay" is that "God himself and nothing else is our eternal life, however he may be understood by us here and now."<sup>96</sup> Thus, for him, philosophy serves theology by making "the primary theological statement intelligible."<sup>97</sup> How does Rahner proceed?

He says, "'The Truth' occurs in the basic experience of the mystery itself."<sup>98</sup> Rahner continues by explaining that

the essence of knowledge lies in the mystery which is the object of primary experience and is alone self-evident. The unlimited and transcendent nature of man, the openness to the mystery itself which is given radical depth by grace does not turn man into the event of the absolute spirit in the way envisaged by German idealism ... it directs him rather to the incomprehensible mystery, in relation to which the

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<sup>95</sup> William V. Dych, S.J., *Karl Rahner*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 32. Dych is referring here to Rahner, TI 16, "The Hiddenness of God," 235.

<sup>96</sup> Rahner, TI 16, 236.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

openness of transcendence is experienced.<sup>99</sup>

What is that mystery? For Rahner, that mystery is, as he has already said, God. But it will be recalled that he says it is God "however he may be understood by us here and now." And that is the problem. This approach to truth and to knowledge of God is presented without any specific reference to Jesus Christ as *the* Truth, and indeed as the Way, the Truth, and the Life as Torrance claimed from the start of his understanding of the Truth as discussed above. So Rahner then contends that,

in forming any concept, he [the human person] understands himself as the one who reaches out beyond the conceptual into the nameless and the incomprehensible. Transcendence grasped in its unlimited breadth is the a priori condition of objective and reflective knowledge and evaluation. It is the very condition of its possibility ... It is also the precondition for the freedom which is historically expressed and objectified.<sup>100</sup>

Rahner explains that knowing this mystery means we are "addressed by what no longer has a name, and it is relying on a reality which is not mastered but is itself the master. It is the speech of the being without a name, about which clear statements are impossible."<sup>101</sup>

Rahner even claims that "The origin and goal of knowledge in the mystery is one of its constituent elements. In an unthematic way this is experienced in day-to-day knowledge and may be called 'primary' in the sense of the a priori condition of possibility of all knowing, even though it only becomes thematic in a secondary sense through subsequent reflection upon its own a priori presuppositions."<sup>102</sup> For Rahner, then, it is "the unfolding of the mystery itself, from the *one* truth" that one experiences in this way. And the "presence of the one truth is of course unthematic, since it exists in the first instance as the condition of possibility of spatio-temporal

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 236-7.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

and categorial-historical experience."<sup>103</sup> Rahner claims this is the event of spirit and is indeed an experience of what he calls the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God). Thus, "knowledge is primarily the experience of the overwhelming mystery of this 'deus absconditus.'"<sup>104</sup> From this it follows that "divine revelation is not the unveiling of something previously hidden" but it refers "to the fact that the 'deus absconditus' becomes radically present as the abiding mystery."<sup>105</sup> So, revelation does not mean that "the mystery is overcome by gnosis bestowed by God." Rather, "it is the history of the deepening perception of God *as* the mystery."<sup>106</sup>

Enough has been said here to see some clear contrasts between Rahner's view of the truth and of God as mystery and Torrance's view of God as truth and mystery. In this article, I wish to focus primarily on the knowledge of God's grace in its identity with the Giver of grace. But before exploring this view in relation to Rahner's specific views of grace, it is important to see that Rahner embraces several ideas that Torrance specifically and with good reason rejected.

First, Rahner embraces what he calls "unthematic" or non-conceptual knowledge of God as mystery. This conception of mystery as non-conceptual is what he means when he speaks of "transcendental revelation." That approach leads him to conclude that our knowledge of God develops from the transcendental experience of the "nameless." That is why Rahner could say knowledge of God is an *a priori* knowledge of mystery which everyone in their experience of self-transcendence knows unthematically. It refers "to a knowledge which is both transcendental *and* unavoidable and is always sustained by the offer of God's self-communication in *grace*."<sup>107</sup> Consequently, for Rahner, "the doctrine of the *natural* knowability and knowledge of God is not a knowledge which appears in isolation, but one element, only subsequently isolated, in a single knowledge of God,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Rahner, TI 9, 135.



authorized by him in its direct relation to him, which, when it is accepted, is already faith."<sup>108</sup>

Notice the progression of thought here. Rahner moves from our transcendental experiences of the nameless to the idea that everyone has non-conceptual or unthematic knowledge of God as mystery and then to the idea that we have an obediencial potency for revelation and a supernatural existential. That is why he can claim that even natural knowledge of God is true knowledge of God. Thus, everyone has unavoidable knowledge of God as a nameless mystery and which is the *a priori* for understanding God, revelation, grace, and faith itself for Christians. However, the obvious problem here is this: Rahner assumes that natural knowledge of God as absolute being is the same as knowing God in faith. It is not because faith, by its very nature, is directly tied to Jesus Christ who is the object of faith. There is no mention of Christ in Rahner's statement about faith here. Of course, Rahner wishes to tie knowledge of God to salvation and thus to Christ. But he is unable to maintain the irreversibility of the object of faith (Christ) and us as the subjects experiencing that faith. Thus, he can say

a theological object's significance for salvation (which is a necessary factor in any theological object) can only be investigated by inquiring at the same time as to man's *saving receptivity* for this object. However, this receptivity must not be investigated only 'in the abstract' nor merely presupposed in its most general aspects. It must be reflected upon with reference to the concrete object concerned, which is only *theologically relevant* as a result of and for the purpose of this receptiveness for salvation. Thereby the object also to some extent lays down the conditions for such receptiveness.<sup>109</sup>

It will be noticed here that Rahner claims we have a saving receptivity for God and God's grace. For Torrance, as we have seen, our actual encounter with Christ discloses that we have no such receptivity and that our reception of revelation is the work of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. For Rahner, our saving receptivity is

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 135-6.

<sup>109</sup> Rahner, TI 9, 35-6.

subjective and can be understood by exploring our subjectivity. Torrance rejects that approach all along the line because for him it is *exclusively* the object of faith that determines the truth of our theological knowledge. And that truth is identical with Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of the Father. Finally, Rahner wants objective knowledge here, but he says only that the object "to some extent lays down the conditions for" reception of such knowledge. If that is in any sense true, then that idea in and of itself has already compromised the sovereignty of God's grace and love by inadvertently advocating some idea of conditional salvation. With these assumptions Rahner is eventually led to conclude that self-acceptance is the same as accepting God and Christ. It is not. A closer look at Torrance's view here will be helpful.

For Torrance, as we have seen, knowledge of God comes to us from Christ himself through the power of the Holy Spirit such that we know God's name precisely as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the triune God is not nameless. And knowledge of God does not derive from a general experience of mystery which we can know *a priori*. God has a name and that is made known by grace (through Christ) and thus in faith as we recognize that we are made righteous by what he has done and does for us as the savior of the world. Of course, it is not our faith that grounds that knowledge but the object of faith. That is why Torrance consistently links our knowledge of God to the doctrine of justification, claiming that what is required is a recovery of

an understanding of justification which really lets Christ occupy the centre, so that everything is interpreted by reference to who He was and is ... we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of his saving work, rather than the other way round. The detachment of atonement from incarnation is undoubtedly revealed by history to be one of the most harmful mistakes of Evangelical Churches.<sup>110</sup>

Grounding his knowledge of God in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God for us, Torrance disallows any sort of unthematic or non-conceptual approach to knowing

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<sup>110</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 64.

God and salvation because he follows Anselm and claims, as noted above, that we cannot have experience of or knowledge of the Christian God without concepts.<sup>111</sup> By ascribing unthematic knowledge to everyone, Rahner undermines objective knowledge of God as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and opens the door to his notion of anonymous Christianity. For Torrance, there is no such thing as anonymous Christianity because to be a Christian means to accept Jesus Christ as the Truth. And that cannot be done without a specific concept of who he was and is and what he has done and is doing as the one Mediator here and now.

This grounding our knowledge *conceptually* in Christ is an exceptionally important point because grounding knowledge of God and of Christ in some unthematic experience, Torrance believes, will always lead to some form of subjectivism as in the thinking of John Robinson and Paul Tillich, who could be considered liberal Protestant counterparts of the Roman Catholic Rahner. Non-conceptual knowledge of God begins for Rahner with an experience of the nameless that leads him to a view of mystery that he calls God, no matter how that is understood. That approach clearly leaves open the possibility of naming God in various ways other than as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. By contrast, Torrance insists that when we speak of God as “person,” then “the kind of ‘person’ that is meant is determined by who God is, and so we speak of God as *the* Person, and indeed the Source of all personal existence.”<sup>112</sup> However, Torrance then insists, that when we speak of God as “person,” then that notion of person when “used of God must be *ontologically* derived from God’s own nature, and therefore from the Trinity, and *not logically* worked up from general ideas we already hold on other

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<sup>111</sup> For a full discussion of Torrance and Rahner on non-conceptual knowledge of God see Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), Chapter Four.

<sup>112</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 80.

grounds.”<sup>113</sup> As I have discussed in detail elsewhere,<sup>114</sup> the issue here is illustrated in the thinking of those who wish to re-name God as mother, lover, and friend, She Who Is, or even as holy mystery with Rahner instead of exclusively as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

On this basis, Torrance says all our statements about God must be traced back to the Trinity and not to any general ideas of mystery or of the nameless. That is why he firmly rejects John Robinson’s attempt to re-think God in pictures “deemed relevant to ‘secular’ man, which we must put in the place of the old image of God.”<sup>115</sup> Such thinking presents God as the ground of our being. But that is to think “out of a centre in the depth of man rather than out of a centre in God himself” and that, Torrance says, is mythology and not theology.<sup>116</sup> Torrance complains that thinking of God in this fashion presents us with a God who cannot interact with us in any causal way. This is the case because for Robinson, God “cannot be other than what Robinson always and actually is in the depth of himself.”<sup>117</sup> This approach by Robinson, Torrance insists, makes his position worse than straightforward deism because “he is unable to distinguish God ‘out there’ rationally as objectively and transcendently other than the depths of his own being, and so he is thrown back upon himself to give content to his notion of God, as what is of ultimate concern *for* him in the depth and significance of his own being.”<sup>118</sup> That God, Torrance says, is nothing other than “the ‘God’ he wants” instead of the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> See, e.g., Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), and *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2022).

<sup>115</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 80.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

true God. It is a "God" that he can use "for his own ends and satisfactions."<sup>119</sup> That Torrance asserts is an idol.

The same thing happens to Paul Tillich, who believes that if you do not like the traditional name for God, then you can follow the pattern of "depth-psychology," which leads us from the surface of our "self-knowledge" into "our depth."<sup>120</sup> While this depth-psychology cannot "guide us to the deepest ground of our being and of all being, the depth of life itself," the name of this "infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*."<sup>121</sup> Tillich says that is what the word God means. From this, he concludes that "if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation."<sup>122</sup> Notice how close Tillich's view of God is to that of John Robinson. Both theologians equate knowledge of God with knowledge of our own depth and the ground of being conceived in light of that experience. From that, they reckon that by speaking of our depth, and ultimate concerns we speak of God.

However, given Torrance's insistence that knowledge of God must be grounded in the nature of God as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, this amounts to subjectivism and mythology on the basis of which Robinson and Tillich are out for what Torrance called "*cheap grace*, i.e. the 'God' *they* want, one to suit themselves and modern 'secular' man, rather than the God of *costly grace* who calls for the renewing of our minds in which we are not schematized to the patterns of this world but are transformed in conformity with His own self-revelation in Jesus Christ."<sup>123</sup> In other words both theologians neglect Jesus Christ and his message,

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 81-2.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 56.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 82.

"where He asks them to renounce themselves, take up the cross and follow Him unreservedly all along the road to crucifixion and resurrection."<sup>124</sup>

Second, because Rahner begins his theology with experiences of self-transcendence and with a general concept of mystery linked to his view of the nameless, he then is led to believe, as Dych notes, that grace cannot be seen in some "extrinsic" way such that "grace appears ... as a mere superstructure ... imposed upon nature by God's decree."<sup>125</sup> Rahner wanted to follow the "new theology" and hold that the human desire for God is both truly human, and at the same time it is "an intrinsic part of human nature," and yet it is still grace. The new theologians, especially Henri de Lubac wanted to conceptualize grace by linking the human desire for God with grace. However, he did not clearly distinguish grace from nature, and thus, for Rome, the new theologians did not "do justice to the sovereign freedom of God's grace."<sup>126</sup>

For Rahner, if grace is merely an addition to human nature, then "the whole realm of the human as such seemed to be deprived of any ultimate meaning." Rahner was dissatisfied with Vatican I, which considered the relation of nature and grace in the context of knowledge of God by asking "how the natural knowledge of God is related to the supernatural knowledge of revelation." This Council simply taught that "they cannot contradict each other because they both have the same source in God."<sup>127</sup> Rahner thought this view did not appreciate that there was a deeper unity of our natural knowledge and graced knowledge. In any case, Dych points out that Vatican II discussed the relation of nature and grace in the context of history rather than of knowledge of God. So, Dych says Vatican II maintained the "absolute freedom and gratuity of God's grace, but at the same time [wished] to see it as a universal possibility for every person."<sup>128</sup> Discussing the relation between nature and grace in the context of history rather than in the context of knowledge

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Rahner, cited in Dych, 33.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 35.

of God is the context within which Rahner worked out his view of grace and nature. Interestingly, Dych concludes by asking, "What concept of grace would allow it to be utterly free and gratuitous and at the same time an intrinsic part of all human history?"<sup>129</sup> Please notice that in all of this discussion of grace thus far in both Rahner and Dych, there is no mention of the need for justification or the need for Jesus Christ as the Giver of grace or the need to look beyond ourselves. That is the case because both theologians are attempting to explain the relation between grace and nature by focusing on our depth experiences and our supposed historical experiences of grace, which are presumed to be part of human transcendental experience.

It is here that Rahner presents a view that is more closely aligned with the problematic thinking of John Robinson and Paul Tillich than it is with a view that does not detach grace from the Giver of grace. Instead of focusing on Christ as the center as Torrance clearly did, Rahner, relying on the thought of Heidegger, focuses on our depth experience by asking,

*must not what God decrees for man be eo ipso an interior ontological constituent of his concrete quiddity 'terminative', even if it is not a constituent of his 'nature'? For an ontology which grasps the truth that man's concrete quiddity depends utterly on God is not his binding disposition eo ipso not just a juridical decree of God but precisely what man is, hence not just an imperative proceeding from God but man's most inward depth?*<sup>130</sup>

These assertions are clearly problematic when compared to the views of Torrance. Why? Because Rahner does not turn to the objective knowledge of God that meets us in the crucified and risen Lord to understand the gratuity of God's grace. Instead, in a manner similar to Schleiermacher, who thought that knowledge of God started with the human feeling of absolute dependence on God, Rahner attempts to explain the nature of grace by referring to our human "quiddity," which he says depends upon God. From this he presumes that since this decree of God is what we

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 302.

are in our humanity as dependent on God, it is "not just an imperative proceeding from God but man's most inward depth." Here, Rahner equates our experiences of depth with knowledge of God and relationship with God. That is the main problem in his entire approach to this issue.

While Torrance refuses to separate incarnation from atonement because it is in the incarnation that the Incarnate Word put us into right relationship with God through his own vicarious life of obedience to the Father, Rahner, with Tillich and Robinson, ignores the problem of sin with this approach as well as the need for reconciliation *in order* to know God and God's grace in its identity with Christ. Put bluntly, by focusing on our humanity as it is presumed to be geared toward grace, Rahner never even mentions what, for Torrance, was a crucial point. That point is that while God created us for fellowship with with him, the problem of sin intervened and has left us an enmity with God so that our free-will is our self-will. And for Torrance, we have no way of escaping this predicament. Thus, even in our moral goodness, we are not able to be in right relationship with God. It is only when we live our justification by grace as this is ours objectively in Christ that we give up all self-reliance and live in fellowship with God as God intended and intends. This thinking also applies to natural knowledge. So, when Vatican I asserted that there cannot be any contradiction between natural knowledge of God and revealed knowledge because God is the source of both, the whole problem of sin and the need for reconciliation *before* we can know the truth of God is bypassed. Natural knowledge is possible because we are God's creatures. But to say that natural knowledge of God is not in conflict with the true God who meets us in his justifying grace through faith is a mistake because no natural knowledge of God is bound to the knowledge of the Father that comes to us from the Son and by the Holy Spirit.

In any case, because of this approach, Rahner then makes a claim that Torrance directly rejected, namely, that the divine decree of which he spoke "necessarily entails an ontological change in human existence."<sup>131</sup> In Rahner's understanding, uncreated grace and created grace mutually condition each other so that God's relation to us through uncreated grace means that God communicates himself to us in the power of the Holy Spirit. But that, Rahner says, "implies a new

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<sup>131</sup> Dych, 36.



*relation* of God to man. But this can only be conceived of as founded upon an absolute entitative modification of man himself, which modification is the real basis of the new real relation of man to God upon which rests the relation of God to man."<sup>132</sup> And for Rahner, "this absolute entitative modification and determination of man is created grace."<sup>133</sup> Further, Rahner maintains that "Grace, being supernaturally divinizing, must rather be thought of as a change in the structure of human consciousness."<sup>134</sup> Recall that Torrance rejected the Hellenistic view of grace as a "detachable and transferrable divine quality which may inhere in or be possessed by the human being to whom it is given in virtue of which he is somehow 'deified' or 'divinised'."<sup>135</sup> Such deification, in Torrance's view suggests a change in human nature. The key problem with this idea is that it then leads one to think grace can be understood by focusing on human nature instead of turning to Christ, who enables us, as fallen creatures, to be in union with God through Christ's forgiving grace and not otherwise. So, for Torrance any changes in us are those which can be seen as the conforming of our lives and activity to the logic of grace by taking up our cross and following Jesus.

This issue of focusing on changes in us instead of on Christ in and through whom we are changed, is no superficial problem because Rahner claims that as humans, we are "inwardly other in structure than [we] would be if [we] did not have" God as our supernatural end which we experience in our desire for mystery.<sup>136</sup> So, to safeguard the gratuity of God's grace without the notion of pure nature, Rahner thinks that grace should be understood as a "supernatural existential." This is a disastrous proposal. On the one hand, it leads to the notion that we have an obediencial potency for God notwithstanding the Fall. On the other hand, it encourages the assumption that we know the true God through natural theology. In order to avoid extrinsicism, this assumption leads Rahner to make statements that certainly appear to ascribe grace and revelation to us directly in

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<sup>132</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 324.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Rahner, TI 5, 103.

<sup>135</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 140.

<sup>136</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 303.

our transcendental experiences. Ascribing grace and revelation directly to us this way opens the door to Pelagianism and to ideas of self-justification.

## **Supernatural Existential**

Let me address what is meant by the supernatural existential by starting with the words of William V. Dych. He asks: "What concept of grace would allow it to be utterly free and gratuitous and at the same time an intrinsic part of all human history?"<sup>137</sup> Notice how very different this question is from the approach taken by Torrance. Recall that for Torrance, grace, as God's gift, "is none other than the risen Christ who confronts men through the word of his Gospel. *Charis* is not here, therefore, in any sense a quality adhering to Paul, but a particular manifestation of the gracious purpose and power of Christ."<sup>138</sup> First, Dych, with Rahner, is rightly trying to recognize and maintain the freedom of God in relation to us. Second, he does so not by turning to the freedom of grace actualized for the human race in the history of Israel and uniquely in Jesus Christ, as Torrance did. Instead, with Rahner, he universalizes grace and then thinks of it as "an intrinsic part of all human history." According to Torrance, God's grace is active in all of human history. But that grace cannot be conceptualized as an intrinsic part of all human history without detaching it from God's actions in his Word and Spirit.

According to Dych, Rahner conceptualizes God in a way that gives creation and humanity "a supernatural end and this end is first 'in intentione.'" And if this is so, then humanity and the world itself "is by that very fact always and everywhere

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<sup>137</sup> Dych, 35.

<sup>138</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace*, 31.

inwardly other in structure than he would be if he did not have this end.”<sup>139</sup> However, while the “new theologians” thought this inner reference “of man to grace” was “a constituent of his ‘nature’ in such a way that the latter cannot be conceived without it, i.e., as pure nature,” Rahner thought this approach made it impossible to give a complete definition of “pure nature.”<sup>140</sup> Rahner wanted to offer a proper view of “nature without grace” in order to preserve the gratuity of grace. And his way of doing that was with his idea of the “supernatural existential.” Then he could say that nature is a remainder concept when it is subtracted from the supernatural existential.<sup>141</sup> But, as noted above, this was bound to be a failure because the whole approach has already universalized grace as an intrinsic part of all human history.

Here is what Rahner thinks regarding the supernatural existential. First, he thinks of revelation itself as, in some fashion, identical with our transcendental dynamisms. Hence, Rahner conceives the universal offer of grace as “always and everywhere and primarily to the transcendental of man as such,” which is accepted and justifying “when this transcendental of man is accepted and sustained by man’s freedom.” Indeed, Rahner believes that “the universality of the factuality of grace from the outset [is] ... an existential of man’s transcendentality

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<sup>139</sup> See Dych, 36. Rahner, TI 1, 302-3 and *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, (hereafter FCF) trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 128. Rahner carefully notes that God’s self-communication is the “necessary condition which makes possible an acceptance of the gift” so that “this acceptance must be borne by God himself. God’s self-communication as offer is also the necessary condition which makes its acceptance possible” *ibid.* But because Rahner focuses on the human subject with his analysis, he detaches the gift (grace as God’s personal self-communication) from Christ the Giver and then says “God’s self-communication must always be present in man as the prior condition of possibility for its acceptance. This is true insofar as man must be understood as a subject who is capable of such an acceptance, and therefore is also obligated to it ... God’s self-communication must be present in every person as the condition which makes its personal acceptance possible” *ibid.* The obvious problem here from Torrance’s perspective is that since it is God alone who enables us to hear his Word and participate in his own self-knowledge and love as the eternal Father, Son and Spirit, that fact eliminates any idea that God’s self-communication is present in everyone because it is present only in those who are living by grace alone and thus relying on Christ alone.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 313-14.

as such.”<sup>142</sup> According to John P. Galvin, the supernatural existential refers to “our being in the world, or our being with others ... this existential ... is not given automatically with human nature, but is rather the result of a gratuitous gift of God ... Because of the supernatural existential, grace is always part of our actual existence.”<sup>143</sup> From Torrance’s perspective presented above, we can easily see the problems embedded in this thinking. Rahner has here conceptualized grace as an infused offer intrinsic to us in our transcendental experiences. This very move destroys the freedom of grace by detaching grace from the active love of God, which comes to the world and to us in the crucified and risen Lord and in him alone, as he is attested in both the Old and New Testaments.

Second, Rahner then presents a view of *conditional* salvation, which Torrance flatly rejected because it throws the weight of salvation back on us sinners who are utterly incapable of escaping the self-will that makes us turn to ourselves for knowledge of the truth in the first place. Third, these remarks demonstrate no recognition of the seriousness of sin with the assumption that we have the freedom to accept the “offer” of grace when, in fact, that freedom must come to us as an act of the risen Lord himself in the power of his Holy Spirit. Thus, for Rahner, the universal offer of grace is accepted and justifying “when this transcendentality of man is accepted and sustained by man’s freedom.” Rahner does mention the problem of sin, but he does not see it the way Torrance does because he thinks that, despite original sin, we have the freedom to accept God’s offer of grace by virtue of our supposed obediencial potency and supernatural existential. So, he visualizes God’s closeness to us as a “holy mystery,” which

is also a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, his real home, that it is a love which shares itself, something familiar which he can approach and turn to from the estrangement of his own perilous and empty life. It is the person who in the forlornness of his guilt still turns in trust to the mystery of his existence which is quietly present and surrenders himself as one who even in his guilt no longer wants to understand

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<sup>142</sup> Rahner, TI 18, 182. See also, FCF, 129.

<sup>143</sup> John P. Galvin, “The Invitation of Grace,” in *A World of Grace*, ed. Leo J. O’Donovan (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 72-3.

himself in a self-centered and self-sufficient way.<sup>144</sup>

Notice here that Rahner speaks of guilt and forgiveness not by explicitly focusing on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ in and through which we are judged and forgiven by his personal actions on our behalf. Instead, his focus is on “a transcendental experience of the absolute closeness of God in his radical self-communication.”<sup>145</sup> Consequently, Rahner never notices one of Torrance’s key points, namely, that our free-will is disclosed in Christ as our self-will which we cannot escape without actually turning to Christ and living by grace alone. Rahner thus argues that “When a person in theoretical or practical knowledge or in subjective activity confronts the abyss of his existence, which alone is the ground of everything, and when this person has the courage to look into himself and to find in these depths his ultimate truth, there he can also have the experience that this abyss accepts him as his true and forgiving security.”<sup>146</sup>

Unfortunately, while Rahner says he wants to abandon human self-sufficiency, it is here that self-sufficiency rears its ugly head. He tells us to look into ourselves to find in our depth experiences the ultimate truth. But the whole point of recognizing grace in its identity with Christ is that he himself *is* the *ultimate truth* who alone can disclose the depth of sin and the nature of his unconditional free love of us in spite of that sin. Rahner thinks by experiencing some sort of an abyss, we experience some forgiving security. But in that way, he espouses exactly what Torrance rejects, namely, conditional salvation. Rahner’s espousal of conditional salvation is evident in his claim that we can only experience the forgiveness that he has in mind by having the courage to look into ourselves to find the ultimate meaning of truth. That, for Torrance, makes forgiveness dependent on our courage to look into ourselves. He would regard that view of grace as the cheap grace espoused by Bultmann, Tillich and Robinson. This claim illustrates that we cannot escape the sin of self-reliance and self-will at all because salvation and God’s forgiving grace do not depend on us having the courage to look into ourselves. These are unconditionally given in Christ himself and his vicarious life of perfect

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<sup>144</sup> Rahner, FCF, 131.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 132.

obedience on our behalf and can only be found in him by looking beyond ourselves toward him. In other words, we can only take up the cross and follow him.

There can be no doubt here that Rahner is speaking of sin, forgiveness, and grace by referring us to ourselves in our experiences of depth. This approach completely side-steps the fact that it is only through Christ's atoning life of perfect obedience to the Father that we can know the true meaning of sin as well as the meaning of salvation through Christ alone and thus by grace alone through faith. It is no accident that Christ is not explicitly mentioned a single time in Rahner's analysis here. This failure to mention Christ explicitly occurs because he has conceptualized the meaning of sin, freedom, salvation, and forgiveness all in general terms based on our transcendental experiences such as experiences of "death," "radical authenticity," and "love."<sup>147</sup>

For Torrance, we need to be made free for grace through the act of Christ himself here and now. Apart from conceptual and ontological union with Christ in faith, our free-will is and remains our self-will. No wonder Rahner can conclude that self-acceptance is the same as accepting Christ when he claims, "Anyone who accepts his own humanity in full ... has accepted the son of Man."<sup>148</sup> Such thinking leads directly to his view of anonymous Christianity, which is essentially a Christianity without Christ. Thus, Rahner advocates what he calls "existentiell Christology" and concludes that an anonymous Christian has a real and existential relation to Christ "implicitly in obedience to his orientation in grace toward the God of absolute, historical presence and self-communication. He exercises this obedience by accepting his own existence without reservation."<sup>149</sup> By contrast, Torrance maintains that when confronted by revelation in its identity with Christ, we are called to take up the cross and follow him since he is our salvation. This major difference between the two theologians stems directly from the fact that Rahner turns toward us in our transcendental experiences to explain the meaning of grace and nature and only then towards Christ. In contrast, Torrance turns exclusively toward Christ who alone justifies sinners thus enabling a true understanding of

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>148</sup> Rahner, TI 4, 119.

<sup>149</sup> Rahner, FCF, 306.

grace and nature. For Torrance, once again, the relationship between Christ and us and thus between grace and nature is an irreversible relationship in which our experiences do not condition or determine in any way the unconditional love of God that comes to us in Christ.

Let me illustrate from another perspective what Rahner has given us here. Listen to the words of William V. Dych. He says Rahner used the word "existential" following Heidegger to analyze human existence by designating "those components which were constitutive of human existence." These components distinguished human beings from other beings. From this, he concludes that "if God created human beings precisely for the life of grace, then the offer and the possibility of grace is given with human nature itself."<sup>150</sup> Notice what is missing here. Torrance thinks Christ is the "personalizing Person" who enables us to be children of God and thus be truly human as God's good creatures by judging us and forgiving us personally. By ascribing the offer and possibility of grace to us in our human nature itself, the problem of sin is simply ignored. We are told that if God created us to share in his own life (which he did), then that must mean that both the offer and possibility of grace is already given to us as part of our human nature as theologically understood within history.

However, after the Fall, our human nature was marked by sin and death and did not possess the offer and possibility of grace in itself. Our human nature was restored for us by being brought into right relation with God by God's grace in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that means the possibility and reality of grace cannot be detached from Christ, the Giver of grace and ascribed directly to us in our fallen human nature. Dych, with Rahner, thinks that "Creation is intrinsically ordered to the supernatural life of grace as its deepest dynamism and final goal."<sup>151</sup> It is true that creation needs God's grace to be what it was meant to be but is not, because of original sin. However, for Torrance, to claim that any of our dynamisms is identical with our movement toward our final goal, which is supposed to be the supernatural life of grace is a flat confusion of nature and grace. It is precisely what Torrance rejected in rejecting the views of John Robinson,

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<sup>150</sup> Dych, 36.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. There is no doubt here that Dych and Rahner have confused nature and grace. Dych writes: "The offer of this grace, then, is an existential, an intrinsic component of human existence and part of the very definition of the human in its historical existence."<sup>152</sup> By contrast, if with Torrance, we do not detach grace from the active mediation of Christ himself through the power of his Holy Spirit, who is always the Giver of grace, then grace, as God's action of love for us in Christ, is not and never becomes a "component of human existence" so that it is "part of the very definition of the human in its historical existence."<sup>153</sup> So, for Torrance, the offer and possibility of grace meets us only in an encounter with the Word of God, which comes to us in Christ. To live by grace is to accept Christ as the Lord and Savior of the world; it cannot mean simply self-acceptance in our supposed innate movement toward absolute being or what Rahner calls "holy mystery," and then equates with the Trinity. The difference here is that Torrance conceptualizes God's self-communication in Christ in its identity "with God himself in his own eternal Being" with the result that "the Gift and the Giver are one" so that in him we encounter God as he is in himself and also toward us.<sup>154</sup> Rahner and Dych conceptualize God's self-communication as a universal "existential" that is given directly to everyone in their depth experiences or experiences of self-transcendence.<sup>155</sup> That thinking detaches grace from Christ, the Giver of grace, and cuts us off from God in his eternal oneness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, both noetically and ontologically.

On the one hand, Rahner thinks that "nature has a certain affinity for grace," which essentially means an "affinity for the supernatural existential."<sup>156</sup> This affinity, he believes, is the "concrete mode in which human nature was created and actually exists as a result of God's intention in creating it."<sup>157</sup> Because of this, "'Pure nature' is an abstract possibility, not a reality. Hence ... the supernatural existential wants

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 182.

<sup>155</sup> Dych, 36-8.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.



to affirm something about the reality of grace, namely, that it is a constituent part of our historical human existence."<sup>158</sup> Dych explains that this implies that the terms supernatural and existential affirm "that grace is utterly free and gratuitous and at the same time that it is utterly intrinsic to human nature and human existence." Consequently, "the offer of grace is part of being human."<sup>159</sup> On the other hand, the supernatural existential allows us to understand "God's gracious presence in human existence as an existential" such that God's presence is seen as "universal." Because it is a "transcendental determination" that "permeates and pervades all of human existence" it is "not confined to one compartment of human life or to particular times and places, but touches everything human."<sup>160</sup>

Dych's presentation here certainly is an accurate interpretation of Rahner's theology as Rahner claims that God's self-communication "radicalizes" our transcendental experiences so that "the original experience of God even in his self-communication can be so universal, so unthematic and so 'unreligious' that it takes place, unnamed but really, wherever we are living out our existence."<sup>161</sup> This thinking leads Rahner to approach Christology in a way Torrance did not. Instead of allowing Christ in his uniqueness as God become man to be his sole starting point, Rahner says,

We are not starting out from the Christological formulations of the New Testament in Paul and John ... we are not assuming the impossibility of going behind such a 'late' New Testament Christology to ask about a more original and somewhat more simple experience of faith with the historical Jesus, in his message, his death, and his achieved finality that we describe as his resurrection.<sup>162</sup>

This approach to Christology is precisely what Torrance firmly rejects by insisting that we cannot separate John and Paul from the other New Testament writings with

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 37-8.

<sup>161</sup> Rahner, FCF, 132.

<sup>162</sup> Rahner, TI 18:145.

the claim that we can have a relationship with the historical Jesus, which bypasses his uniqueness as truly divine and truly human. He thus insists that “we know Christ by acknowledging that what confronts us is *revelation*, revelation that tells us that here is true man and true God.”<sup>163</sup> This revelation is a mystery which we “cannot explain or understand out of our own knowledge” since “he is God, and very God, and yet man and very man: God and man become one person. We know Christ in the mystery of that duality in unity.”<sup>164</sup> Therefore, when we know Christ in his uniqueness, that knowledge comes to us from him alone through the power of his Holy Spirit as a miraculous act of God, and not from us or on account of anything we could know from a simple historical experience of Jesus and his message. Torrance says we must be obedient to this mystery

and seek in every way to let it *declare itself* to us ... we must be faithful to the actual facts, and never allow preconceived notions or theories to cut away some of the facts at the start ... The ultimate fact that confronts us, embedded in history and in the historical witness and proclamation 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.<sup>165</sup>

All of this thinking undercuts Rahner’s attempt to discover what he calls a “questing” or “searching” Christology. Rahner’s search for an a priori anthropology, which he thinks will result in a proper Christology, engages in exactly the thinking Torrance here claims is impossible. Rahner maintains that his searching Christology (the human search for a savior with or without encountering Jesus) is the basis for understanding Christology and operates without an encounter with the concrete historical Jesus.<sup>166</sup> This approach presumes not only that we can understand the mystery of Christ from our own prior understanding of mystery and reality. It also assumes that we can know something of Christ as savior without a specific

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<sup>163</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 3.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> Rahner, FCF, 212.

encounter with him. Rahner's "transcendental Christology," therefore, "asks about the a priori possibilities in man which make the coming of the message of Christ possible."<sup>167</sup> Torrance, however, tells us that there is no such *a priori* because when we know Christ, we immediately ascribe the possibility of that knowledge to him and only to him. In his words: "He manifests himself and gives himself to us by his own power and agency, by his Holy Spirit, and in the very act of knowing him we ascribe all the possibility of our knowing him to Christ alone, and none of it to ourselves."<sup>168</sup>

Rahner's idea of a supernatural existential allows him to ascribe this possibility directly to us. But in doing this, he obviates the need for Christ at the outset and all along the line to know the truth of revelation and of Christology, including the proper meaning of grace in relation to nature. Many implications follow from this, not the least of which is that he believes "the revealed Word and natural knowledge of God mutually condition each other;"<sup>169</sup> that "the *a priori* transcendental subjectivity of the knower on the one hand and the object of knowledge (and of freedom) on the other are related to one another in such a way that they *mutually condition* one another;"<sup>170</sup> and that "anthropology and Christology mutually determine each other,"<sup>171</sup> when in fact they do not. Any such ideas would imply that the truth of our knowledge of Christ and of grace comes, at least in part, from us instead of exclusively from Christ. By contrast, Torrance firmly maintains that such views undermine the sovereignty of God's grace and love that meets us in Christ. Here I would just like focus on two key points, namely, the fact that grace cannot be detached from Christ the Giver of grace and the fact that this means grace simply cannot be properly conceptualized as infused grace. Let me return to the reason why Torrance rejected the notion of created grace to explain this matter.

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<sup>167</sup> Rahner, FCF, 207.

<sup>168</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 2.

<sup>169</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 98.

<sup>170</sup> Rahner, TI, 11, 87.

<sup>171</sup> Rahner, TI 9, 28.

## Infused Grace and Created Grace

Torrance states there is a

deep and subtle element of Pelagianism in the Roman doctrine of grace, as it emerges in its notion of the Church (to use modern terminology) as the extension of the Incarnation or the prolongation of Redemption, or in its doctrine of the Priesthood as mediating salvation not only from the side of God toward man but from the side of man toward God.<sup>172</sup>

Torrance maintains that from the Reformed perspective, human ministry represents Christ by acting on his authority, but "it does not represent the people, for only Christ can take man's place, and act for man before the Father. In other words, it rejects the notion of created grace or connatural grace, both in its understanding of salvation and in its understanding of the ministry."<sup>173</sup> There is not enough space here to present an entire development of these ideas. It is enough to note where this thinking finally leads.

Torrance claims that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was a "medieval synthesis" following the Augustinian tradition using realist Aristotelian terms that was tainted by a nominalistic view "of definable, controllable grace, which we find in Gratian for example, with the realist notion of conferring or causing grace *physice ex opere operato*."<sup>174</sup> This perspective was based on an Augustinian idea of a "sacramental universe" and finally led to the notion that there was "an inherent relation between logical forms and the nature of the truth."<sup>175</sup> In this context, medieval theology developed a view of the relationship between God and creatures in such a way that "even the revelation of God in Christ was interpreted within this system." Unfortunately, this approach "tended to mean that revelation was used to fill out a conception of being established independently on

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<sup>172</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 176.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

the ground of natural theology."<sup>176</sup> On this basis, when the Church was then regarded as an extension of the incarnation, "the institutional Church was held to represent in its forms and dogmas the objectification of the truth in its institutional and rational structure ... It was on this ground that the Church itself came to assume supreme authority, for the expression of the mind of the Church in its dogmatic definitions was held to be the expression of the nature of the Truth."<sup>177</sup> It will be recalled that Torrance opposed this view because it substitutes *logical truth* rather than the *truth of being* in its identity with Christ himself as Lord of the church for the truth itself. The effect of this thinking meant, among other things, that "grace came to be regarded from a more ontological point of view" as "a divine power at work in human being transforming and changing it invisibly" so that it was understood as "grace actualizing itself within the physical as well as the spiritual, metaphysically heightening and exalting creaturely existence."<sup>178</sup> Grace thus came to be seen as "a divine causation, and there follows from it a divine effect in the creature. It is almost like a supernatural potency that is infused into human beings," which inheres in one's soul, lifting us to a vision of God. That, Torrance says, is the "notion of *created grace*, grace actualizing itself in the creature and elevating it to supernatural existence, *ontological grace* at work in man's very being and raising him to a higher ontological order."<sup>179</sup>

Torrance's main objection here is to the idea of *causality*, which he says "appears to import a confusion between Creator and the creature; and to think of grace as deifying man or heightening his being until he attains the level of a supernatural order."<sup>180</sup> But that Torrance says seems to "do docetic violence to creaturely human nature."<sup>181</sup> Torrance notes that this problem does not just appear in Roman Catholicism but takes the form of theology lapsing into anthropology and subjectivism in Protestant theology with notions of "co-operation and co-

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

redemption.” In this context, Torrance conveys his key point by applying the *homoousion* to his view of grace. This application of the *homoousion* eliminates both the medieval “proliferation of *graces*” and “the notion of grace as a detachable quality which could be made to inhere in creaturely being.”<sup>182</sup> Torrance asserts, “the doctrine of *created grace* could only be regarded as a species of Arianism.”<sup>183</sup> So when he says that in Christ, the Gift (grace) and the Giver are one, he means that the self-communication that meets us in Christ is God himself in the Person of his Son, who is one in being with the Father and the Spirit. That means that grace is nothing other than God himself personally communicating with us.

The Gift and the Giver are one. Grace is not something that can be detached from God and made to inhere in creaturely being as ‘created grace’; nor is it something that can be proliferated in many forms; nor is it something that we can have more or less of, as if grace could be construed in quantitative terms ... Grace is whole and indivisible because it is identical with the personal self-giving of God to us in his Son. It is identical with Jesus Christ.<sup>184</sup>

As noted above, there is no doubt that Rahner and Dych also wanted to speak of grace as God communicating himself personally to us and not as a thing transmitted to us. This intention to speak of grace as God’s personal self-communication led Dych to assert that “Rahner offers a way to return to the more personal and more immediately religious understanding of grace in Scripture and the Fathers by thinking of grace not just as a created effect of God’s efficient causality, but, based on an analogy with the immediate presence of God in the beatific vision, as God’s actual presence and indwelling through a mode of quasi-formal causality.”<sup>185</sup> Within this perspective, Dych notes that “the supernatural existential asserts that God in his own personal Spirit is present throughout all of history, and that human beings in all of their human encounters are also

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid. 182-3.

<sup>185</sup> Dych, 39.

encountering God."<sup>186</sup> With his notion of the supernatural existential then Rahner uses the notion of "quasi-formal causality" to explain that God has made himself an intrinsic principle of human transcendental. Thus, while Rahner, like Torrance, wants to say that God communicates himself and not just something to us, the problem appears in his belief that "In a *quasi-formal* causality he really and in the strictest sense of the word bestows *himself*."<sup>187</sup> Rahner uses the word "quasi" to preserve the freedom of God acting causally in this way.<sup>188</sup>

Conceptualized in this way, however, Rahner says God's "self-communication" signifies "that God in his own most proper reality makes himself the inner-most constitutive element of man"<sup>189</sup> so that "God's offer of himself belongs to all men and is a characteristic of man's transcendence and his transcendental" and "cannot by simple and individual acts of reflection ... be differentiated from those basic structures of human transcendence."<sup>190</sup> For Rahner, then our transcendental knowledge "which is present always and everywhere in the actualization of the human spirit in knowledge and freedom, but present unthematically, is a moment which must be distinguished from verbal and propositional revelation as such."<sup>191</sup> Nonetheless, Rahner claims this still must be understood as God's self-revelation. In his words, "This transcendental moment in revelation is a modification of our transcendental consciousness produced permanently by God in grace. But such a modification is really an original and permanent element in our consciousness as the basic and original luminosity of our existence. And as an element in our transcendental which is constituted by God's self-communication, it is already revelation in the proper sense."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 36.

<sup>188</sup> Rahner, TI 1, 330-1.

<sup>189</sup> Rahner, FCF, 116.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

The difference between Torrance and Rahner here is enormous because Torrance identifies grace with Christ himself as the *truth of being* while Rahner thinks "it is only possible to speak of this grace in a meaningful way at all within a transcendental anthropological context."<sup>193</sup> From this, Rahner concludes that "grace is God himself in self-communication, grace is not a 'thing' but—as communicated grace—a conditioning of the spiritual and intellectual subject as such to a direct relationship with God."<sup>194</sup> Thus, grace "can only be understood from the point of view of the subject, with his transcendental nature, experienced as a being-in-reference to the reality of absolute truth and free-ranging, infinite, absolutely valid love. It can only be understood in one's innermost regions as an immediacy before the absolute mystery of God."<sup>195</sup> How is this different from Torrance's view? It is different, in that at the most critical point in his reflections Rahner turns to the human subject to understand grace, instead of turning to Christ who is the grace of God acting for us in his unconditional love of us. So Rahner and Dych can then claim that human beings in all their human encounters are encountering God. That conclusion, unfortunately, ends up ascribing grace directly to everyone in their transcendental experiences as the goal of such experiences which can be equated with absolute truth without identifying that truth with Jesus Christ himself who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In this way, grace is detached from the Giver of grace and sought within our depth experiences in a manner similar to the approaches of Tillich, Robinson, and Bultmann, as discussed above.

### **Grace is Identical with Jesus Christ**

The very idea that God's grace, which cannot be separated from Christ the Giver of grace, might be understood as the basic and original luminosity of our existence makes grace indistinguishable from our very existence, as Torrance has already suggested. This conclusion confuses the Creator and the creature by thinking *causally* about grace instead of understanding grace exclusively as God's personal actions of love toward us in his Word and Spirit. The proof of this confusion can be

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<sup>193</sup> Rahner, TI 9, 36.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.



seen in the comments of Stephen Duffy, who writes that "Grace, therefore, is experienced though not as grace, for it is psychologically indistinguishable from the stirrings of human transcendental."<sup>196</sup> Here, the problem of unthematic or non-conceptual knowledge of God rears its ugly head in connection with knowledge of God's grace. One cannot speak of grace in its identity with Christ the Giver of grace without conceptual knowledge of Christ as God himself acting for us here and now through the power of his Holy Spirit. So, the statement that grace can be experienced, "though not as grace," raises the question of what exactly we are then experiencing, if it is not God's coming to us in Christ! Moreover, to claim that grace can or should be understood psychologically rather than theologically with the result that it is "indistinguishable from the stirrings of human transcendental" clearly implies that creatures in their transcendental experiences cannot be clearly distinguished from God present to them and even indwelling them in his Word and Spirit.

All these difficulties result from the failure to recognize and maintain that grace simply cannot be detached from the Giver of grace without spoiling its proper theological meaning. Let me give one practical example of the problems with Rahner's transcendental method here as it relates to God's self-revelation. Because he conceptualizes grace and revelation by equating them with our transcendental experiences, he does not begin and end his thinking about the resurrection with the crucified and risen Lord himself as Torrance invariably does. So, Rahner claims that,

If one has a radical hope of attaining a definitive identity and does not believe that one can steal away with one's obligations into the emptiness of non-existence, one has already grasped and accepted the resurrection in its real content ... The absoluteness of the radical hope in which a human being apprehends his or her total existence as destined and empowered to reach definitive form can quite properly be regarded as grace, which permeates this existence always and everywhere. This grace is revelation in the strictest sense ... this certainly is revelation, even if this is not envisaged as coming from

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<sup>196</sup> Stephen Duffy, "Experience of Grace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 48.

'outside.'<sup>197</sup>

All of Rahner's presuppositions are here on display. Instead of pointing us directly to the risen Lord who alone is the object of our faith and hope and is thus himself the enabling condition of our knowledge of eternal life, Rahner directs us to our hope for some sort of "definitive identity." In that way, he thinks we already grasp the real content of the resurrection. That is simply untrue. As Torrance insists, "the incarnation and resurrection force themselves upon our minds" with the result that "in the life and work of Jesus Christ we are confronted with an ultimate self-revelation of God into the truth of which there is no way of penetrating from what we already know or believe we know, far less of establishing or verifying it on grounds that are outside it."<sup>198</sup> And that truth claims us by claiming

the unreserved fidelity of our minds. It is no blind act of faith that is required, divorced from any recognition of credibility, for the reality of the incarnation or the resurrection is the kind of objectivity which makes itself accessible to our apprehension, creating the condition for its recognition and acceptance, that is, in such a way that belief on our part is the subjective pole of commitment to objective reality, but intelligent commitment to an objectively intelligible reality which is to be grasped only through a repentant rethinking and structural

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<sup>197</sup> Karl Rahner and Karl-Heinz Weger, *Our Christian Faith: Answers for the Future*, trans. Francis McDonagh (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 110-11. Envisioning the resurrection in this abstract fashion led Rahner to make a statement that Torrance never would make, namely, "the knowledge of man's resurrection given with his transcendently necessary hope is a statement of philosophical anthropology even before any real revelation in the Word" (Rahner, TI 17, 18).

<sup>198</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 18.

recasting of all our preconceptions.<sup>199</sup>

Torrance here does not just refer to our hope for some vague definitive end as Rahner did. Torrance here is claiming that the very meaning of Christian hope is determined by the fact that Christ has risen from the dead and is coming again. He says, "*The raising of the Christ is the act of God, whose significance is not to be compared with any event before or after. It is the primal datum of theology, from which there can be no abstracting, and the normative presupposition for every valid dogmatic judgment and for the meaningful construction of a Christian theology.*"<sup>200</sup> For Torrance, "The resurrection cannot be detached from Christ himself, and considered as a phenomenon on its own to be compared and judged in the light of other phenomena."<sup>201</sup> Thus, for Torrance, our hope as Christian hope, is shaped by the fact that Jesus, who rose bodily from the dead, now lives eternally as the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 18-19. Illustrating the fact that if knowledge of God begins with an ill-conceived view of humanity it will lead to a misunderstanding of both God and humanity Torrance frequently argues that it is precisely the *homoousion* that "does not allow us indiscriminately to read back into God what is human and finite" *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 99. Scientific theology he says cuts "away any mythological projection of ideas of our own devising into God" (ibid.). He maintains that while it is not always easy to distinguish objective "states of affairs from subjective states of affairs," since we constantly tend to get in the way because of our "self-centredness," it is still important to do so in all areas of reflection (ibid.). But in theology it is more difficult because "due to our deep-rooted sin and selfishness we are alienated from God in our minds, and need to be reconciled to him. Hence ... a repentant rethinking of what we have already claimed to know and a profound reorganisation of our consciousness are required of us in knowing God, as was made clear by Jesus when calling for disciples he insisted that they must renounce themselves and take up their cross in following him" (ibid., 100). Torrance believes it is only by holding together the unity between the economic activity of God in the Spirit and in the Son "that we may be prevented from reading back into God himself the material or creaturely images (e.g. latent in human father-son relations) ... creaturely images naturally latent in the forms of thought and speech employed by divine revelation to us are made to refer transparently or in a diaphanous way to God without being projected into his divine Nature" (ibid., 101). We must therefore exercise "critical discernment of what we may read back from the incarnation into God and what we may not read back into him" Thomas F. Torrance, "The Christian Apprehension of God the Father," in Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., ed. *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 137. We may not read the kind of sonship we experience on earth back into God because "we cannot project the creaturely relations inherent in human sonship into the Creator. Nor, of course, can we read gender back into God, for gender belongs to creatures only" (ibid.).

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 46.

ascended Lord and promises us a share in that eternal life. The empty tomb points to the fact that he rose bodily from the dead and that he himself, as the incarnate and risen Lord, is the one who enables our hope for eternal life and enables us to live as new creatures in him. Torrance does not refer to the resurrection in some vague way as our hope for something definitive that can be understood apart from the risen Lord himself. It certainly cannot be understood from our radical hope of attaining a definitive identity as Rahner claimed.<sup>202</sup>

The most important point here is that because Rahner consistently detaches grace from Christ the Giver of grace, he can explain hope from our transcendental experiences of hope instead of exclusively from understanding Christ himself as the risen Lord who alone enables hope for eternal life and enables us to live as part of the new creation through union with Christ. Rahner here equates grace with our radical hope, which he thinks can be explained from philosophical anthropology and then theologically. So naturally enough, he thinks this grace permeates our existence and can also be regarded as God's revelation, which does not have to come from outside us. But the truth is that God's self-revelation and grace cannot be detached from Christ the incarnate, risen, ascended, and coming Lord, and thus must come to us from him and thus from beyond our experiences of hope and in contrast to any logical view of hope grounded in transcendental experience conceived philosophically or theologically. All of Rahner's thinking here is confirmed when he claims that self-acceptance is the same as accepting Christ. Hence, "Anyone therefore, no matter how remote from any revelation formulated in words, who accepts his existence, that is, his humanity ... says yes to Christ, even when he does not know that he does ... Anyone who accepts his own humanity in full ... has accepted the son of Man..."<sup>203</sup> The only way this could be true is if one had confused nature and grace utilizing the supernatural existential so that self-acceptance is then equated with acceptance of Christ. The problem here is that, as Torrance

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<sup>202</sup> It is no accident that when Rahner speaks of Christ's resurrection he refers to "his achieved finality that we describe as his resurrection" (TI 18, 145). The clear implication is that it is not the risen Lord himself risen bodily from the dead who is the sole object of reflection but some sort of vague "achieved finality" that we choose to describe as resurrection!

<sup>203</sup> TI 4:119.

claims, one cannot detach atonement from the incarnation and resurrection. If incarnation is not detached from atonement, then it will be seen that it is only by turning *from* ourselves as the sinners we are apart from Christ, and turning *toward* him as the one in whom our enmity to God is overcome, that we can live as those who are justified by grace alone and thus through union with Christ alone.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by noting how Dych defends Rahner's position as a strictly theological position. He argues once again that Rahner uses his philosophy to explain his theology but that his starting point is a "conviction of faith," that is,

'a strictly theological proposition'. In this instance the faith conviction is rooted in the scriptural assertion of God's universal saving will, and in the belief that if God truly wishes the salvation of all, then it must be a concrete possibility for everyone. One way, although obviously not the only way, of understanding grace as a universal possibility is to understand it as an existential in human life. Philosophy serves theology's task of seeking an understanding of faith in the sense in which Anselm defined theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding.<sup>204</sup>

It is precisely here that Torrance's view of Anselm and Dych's view of Anselm radically differ. Torrance flatly rejects any idea of unthematic and non-objective or non-conceptual knowledge of God, Christ, revelation, and grace, claiming with Anselm that we cannot have experience of God, belief in God or knowledge of God without concepts: "*fides esse nequit sine conceptione*."<sup>205</sup> Thus, for Torrance, knowledge of God comes to us through our knowledge of God the Father, who we know through union with his incarnate Son in faith. Any other view, Torrance claimed, would end with mythological projection from us as human subjects instead of with objective knowledge of the Trinity grounded in God's economic trinitarian self-revelation. Torrance held this view because he maintained that "our knowing of

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<sup>204</sup> Dych, 39.

<sup>205</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 170 and "Truth and Authority," 228.

God is grounded in his knowing of us.”<sup>206</sup> That means that “when we speak of God as Father, therefore, we are not using the term ‘Father’ in a transferred, improper, or inadequate sense; we are using it in its completely proper sense, which is determined by the intrinsic Fatherhood of God himself.”<sup>207</sup>

So, when Dych speaks of faith seeking understanding, he claims that if God wills to save all, then salvation must be a concrete possibility for everyone. It is, of course—but the possibility is in the reality of God acting for all people in his incarnate Word and through his Holy Spirit and this cannot be universalized by equating it with something that is supposedly present in each person in the depth of their experiences of self-transcendence. However, with Rahner, Dych holds that “God-talk makes sense and can point to its roots in experience” with the transcendental Thomist view that such God-talk “is always through the world of our objective, historical experience and as an element *within* that experience. God, however, is not encountered as one object among others in that world, but as the deepest dimension of all our encounters.”<sup>208</sup> It is exactly here that Dych turns once again to Rahner’s view that knowledge of God is not knowledge of an “object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from outside” because such knowledge has the character of “a transcendental experience.”<sup>209</sup> From this he concludes with Rahner’s own words that “insofar as this subjective, non-objective luminosity of the subject in its transcendence is always orientated toward the holy mystery, the knowledge of God is always present unthematically and without name, and not just when we begin to speak of it.”<sup>210</sup>

Nevertheless, as discussed above, if Torrance is right, and I think he is, then we can only know God as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to the extent that we rely exclusively upon the grace of God, which meets us in Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit. When that occurs, we then know God’s name while

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<sup>206</sup> Torrance, “The Christian Apprehension of God the Father,” 137.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Dych, 44.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. Dych is citing Rahner, FCF, 21.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

simultaneously knowing that, apart from grace, which meets us in judgment and forgiveness in Christ, we are at enmity with God and not oriented toward him as some generally known "holy mystery." We also know that while the Christian God is holy and a mystery, that does not mean that we have true knowledge of the Trinity just by referring to God as a holy mystery that can be known from an experience of the nameless. God in Christ is not nameless but has a name, and that is the name into which Christians are baptized.

Consequently, the point of this article is to illustrate that there can be genuine union between Catholic and Protestant theologians regarding knowledge of God, revelation, and grace if and to the extent that both sides are willing to begin and end their theologies with Jesus Christ alone and with the justification that comes to humanity in and through him alone. So, instead of claiming that self-acceptance means accepting God, which it does not, one would have to point to Christ himself as the sole possibility and reality of salvation for the human race and for the whole world. This means that true knowledge of God really does involve knowledge of a definite object, namely, the triune God who makes himself known to us through union with Christ and thus with the Father in faith. Such knowledge does not refer to some nameless reality found in universal human depth experiences but to that particular object which can be experienced and known only as Christ himself is allowed to disclose himself to us through the power of his Holy Spirit. In this way, instead of retreating from the *truth of being*, with the idea of God as the nameless which is identified from a transcendental experience, we may know the truth of God's being from an encounter with his Word and Spirit and thus know God as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.





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## **INCARNATION, CREATION, AND NEW CREATION:**

### **T. F. TORRANCE AND A THEOLOGICAL RE-VISIONING OF THE ARTS**

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T. F. Torrance's reflections could range across an impressively wide variety of fields and disciplines, and this was wholly consonant with his belief that a biblically-based, Nicene, trinitarian faith could be inexhaustibly fruitful for every aspect of life and culture. Yet despite this, he wrote virtually nothing about the creative arts. He had a lively appreciation of music and the visual arts, and his written and spoken rhetoric could soar to inspiring heights, but he never turned to the arts themselves as a topic of sustained theological interest. This essay is an attempt to show that the distinctive shape and contours of his theology have much to offer those who work at the intersection of the arts and faith, far more than we perhaps might at first expect. To demonstrate this, I am going to concentrate on four of Torrance's characteristic emphases and explore the potential of each to engage some of the commonest and most pressing themes in the current conversations between theology and the arts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship at the American Academy of Religion, November 16th, 2018 in Denver, Colorado. I am very grateful for the discussion that followed the presentation.

We will discover that the traffic runs in both directions: from theology to the arts, and vice versa. Not only can Torrance's work provide considerable resources for those at work in the world of the arts (as practitioners or theoreticians); that world in turn can enrich, enliven, and deepen our conceptual grasp of the content of the theology he espoused, and of the methodological commitments his theology entailed. There is an intriguing parallel here with Torrance's engagement with the natural sciences. Not surprisingly, he believed theology had massive potential to illuminate scientific inquiry and exploration. But he was also convinced that through sustained immersion in the literature of the natural sciences (especially the philosophy of science), and through extended interaction with practising scientists, incalculable paybacks lay in store for the theologian. Science could provide theology with fresh conceptual tools and language, a host of methodological clarifications, and not least the chance to expunge numerous pseudo-problems that had bedevilled the history of theology. In other words, Torrance found that engaging with the physical sciences could enable theology to be more "rational": which is to say, following John Macmurray,<sup>2</sup> more faithful to the nature of its object of study. I believe that an analogous engagement with the practices and discourses of the arts can yield comparable benefits.

## 1) Christ and Creation

Even a cursory glance at a major work of Torrance's will show that he was impelled by a theological vision of the created world that is irreducibly Christological. Today, such a vision—or something very close to it—is not hard to find among constructive or systematic theologians. And there are many leading biblical scholars who have commended just such an outlook on exegetical grounds.<sup>3</sup> But in the 1970s, when Torrance was at the height of his powers, all this was a relative rarity in the halls of academic theology, especially in the UK. Doctrines of creation were often elaborated with only a passing nod toward Christology. So when in 1976, Torrance's son Iain

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<sup>2</sup> John Macmurray, *Reason and Emotion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Hays, "Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 5–21; Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010).

lent me a copy of his father's *Space, Time and Resurrection* just after it was published,<sup>4</sup> I was immediately struck by the way this theologian managed to combine a vista of breath-taking cosmic scope—from creation to new creation—with an unflinching concentration on the decisive particularity of Jesus Christ, divine and human. Torrance never underplayed the stubborn testimony of the New Testament: that the very *raison d'être* of the created order and its entire *telos* are to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, the one through whom and for whom God made all things, the one by whom all things hold together, and the one in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself through a human, crucified Messiah.<sup>5</sup> Expanding this in line with the Irenaean and Athanasian tradition he so lauded, Torrance insisted that the contingent order is to be understood resolutely in the light of the relation of the incarnate Son to the Father. Any reduction of the Logos to an impersonal principle, a pre-existing form or pattern of rationality to which God was somehow answerable *a priori*, was strenuously shunned. The Logos is none other than the eternal Son of the Father, and it is this Son who has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. Out of this relation of love intrinsic to the very being of God all things were loved into existence, and into this relation all things are being enfolded toward their final consummation, and End previewed in the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. "The whole universe," Torrance writes, "is ontologically bound to the incarnate and risen Jesus".<sup>6</sup> And just because of this we can say that creation is "proleptically conditioned by redemption."<sup>7</sup>

The implications of this for the world of the arts are immense, indeed limitless. We can highlight two in particular. The first relates to what we might call *the "alreadyness" of the new creation*. It was axiomatic to Torrance that creation's renewal had *already* been established concretely in the humanity of Christ, risen and ascended. In Jesus the Messiah, the Creator has *already* broken into this age,

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Jn. 1:1; Heb. 1:1; Col. 1:15–20.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001), 204.

the age of sin, suffering, injustice, and death; *already* snapped the chains that hold the world back; and *already* raised and exalted this same Jesus from the dead, re-creating his lacerated, dead, decaying human body to enjoy an unimaginably new mode of life. In this light, numerous aspects of artistic making and engagement can be re-thought. Take, for example, the language of “prophetic”, much beloved in current theology and the arts discourse today. The term is often used to stress that artists need to be agents of social critique, exposing and undermining oppressive forces at work in society at large. This is undoubtedly a legitimate and vitally important part of the vocation of many artists.<sup>8</sup> But a heavy dependence on prophetic rhetoric, if not carefully situated theologically, can lead all too easily into forms of critique that have neither a positive source nor a fruitful end. When the Hebrew prophets delivered their stinging invectives against social corruption it was above all because of a prior belief in God’s covenant commitment to his people—the “alreadyness” of an irrevocable pledge, from which, of course, stringent obligations followed. The fierce words, the exposure of exploitation and tyranny, were energized at root by divine faithfulness, God’s loving dedication oriented ultimately toward reconciliation. Likewise, the intense rhetoric of judgement we find in, say, the letters of the New Testament is fueled primarily by the conviction that in Christ, the God of love has *already* decisively unmasked and disarmed the principalities and powers, *already* shown that “their time is up”. The last judgement is at heart the outworking of the first. Grounding the prophetic dimension of an artist’s calling in God’s prior gracious acts in this way will likely lead to an art that is far more severe and searching than any merely self-generated attempts at unmasking and denouncing wrong, and far more likely to lead to lasting healing and *shalom*. Among hundreds of contemporary examples of this at work, the art of African-American artist Steve Prince stands out for me: his remarkable evocation of an animated hope in the midst of the death-dealing horrors of Hurricane Katrina comes to mind as a paradigm of “prophetic art” today.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> On this, see Willie James Jennings, “Embodying the Artistic Spirit and the Prophetic Arts,” *Literature and Theology* 30, no. 3 (2016): 256–64.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.eyekons.com/steve\\_prince](https://www.eyekons.com/steve_prince)

A sense of the “already” is likewise also sorely needed, I suggest, in contemporary discussions of *beauty*. Doubtless, the concept of beauty needs to be engaged at some stage by a theology of the arts. But I suggest we need to be wary of theologies of the transcendentals (such as beauty, truth, goodness) that bear little relation to what has been secured already in Christ, in advance of any beauty-seeking action of our own. If we are to speak of created beauty (or, indeed, God’s beauty) by employing the classically cited qualities such as radiance, diverse unity, perfection, attraction, and so forth, these will need to be constantly re-configured around the dynamic of Christ’s incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. So, for example, those of us engaged in the theology-arts conversation speak much of material beauty—whether the beauty we perceive in the created world or the beauty we bring about through art. But we tend to speak much less of the beauty of the new creation “bodied forth” in Jesus Christ, which is surely the measure and paradigm of the beauty intended by the Creator. In the one conceived and empowered by the Spirit, born in a stable, hounded to a shameful death, vindicated by God on the third day, raised as a “spiritual body”, and exalted to the right hand of God—in this very concrete human being the stuff of the earth has been made new, brought to its divinely intended, dazzling (beautiful) culmination. We have here a way of conceiving beauty that has colossal re-formative power, not least in enabling us to eschew the sentimentality that so often creeps into beauty-talk.<sup>10</sup>

A second series of implications of Torrance’s Christologically integrated theology of creation for the arts relate to its highly conspicuous *eschatological thrust*. Indeed, we have just touched upon this. In keeping with prominent strands in the New Testament, Torrance regards the raising of the crucified Jesus as an advance performance, a preview not only of the “spiritual body” to be given to those in Christ, but of the final re-making of the entire space-time continuum,

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<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *A Peculiar Orthodoxy: Reflections on Theology and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), chs 2 and 3. Hans Urs Von Balthasar asks: “How could we ... understand the ‘beauty’ of the Cross without the abysmal darkness into which the Crucified plunges?” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics. Vol I: Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1982), 117. See also David Luy, “The Aesthetic Collision: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity and the Cross,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 2 (2011): 154–69.

confirming God's primordial pledge to sustain this world and not let it go.<sup>11</sup> This is the logic behind John's almost hyperbolic re-visioning of Isaiah's "new heaven and new earth" in the book of Revelation: Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the one encompassing creation *and* new creation in one.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the idea that a Christian artist may on occasion be called to evoke or portray the eschaton is likely to be widely scorned today, even dismissed altogether, and for quite understandable reasons: it could easily be seen to encourage escapism, Platonised images of heaven, over-neat closures, hegemonic triumphalism, and so on. But when encountered as an embodiment of God's future, a taste of the renewed earth in the midst of this physical world, such art may well have a crucial place in sustaining such a thoroughly material hope. One of the most convincing to my mind, and which avoids the pitfall of portraying the eschaton as a return to Eden, is a painting by the Balinese artist Nyoman Darsane. It takes its cue from Revelation 22, where a perpetual stream flows from God's throne nourishing the tree of life. Darsane welcomes us into the verdant landscape of his own homeland of Bali, but in a richly augmented, expanded, excessively abundant form.<sup>13</sup>

Another way in which this eschatological momentum can find its way into the arts is when artistic practice itself becomes, or is regarded as a foretaste of, the eschatological future. In his vast study of singing in the first thousand years of Christianity, Christopher Page notes a "narrow stream" of thought in the early Church in which "the use of the [singing] voice is [regarded] as one of the principal continuities between the states of bodily life on either side of the grave."<sup>14</sup> Singing *as such* becomes a provisional advance performance of the final "new song" of the

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<sup>11</sup> Of the many works that could be cited, *Space, Time and Resurrection* is the book that first comes to mind as exploring most powerfully this dimension of Torrance's vision.

<sup>12</sup> In my view, Torrance's sermons on the Apocalypse contain some of his best writing. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clarke, 1960).

<sup>13</sup> See Victorian Emily Jones, *The Jesus Question: Jesus the Dancer Part 7: The Art of Nyoman Darsane*, <https://thejesusquestion.org/2012/03/25/jesus-the-dancer-part-7-the-art-of-nyoman-darsane/>, accessed April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Page, *The Christian West and Its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 49.

redeemed. In this connection, the professional soprano and theologian Awet Andemichael can write of singing as “a bridge between our created selves and the new creation.” In singing the Sanctus, she says, “it as if the veil between this in-between place and the fully-new creation were rendered permeable.”<sup>15</sup> Along related lines, it is not far-fetched to see dance at its best as an “advanced echo” of the resurrected “spiritual” body of 1 Corinthians 15: a body reaching towards its ultimate animation by the Spirit (of which more below).<sup>16</sup>

Torrance’s alertness to the eschatological is also critical when considering the transformative power of the arts. “See, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The new creation does not obliterate the material world, but—in a way that stretches our intellectual imagination to its limits—re-configures it, re-makes it as new. Artists, of course, are adept at taking what has been distorted and twisted, stained and spoiled, and re-fashioning it into something of radiance and promise. This is the re-creativity we see when a musician like Jacob Collier re-harmonizes music that others dismiss as moribund and best left to die.<sup>17</sup> It is the re-creativity on display in a sculpture commissioned by the British Museum in 2005, “Tree of Life”, made entirely from de-commissioned weapons from the Mozambique civil war, alluding to the tree of life in the new creation of Revelation 22:2.<sup>18</sup> And—pre-eminently—it is the re-creativity that Paul struggles to articulate in 1 Corinthians 15:35–57 when he writes of our resurrection bodies in the world to come. Echoing the Gospels’ narratives of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, and in keeping with Jewish tradition, he finds himself speaking of the physicality of the new body. But this cannot be the mere continuation of the bodily life we know now. As Torrance put it so memorably, with the resurrection of Jesus (and by implication with ours), we have a “*new kind of historical happening* which instead of tumbling down into the grave and oblivion rises out of the death of what is past ... This is temporal

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<sup>15</sup> From an essay to appear in Jeremy Begbie, W. David O. Taylor, Daniel Train, eds, *The Art of New Creation: Trajectories in Theology and the Arts* (Westmont, IL: IVP, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas’s remarkable reflections on the agility of the glorified body seem very apt here. See “On the Agility of the Bodies of the Blessed,” in *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, 84.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtmY49Zn4l0RMJnTWfV7Wsg>

<sup>18</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree\\_of\\_Life\\_\(Kester\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree_of_Life_(Kester))

happening that runs not backwards but forwards.”<sup>19</sup> The body of this age is constantly breaking up, decaying every day, prone to sin, and spinning down to death. But the resurrection body is the body of this dying age re-made, re-materialized into something barely describable: a “spiritual body”, animated, revived by the Holy Spirit: a “hyper-physical” body, we might say.<sup>20</sup>

## 2) Vicarious Humanity

A second and closely related leitmotif in Torrance’s output is that of the vicarious humanity of Christ,<sup>21</sup> and it is one with numerous ramifications for the way we conceive of and practice the arts. Here we concentrate on just one area of current interest: the way we theologize the vocation of the artist. The notion of “creativity” has received a considerable amount of attention in recent Christian writing.<sup>22</sup> It is a concept that is commonly attached to the arts today, and usually without so much as a second thought. Virtually all current theological writing on the arts will speak of “the creative artist”, “the creative process”, human “creativity”, and suchlike. Yet it is worth recalling that in Christian antiquity and for most of the medieval period, creator language was rarely used of artists. God might be spoken of as an artist, but not the artist as a god-like creator. Underlying this hesitation, it seems, was the biblically grounded conviction that only God truly creates, for only God creates out of nothing; artists work with pre-existing materials.

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<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 88–9. Italics original.

<sup>20</sup> In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Anthony Thiselton argues that to translate *aphthartoi* as “incorrupt” (15:42, 50, 52–4) fails to bring out the force of the original. He urges us to translate the word in terms of “decay’s reversal.” Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1272, 1296–7. The true negation of running down—the degeneration, emptiness, and fruitlessness of our current bodies—is not simply “running on” (survival) but “running up”: “a dynamic process of ethical, aesthetic, and psychosocial flourishing, purpose, and abundance.” Idem, 1296. Italics original.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent treatment of this theme, see Christian D. Kessler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> For a recent example, see Makoto Fujimura, *Art and Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).



It was from around the end of the fifteenth century that divine creator language started to spill over into the human sphere, and become attributed to artists in particular. There was therefore something of what Trevor Hart calls a “linguistic trespass”,

whereby Renaissance humanists transplanted *creare*, *creator* and *creatio* from the hallowed ground of Christian liturgy and doctrine (which hitherto had been their sole preserve) onto the soils of art historical and art theoretical description in the sixteenth century—to refer now not to divine but to fully human activities and accomplishments.<sup>23</sup>

This trespass was many-sided and complex. But among other things it laid the ground for what would become a characteristically modern portrayal of the artist as one who aspires to a God-like freedom over the world, as if detached from the particularities of time and space—and in some versions, as one who is called pre-eminently to master and control nature (or paint, sound, stone) to his (and it usually was “his”) pre-determined purposes.<sup>24</sup> With this went an exaltation of novelty and originality—which of course gestures toward God’s *creatio ex nihilo*. (It is not hard to see parallels here with patterns of thought in the natural sciences which implicitly characterize the physical world as at best indifferent, and at worst hostile to human flourishing, and thus needing to be tamed and controlled.) An extreme version can be found in some of the early nineteenth-century Romantics, where the artist, standing apart from an often hostile world, comes to possess colossal powers traditionally attributed to God, with an infinitely abundant imagination and the ability to forge a quasi-divine redemption.

Many understandably recoil when faced with anything like this, especially those of a strongly Protestant disposition. It is insisted the artist is entirely human, finite, and creaturely, no less prone to sin than anyone else, and must be firmly cut

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<sup>23</sup> Trevor Hart, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity and Artistry* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 124. Italics original.

<sup>24</sup> For an especially illuminating account of these developments, see Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), chs 3 and 4.

down to size. Creation-talk belongs to God alone and any slippage of that language into the creaturely sphere opens the door to idolatry of the worst kind.<sup>25</sup> The intention is that by demoting the artist God will be accordingly re-promoted.

The problem with such a reaction, of course, is not only that it swerves dangerously close to assuming a Nestorian Christology, but that it implies a zero-sum metaphysics: in which divine and human agency are set off against each other as *inherently* at odds, vying for the same space. Torrance's ceaseless stress on the fullness of the humanity of Christ, enhypostatically rooted in the eternal Son, is among other things, a way of affirming that God's agency is not intrinsically opposed to, or exclusive of, human agency. This is in large part the Christological backbone to Trevor Hart's exceptionally fine book, *Making Good: Creation, Creativity and Artistry*,<sup>26</sup> much of which echoes Torrance. Hart insists that God does not merely permit his creatures to make and fashion art, but actually calls, inspires, enables, and equips them to do so. God's renewal of all things is undertaken in such a way as to not exclude human (re-)creativity, but include it—and this, not because God is to be deemed powerless without us (as if God lacks what we possess), but because God freely and graciously wills it to be so. And all this finds its ultimate grounding in the hypostatic union of divine and human in Christ (a far more secure strategy than appealing to the pre-lapsarian *imago Dei*).<sup>27</sup>

As Rowan Williams has recently stressed in his penetrating study *Christ the Heart of Creation*,<sup>28</sup> Jesus is presented in the New Testament as embodying and

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<sup>25</sup> As Calvin Seerveld puts it, except for inspired Scripture, "literature and art is wholly human, not a whit divine." Calvin Seerveld, *A Christian Critique of Art and Literature* (Toronto: Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, 1968), 37.

<sup>26</sup> Hart, *Making Good*.

<sup>27</sup> Many theologies of creativity have taken their cue from the "image of God" in Genesis 1, commonly by arguing that we are made in the image of a creative God. But apart from the fact that this is unlikely to be what the author of Genesis 1 had in view, it short-circuits Christ—the one who *pre-eminently* is the *imago Dei* (Col. 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:4). Hart urges that "the most natural and adequate "home" for an account of human creativity is precisely the overlap between the doctrines of Trinity and incarnation, rather than any free-floating account of our creation in the image and likeness of God (the doctrinal locus where it has more typically been addressed)." Hart, *Making Good*, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

enacting both a free, saving initiative of the God of Israel, and a fully human response of dependence upon this very same God. Many of the pathologies in the history of Christology are due to ignoring this “non-competitive” metaphysics. Divine agency cannot “compete” with human agency for the same ontological space because it is not that sort of agency, and as soon as one imagines that it is—that divine and created agencies are two instances of the same type, potentially striving for the same territory—one is prone to multiple errors. This, in my view, can be read as a thoroughly convincing extension and development of Torrance’s thinking.<sup>29</sup>

But Christ’s humanity, Torrance urges, is not only full, it is also “vicarious”: that is, Christ’s response to the Father is *on our behalf*, preceding any response we make (once again the theme of “alreadyness” comes to the fore). It follows that the fullest human creativity we can perform is that which comes about through sharing in the humanity of Christ, in whom God’s creativity has been enacted and the new creation established. To be “creative”, then, is to share by the Spirit in the life of the risen and ascended human Christ who himself *is* the concrete embodiment of the new creation. In and with Christ, we are given to “voice creation’s praise”.<sup>30</sup> We have here, then, a theological undergirding to a vision of artistic creativity that neither elevates the artist to quasi- or semi-divine status, nor assumes that the more creaturely an artist is, the less God will be directly involved in her work.

### **3) Anti-reductionism**

A third current in Torrance’s work of considerable relevance to the arts is his lifelong resistance to reductionism. Indeed, this is one of his most notable *bêtes noires*. I take “reductionism” to be a pattern of thinking, a “thought-style,”<sup>31</sup> that seeks to restrict reality to one class of phenomena, and to confine all authentic knowing,

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<sup>29</sup> In the introduction, Williams cites Torrance with approval as a key influence. Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, xiv–xv.

<sup>30</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> I borrow the term from Felski: Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

description, and explanation to one basic type. It finds its best-known exemplar in the kind of naturalistic reductionism that excludes *a priori* the possibility of any reality beyond the physical world (such as God), and in addition insists that the nature and behaviour of composite entities can be entirely explained (perhaps even explained *away*) by examination of their constituent parts. Thus “higher-level” phenomena (e.g., biological organisms) can be entirely accounted for by examining phenomena at a “lower” level (e.g., chemical reactions).<sup>32</sup> Sometimes along with this goes the belief that the so-called “higher” disciplines will eventually be replaced by those that deal with the lowest levels (i.e., those that study the behavior of particles). Famously, Francis Crick could claim that “The ultimate aim of the modern movement in biology is in fact to explain all biology in terms of physics and chemistry.”<sup>33</sup>

Torrance consistently opposed all such schemes, and along with them what he regarded as the spurious assumption that naturalistic reductionism can be derived from, or is assumed by, the physical sciences. Drawing especially on Michael Polanyi (1886–1984), he advocated a multi-levelled ontology that he believed was far more securely supported by concrete scientific practice.<sup>34</sup> He approvingly cites Polanyi’s claim “that all meaning lies in the higher levels of reality that are not reducible to the laws by which the ultimate particulars of the universe are controlled”.<sup>35</sup> No level is self-explanatory but opens toward a higher level, and

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<sup>32</sup> For an excellent treatment of the issues involved, see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Naturalism and the First-Person Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Francis Crick, *Of Molecules and Men* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 10.

<sup>34</sup> See, for e.g., Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 102–4; idem, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), ix. He also developed a model of stratification that he applied specifically to theological knowledge; see Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 82–11. For commentary, see Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 234–8; Benjamin Myers, “The Stratification of Knowledge in the Thought of T. F. Torrance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61, no. 1 (2008): 1–15.

<sup>35</sup> Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*, 20. The quote is from Michael Polanyi, *Scientific Thought and Social Reality*, ed. F. Schwartz (New York: International Universities Press, 1974), 136–7.

that to another, and so on.<sup>36</sup> Further, the contingent order *as a whole* does not carry its own explanation. Its secret lies beyond itself: “the universe constitutes an *open* system with an ontological and intelligible reference beyond its own limits which cuts the circuit of any possible closure of its internal processes re-entrantly upon themselves.”<sup>37</sup>

We might add that there are other kinds of reductionism Torrance also opposes, even if he does not always employ the term in doing so. For example, he resolutely rejects the kind of linguistic reductionism that holds that only the kind of literal and empirically verifiable propositions associated with the natural sciences are capable of mediating authentic truth and knowledge, and that these operate through a direct one-to-one correspondence with reality.<sup>38</sup>

What has all this got to do with the arts? A great deal, as it happens, since reductionist pressures have readily found their way into the arts, although they are seen not so much in artistic procedures as in the discourses and attitudes that surround them. This is evident, for example, in a host of attempts to explain the arts solely and entirely in terms of evolutionary biology;<sup>39</sup> or when a Rembrandt self-portrait is viewed as no more than a dressed up auto-biographical statement; or when a Mozart symphony is denigrated simply for its ineradicable attachment to European colonialism (or, indeed, when it is lauded by others for its supposed detachment from all things political and ideological). Although sweeping accounts of the arts of this sort often contain crucial insights, they invariably fail to convince

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<sup>36</sup> Of apiece with this is Torrance’s particular interest in Gödel’s theorem, which shows that any formal system is by its very nature incomplete, in that it cannot demonstrate its own consistency. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, 87–8.

<sup>37</sup> Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order*, 36. Italics original.

<sup>38</sup> For his discussion of these and related matters pertaining to language, see, for e.g., Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, ch. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Hence the account of human culture advocated by Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype: The Gene as the Unit of Selection* (Oxford; San Francisco: Freeman, 1982). For far milder approaches, though arguably still over-stating the significance of the case being made, see Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009; first U.S. edition).

when presented as catch-all theories.<sup>40</sup> What Torrance offers in these contexts is a way of unsettling the closed and enclosing habits of thought that sustain the reductive imagination—from the perspective of theology primarily of course, but also from the perspective of the natural sciences. His alternate imagination is nourished by a highly differentiated theology of creation grounded in Christology and the Trinity, one that arrests any drift towards monism, and seeks to do justice to irreducibly plural forms of created rationality and, linked with this, to quite distinct forms of intelligibility. In this way, he opens up a way of countering the reductive temptation to dismiss the arts as mere entertainment or emotive outpouring without cognitive content.

But we can say rather more about reductionism in relation to Torrance here, for this is one of those areas where the arts can speak back to theology. The arts, I suggest, can offer a concrete embodiment of, and witness to, the kind of counter-reductionism that Torrance is advocating on theological grounds, and in this way can greatly strengthen and enhance the exploration and articulation of those very grounds. I have expanded on this at length elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> The key point is that it has long been recognized that what we have come to call “the arts” appear by their very nature to be *inexhaustibly evocative*: that is, they have the capacity to generate and sustain multiple and potentially unlimited waves of meaning. Hilary Brand and Adrienne Chaplin memorably contrast Van Gogh’s famous painting of worn-down shoes with the two-dimensional picture of a shoe we might find on the side of a shoebox in a shoe store.<sup>42</sup> The latter answers to an immediate need and efficiently answers it; once the shoes are found on the shelf, the picture is superfluous. The Van Gogh painting (which as it happens has stimulated a strong

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<sup>40</sup> For one of the most penetrating critiques of bio-cultural reductionism in the social sciences, see Jean Lachapelle, “Cultural Evolution, Reductionism in the Social Sciences, and Explanatory Pluralism,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2000): 331–61. And for the argument that fictional literature by its very nature presses against reductionism, see Christina Bieber Lake, *Beyond the Story: American Literary Fiction and the Limits of Materialism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

<sup>41</sup> See Jeremy Begbie, *Abundantly More: Theology and the Arts in a Reductionist World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

<sup>42</sup> Hilary Brand and Adrienne D. Chaplin, *Art and Soul: Signposts for Christians in the Arts* (Carlisle: Solway, 2001), 123.

current of philosophical reflection)<sup>43</sup> is richly suggestive, and will likely be generative of further significance with each viewing.

This is emphatically not to claim that works of art are capable of “meaning anything”. But it is to say that the realities being engaged (objects, ideas, persons, or whatever) can become charged with multiple waves of significance that can never be fully identified or specified. In this way, art is capable of its own kind of reality-disclosure; that is, of faithfully opening up realities independent of the viewer but in a way that is clearly distinct from, say, scientific observation and discovery. This kind of “realism” in relation to the arts has recently been developed by a number of scholars under the banner of “aesthetic cognitivism,” a position expressed *in nuce* by Nelson Goodman: “the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge in the broadest sense of advancement of the understanding”.<sup>44</sup> As far as theology is concerned (not least Torrance’s theology), at least two implications of such an account of the arts need to be registered. First, the arts stand as a stubborn testimony to the validity of modes of knowing other than those typically singled out by the reductionist as alone legitimate. Second, the arts at their best, I submit, stand as compelling witnesses to, and enactments of the fact that the finite world we inhabit is of inexhaustible significance, that it always outstrips our perceptual grasp. “What is the world that art takes for granted?” asks Rowan Williams in one of his writings. “It is one in which perception is always incomplete ...”.<sup>45</sup> That, I suggest, is a profoundly Torrancian sentiment, and one which at least begins to

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<sup>43</sup> Most famously (and controversially) by Martin Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 143–212.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, Harvester Studies in Philosophy (Hassocks, UK: Harvester Press, 1978), 102. On aesthetic cognitivism, see Christoph Baumberger, “Art and Understanding: In Defence of Aesthetic Cognitivism,” in *Bilder Sehen. Perspektiven Der Bildwissenschaft*, ed. Marc Greenlee et al. (Regensburg: Schnell + Steiner, 2013), 41–67; Catherine Z. Elgin, “Art in the Advancement of Understanding,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (2002): 1012; John Gibson, “Cognitivism and the Arts,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 4 (2008), 573–89.

<sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), 135.

open out on to the theological.<sup>46</sup> Once the hard grids of a reductionist mentality are shaken, theological possibilities begin to look a good deal more plausible. As the Australian poet Les Murray puts it:

... God is the poetry caught in any  
religion, caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror  
that he attracted, being in the world as poetry  
is in the poem, a law against its closure.<sup>47</sup>

#### 4) Space and Time

And so, finally, to a fourth feature of Torrance's theology: his pioneering reflections on the nature and structures of space and time. Here I want to concentrate on the movement from the arts to theology, and on how one particular art form, music, can provide substantial resources for the theologian.

It is often assumed that music's greatest contribution to theology will be to offer experiences that in some manner abstract us from temporality (and with it, materiality). Music, we are sometimes told, is the most "spiritual" of the arts, the implication being it is the art least tied to space, time, and matter. I want to suggest that not only does this fail to take seriously music's basic embeddedness in spatio-temporal materiality, but that this very rootedness may well turn out to be its most significant theological feature.

As far as music's temporality is concerned, I have argued elsewhere that music makes possible a distinctive, and potentially healing and peaceable, indwelling of time as a dimension of the created world, and that this can help us resist the modern pathology of treating time as something to be escaped, or (more commonly, perhaps) defeated.<sup>48</sup> This, I submit, confirms the profoundly Christian

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<sup>46</sup> And this is the direction Williams himself pursues in his reflections on the arts; see Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, ch. 4.

<sup>47</sup> Les Murray, "Poetry and Religion," from *The Daylight Moon* (1987), *Australian Poetry Library*, <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les/poetry-and-religion-0572031>

<sup>48</sup> For a much fuller discussion, see Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).



intuition of time as both real and primordially good. But along with this we should note what can be learned theologically from *the kind of temporality* that music displays. Immensely illuminating here is the work of Victor Zuckerkandl (1896–1965), a Jewish-Austrian musicologist whose work resonates in remarkable ways with Torrance.<sup>49</sup> Zuckerkandl observes that the most direct way in which Western music engages with time is through meter, the pattern of beats, grouped in bars, that underlies most music. These beats are arranged in waves of tension and resolution: they are not simply points on a timeline but dynamically interrelated to one another within a distinctively structured wave-field. Zuckerkandl makes a parallel claim about melody: each note is internally connected to what precedes it and what follows it; in every note, there is a carrying of what precedes it and a pointing towards its future. In this way, Zuckerkandl avers, time is disclosed not as a container or inert channel (the bowling alley down which notes roll), nor merely as a psychological or cultural construction (as in the Kantian tradition), but as an integral function of the interrelationship between concrete entities, and thus by implication an intrinsic dimension of the physical world.<sup>50</sup>

Aficionados of Torrance will note the strong consonance between this and Torrance's critique of receptacle notions of time, which he so effectively showed to be responsible for numerous cul-de-sacs in the history of theology, especially with regard to Christology.<sup>51</sup> Crucial here is the importance of acknowledging time as intrinsic to the world God creates out of nothing, a dimension of the physical world created, assumed, and affirmed in Christ, to be fully redeemed in the new creation. If Zuckerkandl and others are right, music provides not only an intellectual model but a concrete embodiment of the integrity of created time, and one of potentially immense theological significance.

*Mutatis mutandis*, the same holds for space. Again, much well-intentioned theological writing has suggested that music offers us most when it generates an experience which releases us from all things spatial. Countering this, much recent

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<sup>49</sup> Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1956).

<sup>50</sup> Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, 151–246.

<sup>51</sup> Classically, in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

writing has argued, compellingly in my view, that far more important and far more central to the way music is actually practiced and imagined is the way it can enable a deeper bodily *indwelling* of our material-spatial world.<sup>52</sup> And again, with this we should not miss what can be learned theologically from the *kind of spatiality* that music opens up for us. Consider the contrast between visual and aural perception. Objects in our visual field typically occupy bounded places: they cannot overlap without losing their distinctiveness. We cannot see red and yellow in the space at the same time, *as* red and yellow. By contrast the tone I hear when I press a key on a piano fills the whole of my heard space, my aural field. It does not occupy a bounded location. It is everywhere in my aural space. If I play another note of a different pitch along with the first, that second tone fills the entirety of the same (heard) space. Yet I hear it as irreducibly distinct from the first. In our aural environment, notes can interpenetrate, sound through one another. They can be in the same space at the same time, yet perceived as irreducibly distinct. The sounds do not so much fill a space; they *are* the space we hear, they exemplify, enact their own space.

Again, so much of what Torrance has proposed with respect to theology and space—and again, especially with regard to Christology—begins to be far more readily conceivable. So many of the conceptual blockages that have relied on receptacle models of space begin to dissipate when we allow aural awareness to have its sway, for this is a form of perception not ruled by structures of mutually exclusive, bounded places. We need only think of the two natures of Christ, the *communication idiomatum*, the struggles of articulating a convincing kenotic Christology; or more widely, the sterile oscillations between synergism and monergism, and the numerous attempts to “balance” divine and human agency in a way that does justice to the biblical witness. Supremely, the intra-trinitarian relations and the very conception of “divine spatiality” begin to take on a fresh intelligibility once we refuse to over-rely on one sense mode to do all our conceptual work for us. In our aural space, after all, we do not hear a three-note chord as three mutually exclusive entities, nor as one fused tone, but as a resonant

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Julian Johnson, “Music Language Dwelling,” in *Theology, Music, and Modernity: Struggles for Freedom*, eds. Jeremy Begbie, Daniel K. L. Chua, and Markus Rathey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 295–316.

field. The notes sound through one another, interpenetrate. This is not a logically prior space into which three different objects are inserted; it is a space *constituted by* the resonant, differentiated life of the three. The three tones I hear do not each *have* a space; they *are* that space in action.<sup>53</sup>

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This essay only points to some of the ways in which Torrance's theology provides a rich counterpoint to contemporary discussions in the arts. There can be little doubt that, if he is read with care, and time is taken to penetrate to the currents that at the deepest level propel his thought, Torrance will prove to be one of the most stimulating and contemporary theologians to have appeared in the last hundred years. Those who go on to explore the arts in his company, including themes we have not considered here, will likely be immeasurably enriched.

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<sup>53</sup> On this, see Jeremy Begbie, "'A Semblance More Lucid?'" An Exploration of Trinitarian Space," in *Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 20–35.



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## **INTERVIEW WITH PAUL D. MOLNAR**

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**TS:** How did you first become interested in the theology of TFT?

**PM:** I first became interested in the theology of TFT when I read his *Reality and Evangelical Theology* back in 1982. I found his arguments to be much more consistently theological than the material I had been reading from Karl Rahner prior to that. Of course, I also found that his thinking was in harmony in many ways with the views of Karl Barth which I had learned while earning my Ph.D. at Fordham in 1980. I recall presenting a paper at the College Theology Society offering a critique of Rahner's theology in 1984. In a conversation afterward with another Catholic theologian I was asked who my favorite modern theologian was—aside from Karl Barth. He thought I'd say it was Rahner. Instead, I said it was T. F. Torrance. He never heard of him. I suspect things might be different today! At least I hope so.

**TS:** I first met TFT when he lectured at Fuller Theological Seminary in 1981, which became the book you mentioned. I was a young MDiv student who was reading theology that wasn't very theological! It also struck me that CalTech had invited him to lecture there while he was lecturing at Fuller. I asked him what it was like to lecture at Fuller and CalTech at the same time, and he said: The scientists understand me better than the theologians! He had a sly sense of humor. From your perspective as a theologian, what do you think he was suggesting for an authentic evangelical theology?

**PM:** That is an interesting and revealing remark by TFT. The scientists he mentioned clearly were aligned with his view of scientific theology, namely, a way of thinking that allowed the object under consideration to determine the truth what is thought and said. I think Torrance was suggesting that if theologians were to think objectively instead of grounding their theology either in their existential reaction to the Gospel or in the way they think about the Gospel, then their own theology would avoid what he called "deistic" dualism. He believed that when the "ontological relation of a set of statements to the realities to which they are meant to refer is cut or damaged" and "the objective reference is suspended" then theological statements either refer "to the subject who made them, in which case they are to be understood as forms of his life, expressive of the states of his consciousness or the attitude of mind he takes up ... they cannot refer to things as they are but only to their appearances" (*Ground and Grammar*, 33-4). Or one might interpret the statements "in terms of the interrelations of the statements with one another" in which case the ontological relation with reality would be broken once more since such thinking would be "confined to their syntactical meaning" and "the semantic focus of statements collapses on itself" (*ibid.*, 34). He concluded, rightly, I think that when either of these approaches is taken then one is "confined to a form of existentialism" since statements then would only reflect a person's attitude toward existence and the focus would then be on that person's "self-understanding" instead of upon the object, which should dictate the proper understanding of reality. This prevents us from knowing being "in its inner relations" and thus never escapes "Kantian dualism" (*ibid.*, 34-5). On the other hand, language philosophy which is linked to positivist and nominalist views of science also denies that we can know things in themselves and also fails to escape Kantian dualism. Torrance then made

the connection of all this to theology noting that if such statements as “The Word was made flesh,” “God is love,” “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” were cut off from their objective reference to God himself acting for us in Christ as he did, then speaking of an act of God within such a “deistic disjunction between God and the world” would make it impossible to grasp their theological meaning. Truth would be lost because statements understood in that way would be construed mythologically as “expressing man’s feeling of dependence on God and the understanding of himself in the world in which he lives” (ibid, 35-6). In other words, theological statements would no longer be governed by who God is and what God does within history but would only describe “ourselves as dependent on God” (ibid., 26). Statements about Jesus Christ would be “turned round into being statements about the meaning he has for us in our freedom to be ourselves and to live a life of self-commitment in faith and love” (ibid.). All of these remarks which are found in his book, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, clearly functioned in a basic way throughout his important book, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*.

**TS:** In what ways do the theologies of KB and TFT influence you in similar and different ways.

**PM:** This is an excellent question. It would require at least a book chapter and possibly a book to answer. I have written on this specific issue as it relates to their theologies. Most recently, I discussed their similarities and differences in the chapter entitled “Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Barth: Similarities and Differences,” in the *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 67-84. But your question concerns how their theologies influence me in similar and different ways. Briefly (I hope) I would say that I find the fact that both of them insist upon the centrality of Jesus Christ and enact their theological approaches by allowing Jesus Christ in his uniqueness as God incarnate to shape all that they think and say. That approach shaped their views of Christology, the Trinity, Revelation and theological method—just to name a few important doctrines or issues. Additionally, they genuinely sought to explicate their theological epistemologies within a properly understood doctrine of justification by grace and faith. That is something that you simply do not see in many contemporary approaches to theology, especially on the Catholic side. It is

because they both identify revelation with the fact that the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to God that they take the problem of sin seriously when constructing their theologies. However, that means that they allow their views of sin and salvation to be dictated by the fact that both our sin and salvation are disclosed in the life history of Jesus himself. It is because our sin is really forgiven sin in him that we can understand it properly through the grace of God. There are some differences of course. One of them is Torrance's attempt to construct what he called his "new" natural theology. I have criticized that attempt because, even according to Torrance's own positive theology, our minds are twisted and in-turned and thus in need of Christ's reconciling grace to know God truly. If that is true then his "new" natural theology, which he says must function within revelation, is not in fact a natural theology in any traditional sense at all. It is quite frankly a theology of reconciled human nature reflecting on the triune God in faith. I think Torrance might have been misled with an analogy he took from Einstein, namely, the idea that natural theology, like Euclidian geometry was problematic in that natural theology functions independently of revelation, just as Euclidian geometry functions independently of physics. Hence, each needed to be *completed* beyond that independent function in revelation as it concerns theology and in physics as it concerns science. He wrote: "Far from being swallowed up by physics, however, geometry would become the epistemological structure in the heart of physics, although considered in itself it would be incomplete without physics" *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 33. The problem with this is that natural theology requires a complete metanoia according to Torrance, such that it really is not just incomplete without revelation, but stands in conflict with the God revealed in Jesus Christ apart from faith, grace and revelation in its identity with Christ himself. Another notable area of disagreement between the two theologians concerned the nature of the sacraments. George Hunsinger has called attention to that in a number of his important writings on that subject.

**TS:** When I first started studying theology in my young 20s with RSA, GWB, and TFT, GWB was especially adamant that I avoid contemporary theology, which he considered faddish, and focus instead on a genuine evangelical theology like that of TFT. Why have you have engaged several contemporary theologies as a proponent of TFT's kind of trinitarian-incarnational theology?



**PM:** The simple answer to your question is that when I was in graduate school at Fordham in the 1970's my advisor, who was a Presbyterian Minister teaching us the theology of Karl Barth, had me read Charles Norris Cochrane's book, *Christianity and Classical Culture*. In it he said that the early church theologians somewhat ungenerously thought the best way to teach positive Christian doctrine was through the errors of their opponents. That is certainly what Irenaeus and Athanasius did in their historical settings with the former opposing Gnosticism and the latter opposing Arianism.

So, to answer your question, the reason I have engaged a number of contemporary theologies as a proponent of TFT's incarnational-trinitarian theology is to illustrate the truth of the Gospel from within a reasonable understanding of the Nicene faith which has united all Christians since the fourth century. When, with the help of Torrance, one sees the real connection between the incarnation and atonement and how these doctrines are shaped by a proper view of the Trinity, then the positive force of Torrance's clear grasp of salvation by grace through faith drives me to expose those views which exemplify basic commitments to forms of self-justification in doctrine and practice! When I engage such problematic theologies, I do so not only to sharpen my understanding of a proper view of the Trinity, Christology and Salvation but in order to set the truth of the Gospel before people over against misleading contemporary views that function on the assumption that theology is something we do to create a better world. In a certain sense, I hope to show that there is a notorious connection between heresies that arose in the early church and today. Colin Gunton once said that he thought the favorite heresy of the twentieth century was Arianism. I think he was right. So, my goal is to explain that if we don't pay attention to the truth as it was seen and understood centuries ago, then we will fall prey to new ideas that seem inviting and helpful but that are completely wrong and misleading, since they really are ideas that were rejected for good reason by real theologians centuries ago. That is why I so strongly oppose the panentheism of Moltmann, and the flimsy thinking of Sallie McFague and her teacher Gordon Kaufman. McFague and Kaufman were both unmistakably Arian theologians who flatly rejected Jesus's uniqueness and claimed that it was mythology to try to ground theology within the immanent Trinity. McFague maintained that Jesus was not ontologically different from any other human being

who manifested God's love. Kaufman said we should forthrightly reject the idea that God really was in Christ reconciling the world to himself because no one human being could have that sort of significance. A lot of people follow their thinking that God, Christ and salvation are no more than symbols Christians invest with meaning that comes from us in our attempts to overcome social and ecological problems. If that is at all true, then in that very procedure the roles of Creator and creature have already been reversed and the idea that we can create a better world fails to notice the real problem of sin as self-will and the real meaning of salvation which is that Jesus Christ overcame our self-will and enmity toward God created by our attempts to live by relying only on ourselves using theological language. I think it is really important for people to see that when we speak of Christ as the Lord and Savior and of God as the one who loves in freedom we are not just reifying concepts, as Kaufman believed. That is because we don't think the truth of our theological concepts comes *from* us at all! That is something that really needs to be seen and stated with clarity today in a society where people honestly believe that gender is no more than a human construct and that God is a symbol we can define and re-define as we wish to achieve a social or political goals. I hope that answers your question!

**TS:** I will say that despite GWB's dismissive attitude toward the many contemporary theologies of our day and age, he was personally concerned with human needs both on a personal and social level, but he did not think both theologically and practically that the multifarious theologies of our contemporary context were of actual help. In your most recent work, you suggest the same on both fronts. Is that an accurate assessment that you find today's politicized and anthropomorphized theologies as bankrupt on multiple levels, especially for humans in need of God's grace — which is largely absent as a common theme in the whole world of so-called "contemporary theology"?

**PM:** I have to say that I am in complete agreement with you that much contemporary theology is politicized and anthropomorphized and bankrupt because so many prominent theologians fail to notice the real meaning of sin just because they refuse to allow Jesus himself through his death on the cross and resurrection to inform their understanding of sin and salvation. That's why so many today seem

to believe that theology is an ideology we use to create a better world. That, in my view, is the epitome of self-justification! Since we as Christians actually live by God's forgiving grace, we simply cannot begin good theology with ourselves and our best insights. We really must allow Jesus himself to have the *first* and *final* Word. That's what it means to live by grace. He judges us by calling us away from self-reliance to reliance on him. Perhaps one brief example here will help.

In her book, *She Who Is*, Elizabeth Johnson claims that it is "Through women's encounter with the holy mystery of their own selves as blessed" that we acquire "commensurate language about holy mystery in female metaphor and symbol ... To give but one example, conversion experienced not as giving up oneself but as tapping into the power of oneself simultaneously releases understanding of divine power not as dominating power-over but as the passionate ability to empower oneself and others ... in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God ..." (66-7).

Several things may be noted here. Jesus Christ is missing from this discussion of naming God and of conversion. Thus, Johnson assumes that women can turn to themselves to name God, to know God and to be converted. But conversion here means self-reliance or tapping into the power of oneself with the assumption that in so doing they are reaching out to God. However, all of this ignores the problem of sin as self-will and fails to notice that Jesus calls us to repentance and belief in him alone and not to trust in ourselves as the source of our knowledge of God. Here then is a concrete instance of a failure to see the importance of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Christ.

Just listen for a minute to how different Torrance's view of this matter is. He does not point us to ourselves as the source of our knowledge of God. He does not think conversion means self-reliance in any way. He thinks our knowledge of God comes from the Father through the Son so that we can only really know the Father through union with Christ in faith and thus by the power of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit. So, allowing the crucified and risen Christ to be his starting point, Torrance says: "As fallen human beings, we are quite unable through our own free-will to escape from our self-will for our free-will is our self-will. Likewise sin has been so ingrained into our minds that we are unable to repent and

have to repent even of the kind of repentance we bring before God. But Jesus Christ laid hold of us even there in our sinful repentance and turned everything round through his holy vicarious repentance, when he bore not just upon his body but upon his human mind and soul the righteous judgments of God and resurrected our human nature in the integrity of his body, mind and soul ... the Gospel speaks of regeneration as wholly bound up with Jesus Christ himself ... our new birth, our regeneration, our conversion, are what has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of our conversion or our regeneration we are referring to our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake. In a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion ... without him all so-called repentance and conversion are empty ... conversion in that truly evangelical sense is a turning away from ourselves to Christ ..." (Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 86). Notice, that for Torrance, we are all exposed as sinners in light of Christ's forgiveness and our conversion refers to Christ enabling us here and now to turn away from ourselves toward him as the one in whom we are extricated from sin and placed in a right relation with God through faith. That's what it means to live by grace since grace cannot be separated from Christ, the giver of grace. The difference here is that between night and day. In Torrance's view we have true and certain knowledge of God and of salvation, but that knowledge comes from the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. It comes concretely through the very death and resurrection of Christ himself since, as the risen, ascended, and advent Lord, he alone is the active agent of our ability to know the triune God here and now.

In my latest book, my main thesis is that theology looks and is completely different when Jesus Christ himself in his uniqueness as the Word of God incarnate is allowed to be the *first* and *final* Word in theology. Torrance and Barth most certainly did that. From what I know of GWB, he did that as well. In my experience you also do that. But many of our leading contemporary theologians, including Elizabeth Johnson, do not do that. And I think it is extremely important for someone to show how and why that is so and what the implications are of such methodological failure. I do that by focusing on liberation theology, language for God, universalism, interreligious relations and nonconceptual knowledge of God,

just to name several of the subjects treated in my most recent book, *Freedom, Necessity and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance*.

**TS:** What positive role do you see for a genuine evangelical theology to lead the way forward beyond a simplistic and antagonistic dividing up in our contemporary society based on being "black" vs. "white" -- or any kind of race-based or contextualized theology that begins with us, not with the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ, who is coming again to complete his breaking down of the dividing walls of hostility that we perpetuate, whether we be black or white, rich or poor, or male or female?

**PM:** I love this question because it gets to the heart of a properly evangelical theology and to the most important point of my most recent book. In that work I argue that all theology will look different when Christian theologians allow Jesus Christ himself to be the *first* and the *final* Word in theology. If one begins theology with anyone or anything else, then idolatry and self-justification always follow with problematic results. Let me explain that a bit.

Much contemporary liberation theology begins from the assumption that the human fight against oppression and for liberation is an appropriate starting point not only for a proper view liberation (human freedom), but for proper knowledge of the triune God. A suitable evangelical theology would oppose both that starting point and the conclusions that follow. First, since all such attempts do not begin in faith by allowing Jesus Christ himself to disclose to us who we really are in ourselves and in him, the problem of sin and its solution is missed. Second, because of that it is assumed that we already have the freedom to overcome what it is that enslaves us humanly. Third, both of those assumptions then lead to the idea that we can rely on ourselves and some sort of innate freedom and knowledge of God to know the triune God and to know what it means to be in right relation with God and each other. Each of those conclusions is wrong and with disastrous results.

Let us consider an example of a theology which does not begin and end with Jesus himself. There are many to choose from. I have discussed these in my last two books, *Freedom, Necessity and the Knowledge of God* and *Divine Freedom and*

*the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*. Here I will focus on Elizabeth Johnson who argues that as women have new experiences of being liberated from male domination, they experience God in new ways and should thus name God out of that experience. I have consistently opposed such thinking because I agree with Thomas F. Torrance who believes that an evangelical theology must think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. And he does not think we have to leave the sphere of history and human experience to do this because God himself has come to us in the incarnation to make himself known to us as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I will return to his thought in a moment.

Here I want to explain that because Johnson presumes that women's supposed new experiences of God lead to accurate knowledge of the Christian God, she claims that there is "one strand that is fundamental to emancipatory speech about God in feminist liberation theology, namely, the experience of conversion" (*She Who Is*, 61). Thus, she asserts that "A central resource for naming toward God, the very matrix that energizes it, is the breakthrough of power occurring in women's struggle to reject the sexism of inherited constructions of female identity and risk new interpretations that affirm their own human worth. This foundational experience can be suitably described in the classic language of conversion" (*ibid.*, 61-2). From this, as already noted above in another context, it follows for Johnson that "Through women's encounter with the holy mystery of their own selves as blessed comes commensurate language about holy mystery in female metaphor and symbol, gracefully, powerfully, necessarily ... speaking about God and self-interpretation cannot be separated. To give but one example, conversion experienced not as giving up oneself but as tapping into the power of oneself simultaneously releases understanding of divine power not as dominating power-over but as the passionate ability to empower oneself and others ... in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God" (*She Who Is*, 66-7).

The first thing to be noticed here is that Johnson explicitly thinks from a center in human experience and not from a center in the incarnate Word. Had she done the latter, she would have immediately realized that we are sinners and cannot escape our self-will that puts us at enmity with God and each other by

relying on our supposed "conversion" experiences. That is what is revealed in and through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection as we hear his Word here and now through the power of the Holy Spirit. In him humanity was confronted directly by God as the one true God who was uniquely present and active in the person and work of Christ as humanity's savior, helper, and friend. And what was the reaction of his own people? It was to hand him over to the Romans (the Gentiles) to be crucified. In those events we are all disclosed as sinners, namely, as those who reject God as he truly is for us in Christ.

The second thing to be noticed is that in her approach she ignores the problem of sin which Torrance immediately recognizes because he insists that all Christian knowledge of the triune God must begin with cognitive union with Christ and thus with faith in him. To begin with ourselves, as she does, would be to embrace some form of self-justification which illustrates Torrance's positive point that in light of revelation, we are disclosed as in-turned, twisted and self-willed sinners in need of God's forgiving grace. In ourselves, we are thus opposed to the only truth which can lead to true liberation, true freedom, and thus to true knowledge of God. This means we would have to acknowledge that Jesus himself and not our experience of emancipation is the only possible starting point for a properly evangelical theology. That is the case because he really is the Way, the Truth, and the Life since no one comes to the Father except through him (Jn. 14:6). So, while it is true that self-interpretation and knowledge of God cannot be separated as Johnson says, that hardly means that we can know the Christian God through our own self-interpretation and experiences of emancipation as she also maintains. It is that false assumption that leads to all the conflicts that are alive and well in contemporary theology and in political and social life. It is that false assumption that leads some theologians today to construct theological anthropologies without Christ himself and even against what he has done for us in his own life, death, resurrection and ascension, and what he himself reveals to us now in the power of his Holy Spirit and in faith.

Let me present a few salient remarks from Torrance to show just how distorted Johnson's liberationist approach to freedom and to knowledge of God really is. She thinks conversion means that women should tap into their own power

and not give themselves up. But for Christians conversion has never meant that since we are baptized into the death of Christ in the hope of rising again through him. We are baptized out of ourselves and into Christ. Thus, to be a disciple means, as Jesus himself made clear, taking up our cross and following him—giving ourselves up to him as our savior and as the only one who can and does free us from sin, including the sin of patriarchalism. Indeed, he also is the only one who can enable us to recognize and overcome the sin of racism as well. I will return to this in a moment.

Listen to the words of Torrance once again. "As fallen human beings, we are quite unable through our own free-will to escape from our self-will for our free-will is our self-will. Likewise sin has been so ingrained into our minds that we are unable to repent and have to repent even of the kind of repentance we bring before God. But Jesus Christ laid hold of us even there in our sinful repentance and turned everything round through his holy vicarious repentance, when he bore not just upon his body but upon his human mind and soul the righteous judgments of God and resurrected our human nature in the integrity of his body, mind and soul from the grave ... the Gospel speaks of regeneration as wholly bound up with Jesus Christ himself ... our new birth, our regeneration, our conversion, are what has taken place in Jesus Christ himself, so that when we speak of our conversion or our regeneration we are referring to our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake. In a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion ... without him all so-called repentance and conversion are empty ... conversion in that truly evangelical sense is a turning away from ourselves to Christ, it calls for a conversion from our in-turned notions of conversion to one grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself" (*The Mediation of Christ*, 85-6).

Among contemporary theologians, there is no doubt that Torrance explicitly allows Jesus Christ to be the *first* and *final* Word in his understanding of conversion and therefore in his understanding of human freedom as grounded in God's freedom for us in the incarnation. His basic point, however, is utterly opposed to the idea that we can construct a relevant theological anthropology without explicitly



relying on Christ himself and sharing in his new humanity so that we do not rely on our own free-will to know God and to know who we really are in relation to him. It is indeed through the Holy Spirit actualizing in us the reconciliation between us and God accomplished objectively in Christ, that we truly know God and live as those who have been freed from the sins of patriarchalism and racism. Put bluntly, true knowledge of God comes from God alone as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and thus to the Father. It does not come from us at all.

When this is not seen and understood then we are told by some that we must reconstruct the doctrine of creation in order to overcome "whiteness" and in overcoming "whiteness," which is thought to be the source of racism, we are then told that we will have a proper view of God the creator and us as his creatures. However, nothing could be further from the truth because while there is a way from Christology to a proper view of anthropology as both Torrance and Barth held, there is no way from anthropology to a proper view of God the creator or to a proper view of sin, salvation, and true freedom. Racism is an evil to be sure. But we will never recognize it as the evil it is unless we understand the meaning of sin and freedom from what is revealed in and by the crucified and risen Lord. I say this here because in a recent publication in the College Theology Society Annual Volume (2021) entitled "Recognizing the Human After Whiteness: Hermeneutics, Anthropology, and Scripture in Paul Ricoeur and Willie James Jennings" David de la Fuente simply assumes that the problem of racism today stems from "whiteness" which is equated with dominating others. However, the real problem in evidence when people try to dominate others is the problem of sin. To equate this with race would itself be a form of racism since racism refers to any attempt to define people exclusively by their race instead of by their relations with God and each other. The author sees "whiteness" as a "disease" which afflicts the Christian imagination. Yet, from a Christian standpoint, the disease that really afflicts the Christian imagination is sin, namely, the idea that we can rely on ourselves to recognize and overcome the sin of racism. The author of this article sets out to "reimagine" the human "after whiteness" and sets out to do so by weaving together insights from Ricoeur and Jennings. Only then does he turn to Scripture as a "special case" and as a narrative "that can disclose a possible world for shared human life 'after whiteness'" (4).

Noticeably absent from this analysis is any recognition of the need for Jesus Christ as the only one who can disclose to us our true human need (which is forgiveness of our sin) and the true meaning of human freedom and salvation as enabled through union with Christ himself. Scripture is not just a narrative that we use to overcome "whiteness." It is witness to Jesus himself as the Word of God enabling us to live in right relation with God and each other. In this article we are told that as "second readers" of Scripture after the "first readers" (Israel), then "this position" will open up "the biblically communicated dream of ending hostilities, something that is not only within general human capacities ... but is also theologically speaking God's intention" (8). However, in conceptualizing our Jewish neighbors as "first readers" of Scripture and Christians as "second readers" the author completely ignores the problem of sin and the need for salvation. It is not within anyone's general capacity to overcome sin and free us for love of God and neighbor. That is why the incarnation took place in the first instance so that this could be done for us from the divine and human side in Christ. Furthermore, the relation between Jews and Christians is not so easily solved just by speaking of first and second readers because the first readers themselves handed over their own Messiah to the Romans to be crucified in their imagined faithfulness to God. Moreover, the second readers only read Scripture properly when they allow Christ himself to be the *first* and *final* Word witnessed to in both the Old and New Testaments! The sad part of allowing race rather than Christ to set the agenda here is that it allows one to argue that it is through exchanging memories that people in the United States "are willing to listen to and amplify the voices naming the disfiguring effects of whiteness and the intersecting experiences of oppression" (10). When this happens, we are told that the "Western self" would then be destabilized, and this would open "up a more authentic recognition of the human other in their particularity and diversity" (10).

The problem here is that none of this recognizes that the real problem of racism is the problem of sin; it has nothing to do with "whiteness." And the only way to understand the human other in an authentic manner is from the human Jesus himself who enables human beings to live as the reconciled sinners they are in Christ here and now. That would be a truly theological solution to our human problems. Torrance and Barth understood that. It is no accident that Torrance and

Barth would never reverse anthropology and theology as is commonly done in much Catholic and Protestant theology today. Thus, for Torrance, to be a Christian means taking up one's cross and following Christ. By contrast, Willie Jennings argues that "To be a Christian is to 'read after', that is, to attune our senses to hear, and see, touch, feel and smell what others have already discovered" ("Reframing the Word: Toward an Actual Christian Doctrine of Creation," *ISJT* 21, 4, October, 2019, 405). Not exactly. I say this because they did not "discover" the truth that met them in Jesus Christ. That truth "discovered" them as the sinners they were and forgave them and reconciled them to the Father. While Christianity is indeed indissolubly united with Israel in the covenant which was fulfilled in Christ for Jew and Gentile alike, what Jennings offers is a most inadequate grasp of what it means to be a Christian since a Christian is one who takes up the cross and follows Christ himself. He is the one who frees people to be truly human in every new circumstance. So, it is not enough to say that to be a Christian is to "hear, and see, touch, feel and smell what others have already discovered."

For Jennings, unfortunately, the doctrine of creation needs to overcome "the epistemic racism of whiteness that constantly forms knowledge in a Eurocentric hierarchy of value with all non-white bodies in the secondary role of making 'contributions' to an agreed upon (white) body of knowledge" (407). Unless and until theologians from whatever region of the world they live in are willing to recognize that Jesus himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, theologians will be liable to falling prey to this racist set of ideas. To equate racism with whiteness is to miss the fact that racism stems from human sinners, whatever their race. Further, to equate "epistemic racism" with Eurocentric values with the claim that non-whites are secondary is another racist presupposition and not a Christian one. Finally, to claim that Eurocentric theology must consist in an agreed upon "white body of knowledge" is again a racist judgment that misses the fact that any genuine theology of creation must allow itself to be shaped by who God is as the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christology and therefore Jesus Christ himself determines the truth of theology and what it means to be truly human in Europe, Asia, South America, North America, Africa and anywhere else on earth.

**TS:** Dietrich Bonhoeffer incisively described his time at Union Theological Seminary in NY (which his friend Paul Lehmann arranged) as 'Protestantism without Reformation.' Karl Barth as a respondent to Vatican II viewed the internal reforms of the Roman Church as a call to Protestantism for a new reformation. Is it your view that both the Catholic and Protestant wings of the fractured Western Church are still in need of renewal, repentance, and reformation?

**PM:** Honestly, I don't know a lot about these events. I did know that Barth advised Bonhoeffer to return to Germany and I think I recall that someone said that, in light of subsequent events, he regretted that advice! I also know that Tillich taught at Union. But, again, I don't know a lot of details about any of this. Of course, Barth thought Vatican II was an important positive move for the Roman Catholic Church. But he later wondered whether some theologians such as his friend Hans Küng might have mistakenly moved in the direction of the liberal Protestant position that Barth himself once espoused and then rejected. Barth also was a bit dismayed by the fact that in the document on Revelation the Council's statements were not entirely consistent so that some thought they could set up natural law as a source of our knowledge of God alongside revelation in its identity with Christ. I discuss this in my new book, *Freedom, Necessity and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance*, Chapter Two, "Barth and Roman Catholic Theology."

**TS:** Here's a pointed question (with preliminary commentary): How did TFT help you become "evangelical" and "catholic" in a way that transcended both "Evangelicalism" and "Catholicism" in their various contexts? Do you accept "evangelical catholic" as a way to describe your own pilgrimage — or is it perhaps more complex?

**PM:** I don't know if you are aware of this, but I have a letter from T. F. Torrance in which he said he really liked the fact that I was an evangelical Catholic. I took that as a compliment because if Catholic theology is to be truly catholic *and* theological it must be grounded in the Gospel! But that means that magisterial statements, however important they may be, and they are important, cannot assume any sort of normative role in relation to revelation itself as that meets us in Jesus Christ as attested in the Bible! So, to be evangelical and a catholic to me

means to be faithful to Christ himself as that faith is enabled by the Holy Spirit. That would require a reconceptualization of truth in the sense that Torrance explained in his monumental piece "Truth and Authority: Theses on Truth," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (3) (1972), 215-242. He maintained that our thinking must be in line with the truth of being as it is grounded in God and therefore in our encounter with God in Christ. However, he rightly claimed that that could not happen if truth were equated with magisterial statements about it or with our subjective experiences in such a way that one might suggest that we could have some sort of non-conceptual knowledge of God in the form of symbolic descriptions of our religious experiences. Torrance rejected such thinking because it always grounded truth in us instead of in Christ himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In my new book, *Freedom, Necessity and the Knowledge of God*, I contrast Torrance's thinking with the views of Karl Rahner to demonstrate the problematic implications of Rahner's embrace of non-conceptual knowledge of God (Chapter Four). Non-conceptual knowledge of God is a culprit in contemporary theology because it leads many to think that true knowledge of God in some sense comes *from* us instead of only *to* us through the power of the Holy Spirit uniting us conceptually and ontologically to Christ himself and thus to God the Father.



**PART II**

**THEOLOGY AND ETHICS IN T. F. TORRANCE**





Paul D. Molnar, "Torrance, Justification by Grace Alone, and 'Liberation Theology,'" *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 101-150; #2023-PDM-2. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

**TORRANCE, JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE,  
AND "LIBERATION THEOLOGY"**

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Karl Barth famously argued that "there is a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology."<sup>1</sup> This bold assertion, with which Barth's student and colleague Thomas F. Torrance would fully, emphatically, and foundationally agree, is crucial because it implies that a properly Christian theological anthropology must begin with Jesus himself as the incarnate Word because, in him, we meet God himself. To bypass Jesus in order to speak theologically is to bypass God himself. That, for Barth and for Torrance, is the height of idolatry because any attempt to speak about our relations with God and our relations with each other, which does not begin with God himself, will always end in some form of self-justification. To begin with God himself, however, means precisely to acknowledge Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Much "liberation theology" does not begin there but with experiences of liberation or fighting against oppression. That approach is neither theological nor in reality liberating.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., vol. I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. by G. W. Bromiley, (hereafter: CD), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 131.

Profound implications follow from assessing "liberation theology" from a more deeply and ontologically trinitarian-incarnational theology. First, if Barth and Torrance are correct, and I think they are, then what we discover in our encounter with Jesus is that we are disclosed to be enemies of grace, that is, those who are at enmity with God. We are the ones who brought Jesus to the cross and it is in and through that cross that our sins have been forgiven. Additionally, we do well to recall that Jesus was crucified by the political theologians of his day and age! Second, this means that there is no *continuity* to be found in human experience and behavior on the basis of which we are in harmony with God and our neighbors, whether than be based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other basis for an adjectival theology. Basing theology on these latter characteristics, however, is the unfortunate and preferred alternative in our multifarious contemporary theologies. Whenever that assumption is made, then some form of self-justification always is at work and rears its ugly head with some sort of politicized manifestation. Such self-justification simply and profoundly misses the true meaning both of theology and of anthropology as understood in a more properly Christological way.

What I am claiming then is that whenever it is assumed that we humans possess some sort of innate continuity with God, then the problem of sin is unrecognized, ignored, or brushed aside, and the proper meaning of salvation and liberation is missed. And the problem (sin) and its solution (salvation by grace alone) are missed just because they are not sought beyond us in Christ alone. Let me explain. T. F. Torrance makes the following claim in his *Theological Science*: "face to face with Christ our humanity is revealed to be diseased and in-turned, and our subjectivities to be rooted in self-will. It is we who require to be adapted to Him, so that we have to renounce ourselves and take up the Cross if we are to follow Him and know the Father through Him."<sup>2</sup> In that way we sinful human beings are "healed" and "recreated in communion with God," and any distortion in our knowledge of God and relationship with God is overcome precisely through "cognitive union with God in love."<sup>3</sup> Here it is important to stress the

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<sup>2</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 310.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

"epistemological significance of the Incarnation" because it is precisely in and through the Incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) that "we are summoned to know God strictly in accordance with the way in which He has actually objectified Himself for us in our human existence."<sup>4</sup> And, contrary to Karl Rahner's theory of anonymous Christianity, this cannot occur anonymously because there is no anonymous way to know of Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for us in his own life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and continuing mediation at the right hand of God without knowing him conceptually through the Gospel witness. Torrance explains this situation with great insight and with important implications for ethical behavior in his book on Atonement. Following St. Paul, Torrance held that "we are alienated or estranged in our minds, and indeed are hostile in mind to God."<sup>5</sup> He noted that this New Testament view was "deeply resented by the rational culture of the ancient classical world of Greece and Rome" and that our modern world also finds this "difficult to accept."<sup>6</sup>

This may be something of an understatement in light of the fact that so many contemporary theologians ignore or redefine the problem of sin by claiming it merely refers to imperfections in the human condition. That move unfortunately allows them to marginalize the unconditional grace of God as the sole source of our knowledge of God and of ourselves as forgiven sinners. Nonetheless, Torrance wisely and astutely rejected any such move by sticking closely to the doctrine of justification by grace alone. Thus, he held that relying on God's grace necessarily means not relying at all upon ourselves—our religion, our morality, or even our faith. Torrance saw and understood this extremely well as he also noted that "evangelical Christianity" today "does not seem to have thought through sufficiently the transformation of human reason in the light of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ."<sup>7</sup> Because of this, both within the church and in society, he held that humanity remained "unevangelised." I think he is right. His claim is simple but with

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 437.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

profound implications: "the mind of man is alienated at its very root. It is in the human mind that sin is entrenched, and so it is right there, the gospel tells us, that we require to be cleansed by the blood of Christ and to be healed and reconciled to God."<sup>8</sup>

So, the pivotal point here is that because our behavior (ethics) is governed by our minds, Torrance maintained that even though we have free will, "we are not at all free to escape from our self-will" (which for Torrance means our inveterate attempts to live autonomously instead of in dependence on grace alone) that is ingrained within our mind which not only controls all our thinking and culture, but it is there that "we have become estranged from the truth and hostile to God." Thus, it is "in the ontological depths of the human mind, that we desperately need to be redeemed and healed."<sup>9</sup> That healing took place for us in the incarnation since the Son of God assumed our fallen human nature and bent our wills back to God in our place and for us by experiencing God's judgment (opposition to sin) "in order to lay hold upon the very root of our sin and to redeem us from its stranglehold upon us."<sup>10</sup>

Since it is our mind that is sanctified and renewed in Christ, Torrance strongly opposed any Apollinarian view that because our minds are sinful they had to be replaced by the Word in the incarnation. Instead, for Torrance, the Word assumed our sinful flesh, including our minds and healed us that so that through union with him in faith we may live as part of that new creation. Karl Barth's view is in harmony with Torrance's. For Barth, if we look in any direction but toward Christ himself, we will not see the truth about humanity. We will not see our sin and the law against which we have sinned and we will not see the fact that in Christ our sins have been forgiven because in him all human beings in their attempts at "existing otherwise than in Jesus Christ" have been "judged and removed, really removed, i.e., moved and taken up into fellowship with the life of the Son of God."<sup>11</sup> This

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 440.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, CD II/1, 162.

happens when the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and thus enables our reconciled fellowship with God in truth.

In knowing God in Jesus Christ then we know that "we cannot confine knowledge of Him within our human subjectivities."<sup>12</sup> This means that when we allow Jesus to be the *first* and *final* Word in theology then we are thinking according to the very movement of grace toward us in the incarnation with the result that it is through the Holy Spirit that "we are converted from ourselves to thinking from a centre in God and not in ourselves, and to knowing God out of God and not out of ourselves."<sup>13</sup> This is crucial because it means that it is only when the Holy Spirit, who is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son, enables us to know the Father through union with the Son, that we have a continuity with God the Creator and Lord of the universe. That continuity does not belong to us innately because we are sinners who cannot escape our self-will which itself is identical with our free-will; however, it becomes ours as that continuity is "continuously given and sustained by the presence of the Spirit."<sup>14</sup> Importantly, since the Holy Spirit is also "the temporal presence of the Jesus Christ who intercedes for us eternally in full truth,"<sup>15</sup> our knowledge of the Holy Spirit and God himself is lost by confusing the Holy Spirit with the human spirit and thus by falling into some form of "subjectivism." Again, Torrance has things just right: "unless we know the Holy Spirit through the objectivity of the *homoousion* of the Son in whom and by whom our minds are directed away from ourselves to the one Fountain and Principle of Godhead, then

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<sup>12</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 310.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 174. Torrance appealed to the doctrine of election to stress the "unqualified objectivity of God's Love and Grace toward us" so that our faith rests on "the ultimate invariant ground in God himself ... for our salvation in life and death" Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 132. This theonomous way of thinking takes place "from a centre in God and not from centre in ourselves" because the doctrine of election excludes any idea that "we may establish contact with God or know or worship him through acting upon him" (*ibid.*). For Torrance justification means that "it is Christ, and not we ourselves, who puts us in the right and truth of God, so that He becomes the centre of reference in all our thought and action" (*God and Rationality*, 60).

<sup>14</sup> See Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 223.

<sup>15</sup> Barth, CD II/1, 158.

we inevitably become engrossed with ourselves, confusing the Holy Spirit with our own spirits.”<sup>16</sup> When that occurs then knowledge of God, ethics and anthropology stem from our subjective perceptions, agendas, and experiences instead of from the revelation of God in his Word and Spirit.

This may sound a bit complicated. But Torrance explains this with a clarity and precision that make it impossible to miss the implications of his position. His point is very simple, and it is that Christians need to be childlike in the sense of simply taking up their cross and following Jesus as he originally noted in his book *Theological Science*. But they should not become childish in their faith. What did he mean by this? He says, when the Lord spoke of the Kingdom of God, he never spoke about “maturity and adulthood.”<sup>17</sup> Those who seek maturity and adulthood apart from Christ are seeking to ground their humanity in themselves—in their own self-understanding so that they then bring God into the picture only to support their own views of reality. Torrance claims that we live within the Kingdom of God only when, like children, “we are devoid of sophistication and pretentious self-understanding, where we let Christ be everything, and that includes being the mighty Saviour who came to make Himself responsible for us, to shoulder our burdens, and bear away our sins.”<sup>18</sup>

True maturity and adulthood, however, should be associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s approach who, unlike other Germans, did not yield to authority or to the State and refused to use God as “an ‘external prop’ for his faith.”<sup>19</sup> In him Torrance said, “German Christianity came to maturity, and adult man emerged upon the scene, free from the shackles of authority and standing on his own feet.”<sup>20</sup> However, Torrance also noted that many of his contemporaries in Germany, in the USA, and in Britain were using Bonhoeffer only as “a means of objectifying their own self-understanding and as a symbol on which to project their own image of

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<sup>16</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Torrance develops this same viewpoint in *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), chapter 4.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 74.

themselves."<sup>21</sup> They used phrases like "religionless Christianity" and "worldly holiness" to construct systems of thought that were in conflict with Bonhoeffer's theology and Christology. The reason I bring this up here is because Torrance's analysis illustrates the important point that he frequently presented when he discussed the ethical implications of Christian faith. And he did so by explaining morality on the basis of his view of justification by grace alone. Let me briefly explain this.

Torrance believed theology was not childlike but childish if it is only based on "an external authority, be it from the Scriptures or the Church."<sup>22</sup> By way of example he noted how often it is the case that if a minister is taken away from a congregation then the church members seem to "collapse in their faith" because they were relying on "external props" and thus have not "grown up in their faith."<sup>23</sup> Then he draws some very interesting and important conclusions. First, he says it is possible to use God himself as a prop in that way to support one's own view of religion. In that way he claims people protect themselves "from the searching judgements of God or from being concluded with all the godly and ungodly in the one solidarity of sin under the divine grace."<sup>24</sup> This is a vital point because it indicates why both Torrance and Barth spoke of revelation as grace being offensive to us. The reason is that even in our goodness we all are in solidarity in sin and that is what the grace of God disclosed in Christ reveals. Second, because of this Torrance then concludes that when we take justification by grace seriously then "the ground is completely taken away from [our] feet, and away with it there goes [our] own 'religion' and the 'prop-God' that belongs to it."<sup>25</sup> And his point is that it is that prop-God that Bonhoeffer was rejecting by "radicalizing justification by grace alone over against man's own religious self-justification and self-security."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 74-5.

## Justification by Grace and Moral Concerns

How then does Torrance's thinking play out in relation to morality? Torrance approaches this issue by noting that we cannot answer this question on the ground of natural science because with natural science "we have to think of nature out of nature" without recourse to some "*deus ex machina*" to help us out of difficulties. In other words, you cannot bring God in to explain anything in natural science since such science works only on the level of created nature so that all natural knowledge functions as if God were not given, "*etsi deus non daretur*."<sup>27</sup> This means that it is part of the doctrine of creation not to bring God in to explain the universe and what goes on within it. Indeed, to do this or to bring God in to stem secularization is pointless since this amounts to using God "against His will" in ways that can lead only to confusion. This is the case because every such attempt ends by "confounding Him with worldly powers" in a way that only alienates us further from the God of the Bible.<sup>28</sup>

It is this confounding of God with worldly powers that is at the heart of the current attempts by liberation theologians who attempt to understand God from their fight against oppression, no matter what form that fight might take. The God of the Bible, Torrance rightly insists is "known only through the Cross and weakness of Jesus Christ" in such a way that we know that it is God in him who "conquers the power and space of this world." Hence, the God we must do without is the "God' who is a prop to [our] self-justification" and not "the God of justification by grace alone."<sup>29</sup> Here Torrance maintains a view that is frequently misunderstood today. He says that if we try to think of God and nature "on one and the same level (or, on two quite separated levels which are merely the obverse of each other, which amounts to the same thing!)" then we fall into naturalism. That unfortunately leads to "a false apologetic that attempts to defend the Christian doctrine of the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 75-6.



transcendence of God on the same plane of thought as that in which we engage in merely natural knowledge."<sup>30</sup>

Here Torrance directly links his understanding of cheap and costly grace both to the doctrine justification and to Christian ethics asking: "Are we to engage in moral decisions without bringing God into them at all, and are we to learn how to behave in this secularized world in a purely secular way, *etsi deus non daretur* [as if God were not given]?" If the answer here is yes, then we deny our actual need for God and God's grace and we fall back finally upon ourselves once again. That, he says, would be a total misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer. He wanted to focus on the God of the Bible and not our prop-God so that "the point of departure for *Christian ethics* is not the reality of one's own self or the reality of the world, but the 'reality of God as he reveals Himself in Jesus Christ.'"<sup>31</sup> Importantly, Torrance says that in his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer said we have to "discard the questions 'How can I be good?' 'How can I do good?' and ask the very different question 'What is the will of God?'"<sup>32</sup>

It is with that question that, like Barth, Torrance began his ethics with the basic principle of our justification by grace alone which means that it is grace alone that "makes a man really free for God and his brothers, for it sets his life on a foundation other than himself where he is sustained by a power other than his own."<sup>33</sup> Here we reach the heart of the matter. Either we live the freedom which is ours in Christ who has loved us and will always love us unconditionally or we rely on external authorities and false props. The right choice here clearly is not to rely on our morality or religion but to live our ethical and religious lives "exclusively from a centre in Jesus Christ."<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer would not separate our existence within this world from our existence in Christ because it is in Christ that we see the true meaning of both. Hence, ethics and dogmatics both pivot "upon the fact that in and through the incarnation the Being of God Himself is to be found 'in space and time',

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

for it is by participating in this Christ that we stand at once both in the Reality of God and in the reality of this world."<sup>35</sup>

## **Cheap and Costly Grace**

This, however, means rejecting Neo-Protestant Christianity, Ebionitism (attempts to ground Christ's uniqueness in human responses to the Gospel instead of in Christ himself) and Docetism (attempts to understand Christology from our ideas about Christ instead of from Christ himself) as well as any dichotomy between idea and reality such as we find in Bultmann. Bonhoeffer's ethics was grounded in Christology and that is how Torrance grounds his ethics as well when he insists that justification is the basis for his view of morality. He argues that justification is the "most easy thing" but "difficult to understand." It is also "the most easy and yet the most difficult to accept." It is easy "because it is so utterly free, and therefore so cheap in the sense that it is quite without price or condition; but it is so difficult because its absolute freeness devalues the moral and religious currency which we have minted at such cost out of our own self-understanding."<sup>36</sup> But Torrance offers another view of cheap grace here as well. He says modern people find it difficult to understand and accept justification by grace alone because they want "cheap grace', grace which does not set a question mark at [their] way of life" and does not "ask [them] to deny [themselves] and take up the Cross in following Christ." They want a "grace that does not disturb [their] setting in contemporary culture by importing into [their] soul a divine discontent, but one which will let [them] be quite 'secular', grace that merely prolongs [their] already existing religious experience and does not 'spoil' [them] for existence as [people] of the world."<sup>37</sup> There is yet another meaning Torrance gives to cheap grace and that relates to what he called the new theologians of his day such as John Robinson with his book *Honest to God*.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 77-8.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 71.

Robinson spoke of God as the ground of his being by projecting his view of God from his own secular experience mythologically out of himself instead of thinking from a center in God. He, and those who followed him, should have allowed the triune God in his own personal being to define his view, instead of trying to understand God from his own experience. The end result of Robinson's approach, according to Torrance, was that Robinson embraced an inverted deism because the God he presented was powerless to act in relation to us since, in his theology, God could not be distinguished from Robinson's own experiences of depth. His great mistake was that he was unable "to distinguish God 'out there' rationally as objectively and transcendently other than the depths of his own being, and so he is thrown back upon himself to give content to his notion of God, as what is of ultimate concern *for* him in the depth and significance of his own being."<sup>38</sup> Torrance flatly asserts that this approach to theology is one that is only out for *cheap grace* because it merely uses God for its own ends and satisfaction and says that is precisely what Bonhoeffer rejected as idolatrous projection. Accordingly, Robinson ended up where all the "new" theologians ended, that is, with "the 'God' *they* want, one to suit themselves and modern 'secular' man, rather than the God of *costly grace* who calls for the renewing of our minds in which are not schematized to the patterns of this world but are transformed in conformity with His own self-revelation in Jesus Christ."<sup>39</sup>

This is an enormously important point because it is obvious that Robinson's approach was in harmony with the approach offered by Paul Tillich who argued that if you do not like the traditional meaning of the word God, then you could translate it and speak of the depths of your life or of your ultimate concerns. In doing that he believed you could not be called an atheist. You would only be an atheist if you denied or rejected your own experiences of depth because he believed that the word God means depth and if you know about depth you know about God.<sup>40</sup> This is still a popular methodology today and it is exactly what Torrance here rightly rejects

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>40</sup> See Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 57.

as an approach that is out for *cheap grace* because it confuses who God is objectively as the eternal Trinity acting for us in the incarnate Word and outpouring of the Holy Spirit with our own subjective experiences of depth.<sup>41</sup>

Importantly then, when Torrance speaks of the God of *costly grace* who meets us in Jesus Christ, he clearly means that Christ himself calls us to renounce ourselves and “take up the cross and follow Him unreservedly all along the road to crucifixion and resurrection.”<sup>42</sup> Far from threatening those elements of truth that people see as important for the modern world, Torrance insists that the Gospel does not threaten that, but threatens our own “self-centeredness” which is the actual threat that the Gospel opposes. Torrance then says that a proper doctrine of creation would affirm “*the liberation of nature*” and a proper doctrine of grace would lead to “*the affirmation of nature*” by recognizing the unconditional nature of God’s free love by which God maintains his creation in distinction from and dependence upon him. Thus, Torrance concludes: “Cut away that relation to the God of creation and grace and what ensues can only be deism or atheism in some form or other.”<sup>43</sup> He claims that the new theology actually smothered the objective truth sought by modern empirical science “with a massive subjectivity in which there is revealed a reactionary flight from scientific objectivity.”<sup>44</sup>

It is not insignificant that Torrance maintains that there is an evangelical and an unevangelical way to preach the Gospel. The latter tells people to believe in Jesus Christ *in order* that they may be saved. That, however, throws people back on themselves and their own personal decision or repentance and ends with a mistaken view of conditional salvation. That is no salvation at all since that is the

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<sup>41</sup> One popular example of this approach can be found in John Haught’s book, *What is God: How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) where he devotes a chapter (Chapter 1) to explaining that we know God from our experiences of depth. The result is a disaster since he is unwilling and unable to realize that God recognized in Christian faith is the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit so that God simply cannot be known from our experiences of depth at all. Torrance knew that well because his view of God came from his encounter with the grace of God which could never be separated from Christ, the giver of grace.

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 82.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

very thing we cannot accomplish and do not need to accomplish, as it has already been accomplished for us by Christ himself. So, the "unevangelical" approach to the Gospel says, "This is what Jesus Christ has done for you, but you will not be saved *unless* you make your own personal decision for Christ as your Saviour. Or: Jesus Christ loved you and gave his life for you on the Cross, but you will be saved only *if* you give your heart to him."<sup>45</sup> The evangelical approach says that salvation is an accomplished reality in the very life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus for all. Therefore, we should accept that new life and live it.

These "unevangelical" views directly conflict with the Gospel of God's unconditional grace. They embody a legalist view of conditional salvation that makes our actual taking up our cross and following Christ impossible by placing the weight of salvation back on us. It should instead point us to the simple fact that Christ has made himself responsible for us. Hence, we do not rely on ourselves at any point at all, but only on him as the one Mediator who loves us unconditionally and thus effectively. Torrance insists that the Gospel is preached evangelically when "full and central place is given to *the vicarious humanity of Jesus* as the all-sufficient human response to the saving love of God which he has freely and unconditionally provided for us."<sup>46</sup> Two key points follow from this. As the man Jesus, God has utterly and freely given himself in his Son by pledging "his very Being as God for your salvation." He has thus "actualised his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself."<sup>47</sup> Christ died for us just because we are sinners and quite unworthy of him and in that way, he has made us his own even before and apart from our believing in him. That is why Torrance always insists on holding incarnation and atonement together so that he can stress that Jesus' humanity is not merely instrumental in God's hands but that he personally acts to save us from sin. Salvation is not just an act of

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<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 93.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

God for us but “also a real human act done in our place and issuing out of our humanity.”<sup>48</sup> That is why he insists that we need a view of justification by grace

which really lets Christ occupy the centre, so that everything is interpreted by reference to who He was and is. After all, it was not the *death* of Jesus that constituted atonement, but Jesus Christ the Son of God offering Himself in sacrifice for us. Everything depends on *who* He was, for the significance of His acts in life and death depends on the nature of His Person.<sup>49</sup>

Importantly, this means that “we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of His saving work, rather than the other way round. The detachment of atonement from incarnation is undoubtedly revealed by history to be one of the most harmful mistakes of Evangelical Churches.”<sup>50</sup> This means that if we focus on Christ’s benefits and not upon Christ himself, we end up with legalism and moralism and miss the whole point of justification. For Torrance, “it is only through union with Christ that we partake of His benefits, justification, sanctification, etc.”<sup>51</sup> Hence Torrance insists that Jesus has bound us to himself by loving us so that “he will never let [us] go, for even if [we] refuse him and damn [ourselves] in hell his love will never cease.”<sup>52</sup> Because all of this is in effect for us, we are called to repent and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. What he accomplished for us was both an act of God reconciling us to himself and an act of man living perfectly by grace in our place and as the enabling condition of our living in the freedom for God and neighbor accomplished by him and in him and through him. Torrance says Christ himself believed for us and acted in our place.

Does this mean that Torrance has displaced us in such a way that what we do no longer matters? It could seem that way. But that is not what Torrance says and

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas F. Torrance *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK; Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 212.

<sup>49</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 64.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

thinks. What he means is that because Christ's own life of faith and obedience to the Father in our place includes us in our response to God and our own faith thus, he has already made my decision for God for me. Therefore, his acknowledgment of us before God "as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him, and whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ [we] are already accepted by him."<sup>53</sup> Because all of this is true, therefore we are called to renounce ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, the Savior and Lord.

When we live this freedom which is ours in him then we will not need to look over our shoulders to see whether we have given ourselves sufficiently to him or not in faith. We won't have to wonder about our faith because the strength of our faith does not rest upon our believing but solely upon what Christ has done for us and what he now does for us before the Father. The freedom Torrance has in mind here is this: in Christ "I am completely liberated from all ulterior motives in believing or following Jesus Christ, for on the ground of his vicarious human response for me, I am free for spontaneous joyful response and worship and service as I could not otherwise be."<sup>54</sup> Notice that Torrance has not eliminated our own personal decision of faith or our own spontaneous acts of loving God and neighbor here. Instead, he has grounded them in Christ's active obedience in such a way that it is Christ himself even now as the risen, ascended, and coming Lord who empowers our spontaneous free actions in obedience to God and in loving others. So he claims that in his humanity Jesus Christ "stands for the fact that 'all of grace' does not mean 'nothing of man', but the very reverse, the restoration of full and authentic human being in the spontaneity and freedom of human response to the love of God."<sup>55</sup> This position stands in complete contrast to those who criticize Torrance for presenting Christ in such a way that he does away with our free human actions. His position is exactly opposite such a view.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

## Torrance, Cheap and Costly Grace, and Legalism

Here I have said enough to be able to explain why those liberation theologians and those who think we can move from anthropology to theology (and Christology) get things wrong both in their theological anthropologies and in their view of Christian ethics. T. F. Torrance once wrote to me telling me that he liked the fact that I was an evangelical Catholic. That was a compliment because any Christian theology that is not properly grounded in the biblical witness will always confuse the Holy Spirit with the human spirit and begin thinking about God and human behavior from a center in human experience rather than from a center in God which God himself has provided in the incarnation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Among contemporary theologians, we have been seeing that Thomas F. Torrance clearly exemplifies how and why a theology that allows Jesus Christ himself to be the *first* and *final* Word leads both to a proper understanding of God and to a proper understanding of our relations with God. For Torrance, the Nicene faith held prominence in the church, but not for any legalistic reasons. So, while the faith confessed at Nicaea meant genuine knowledge of the truth of the Gospel which was called for by the Gospel itself, it did not mean “laying down decrees ... requiring compliance either like apostolic decisions or like imperial edicts.”<sup>56</sup> Torrance always opposed a legalistic approach to theology precisely because, for him an evangelical approach meant a declaration of the church’s saving faith based upon the Scriptural witness and not an imposition of it.

To clarify this point, let us consider more closely Torrance’s view of justification which, as already noted, he explains with the categories of cheap and costly grace. For Torrance, “Grace is not cheap but costly, costly for God and costly for man, but costly because it is unconditionally free: such is the grace by which we are justified in Christ Jesus.”<sup>57</sup> For Torrance this means that all people, whether they are good or bad or religious or secular, “come under the total judgement of grace” in which they are completely called into question and “saved by grace

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<sup>56</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; reissued in a Second Edition by T&T Clark, 2016, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 56.



alone."<sup>58</sup> That means, however, that our righteousness before God is not grounded in us at all, and especially not in our religious attempts to reach God without actually relying on Christ who is the grace of God enabling that possibility in the first instance.

Torrance himself preferred to speak of our justification by grace even though Luther correctly referred to our justification by faith in the sense that "It is not faith that justifies us, but Christ in whom we have faith."<sup>59</sup> However, Torrance noted that in both Lutheran and Reformed theology faith came to be seen as itself a justifying work and that undermined the evangelical meaning of grace and justification. This view made its presence felt in the notion of "*conditional grace*" which became entrenched throughout Protestantism. On the Roman Catholic side, the idea of infused grace was taught. Accordingly, while grace was supernaturally infused *ex opere operato*, we could then cooperate with grace and merit more grace. That idea "obscured the Gospel of free forgiveness of sins granted on the merits of Christ alone."<sup>60</sup> Once it was thought that grace was offered to people on condition of faith, the evangelical message of God's free grace effective in Christ for all was lost and new types of legalism followed. Legalizing follows by making faith into a saving work. This is another problematic view that Torrance opposed with his concepts of cheap and costly grace. Grace is cheap in that it is freely given to all. It is costly because it not only involved Christ's death on the cross, but it undercuts even the slightest idea that we could rely on ourselves. It always means taking up one's cross and following Christ.

As already noted, our faith should be grounded in Christ's own active obedience in our place. When it is, then the Gospel is proclaimed as an unconditionally free and effective act of God for us in Christ himself. This is why Torrance maintained that

we are yoked together with Jesus in his bearing of our burden and are made to share in the almighty strength and immutability of his

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 57.

vicarious faith and faithfulness on our behalf. Through his incarnational and atoning union with us our faith is implicated in his faith, and through that implication, far from being depersonalised or dehumanised, it is made to issue freely and spontaneously out of our own human life before God.<sup>61</sup>

For Torrance then, "Our faith is altogether grounded in him who is 'the author and finisher of our faith', on whom faith depends from start to finish."<sup>62</sup> Clearly, because Torrance's view of faith is altogether tied up with Christ as the *first* and *final* Word of God he maintained that faith itself "arises in cognitive commitment to the compelling claims of God in Jesus Christ and is linked to the absolute priority of God over all our conceiving and speaking of him."<sup>63</sup> And this means our faith is shaped by the "precise form God's truth has taken in the incarnation of his Word" while it is also open to ever more understanding because it is tied to the "inexhaustible nature of God."<sup>64</sup> This faith, which characterizes the faith of the Nicene Creed, is belief in the eternal Trinity and that means that since Jesus himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, belief in any other god is excluded. This, because the only way to the Father was provided by Jesus himself as the incarnate Word in his own personal being and actions. One other key point should be made here. Since faith really is cognitive union with the Word of God incarnate as Jesus Christ, faith cannot be understood "as some form of non-cognitive or non-conceptual relation to God" since in Nicene theology faith involved "acts of recognition, apprehension and conception, of a very basic intuitive kind, in responsible assent of the mind to truth inherent in God's self-revelation to mankind."<sup>65</sup>

Torrance held that contemporary Protestantism obscured this proper view of faith with a subtle element of "co-redemption." This of course is not just a

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<sup>61</sup> Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 84. Notice that here once again Torrance does not see Christ's mediation between us and God the Father as in any way displacing our free human actions. On the contrary, he frees us to spontaneously respond to God in faith.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 20.

Protestant phenomenon because "co-redemption" is in evidence, as already noted above, whenever one supposes that people cannot be saved "*unless* they make the work of Christ real for themselves by their own personal decision" or that people will be saved "*only if* they repent and believe."<sup>66</sup> What exactly is the problem with these notions? The answer is simple, but with profound implications, as already mentioned above. This thinking makes Christ's unconditional love of us conditional upon what we do. But we are the sinners who can do nothing, even in our goodness, to merit God's love of us that was unconditionally actualized on the cross and disclosed in Christ's resurrection. The idea of conditional salvation in the form of "co-redemption" or any other form therefore throws the weight of salvation back on us sinners who, whether we realize it or not, cannot save ourselves or anyone else by what we do. That is not good news, as Torrance notes, because if that were true then salvation would be completely lost.

Here Torrance's thinking is consistently Christological in just the right sense because his thinking always begins and ends with Christ and never with who we are and what we do. So he argues that the New Testament's message is that

God loves us, that He has given His only Son to be our Saviour, that Christ has died for us when we were yet sinners, and that His work is finished, and *therefore* it calls for repentance and the obedience of faith, but never does it say: This is what God in Christ has done for you and you can be saved on condition that you repent and believe.<sup>67</sup>

This is a pivotal point already noted above and it is missing in much contemporary liberation theology and in Christian ethics. Such theology, as we shall see, tends to begin with peoples' fight against oppression which may take many forms such as the feminist opposition to patriarchalism or the fight of the disenfranchised against those who try to dominate them or the fight against racism. Certainly, women are right to oppose all forms of patriarchalism and Christians should definitely oppose exploitation and domination of some by others and racism as well. However, to assume that theology begins there or with experiences of overcoming these forms

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<sup>66</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 58.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

of oppression is to embrace what Torrance is calling cheap grace and therefore to stand in opposition to the Gospel of God's unconditional love for humanity. The problem here is that if we begin with what we do and then search for a theology to undergird that activity, we have in fact shifted the weight *from* Christ as the objective source of truth and freedom to ourselves and what we do. Torrance astutely notes that "what becomes finally important is 'my faith', 'my decision', 'my conversion', and not really Christ Himself."<sup>68</sup>

Such thinking he believed has led to the idea that we are saved by our "existential decision, in which we interpose ourselves, with our faith and our decision, in the place of Christ and His objective decision on our behalf."<sup>69</sup> This happens when our faith is detached from its objective basis in the historical Jesus as the incarnate Word and his actions for us during his ministry on the cross, and as the risen, ascended, and coming Lord. Such an approach to the Gospel in fact cheapens God's costly grace by equating grace with our own faith, actions, and decisions. What is important then becomes our present contextual reaction to the biblical text instead of our obedience to Christ in faith. At this point Torrance explicitly opposes Bultmann's view of the Gospel by insisting that Christ himself has objectively accomplished our justification once and for all through his life of obedience that reached its high point on the cross. By contrast, Bultmann changes this objective meaning into what Christ means subjectively for each of us. Thus, for Bultmann we must cut through that objective act of God on the cross since for him Christ's death is no different than a fatal accident in the street.<sup>70</sup> And what Bultmann discovers is that we don't need that objective historical event of atonement to grasp the meaning of the Gospel. Thus, the meaning of the Gospel is the meaning I get from the Gospel story and apply to myself in my contemporary situation.

Torrance unequivocally rejects this approach not only because it obscures the truth of our justification by grace, but because it leads to an incurable form of subjectivism and thus straight to a form of self-justification, which as I have been

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 277.

arguing, is no justification at all. That is the cheap grace we find in those views which begin with us instead of with faith in Christ. One might say that the ultimate example of how really untheological such an approach is would be Bultmann's claim that if the resurrection was in any sense a historical event, then it was nothing other than the rise of faith on the part of the disciples after Jesus's death. That mistaken view overtly reduces the objective event in the life of Jesus, which is indeed the very revelation of God, into the subjective experiences of faith on the part of those who hear the story of Jesus and his death on the cross. This approach by Bultmann and by many today who might theoretically reject Bultmann's view of the resurrection but still employ his "existential" or "contextual" approach to theology, detaches Christian faith from the actual historical events that give it its meaning. Such an approach Torrance rightly asserts "imports an astounding egocentricity in which the significance of the *pro me* is shifted entirely from its objective to its subjective pole. And so we see justification by grace being turned into its exact opposite."<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, Torrance turns to Barth to stress that we can never take our eyes off "the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His objective vicarious work" because if we do then "the Gospel disappears behind man's existentialized self-understanding, and even the Reality of God Himself is simply reduced to 'what He means for me' in the contingency and necessities of my own life purpose."<sup>72</sup> He then mentions a book on *The Elements of Moral Theology* saying that he was astonished that Jesus Christ hardly figured in that work at all. What took his place Torrance noted was "the ethical and indeed the casuistical concern." Even more interestingly, Torrance asserted that "what emerged was an ethic that was fundamentally continuous with our ordinary natural existence and was essentially formal."<sup>73</sup> Here we see once again how important it was to Torrance to realize that the kingdom of God made present in Jesus completely overturns any ethical (moralistic) or legalistic approach to the truth of the Gospel.

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<sup>71</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

## Love of God and Love of Neighbor

This issue merits some further explanation. One way to do this is to explain exactly why Torrance insisted that we could not love God *by* loving our neighbors. This for Torrance is a key example of self-justification. It indicates a failure to live by God's unconditional love which meets us in the incarnation as grace. For Torrance, "To love God through my love to my neighbour is to move toward God. It does not know a movement of God toward man."<sup>74</sup> Since, for Torrance, God's grace cannot be separated from the active mediation of Christ at any time or place because Christ is God's grace for us and in relation to us, it would be a mistake to think of grace as a "transferrable quality infused into and adhering to finite being, raising it to a different gradation where it can grasp God by a connatural proportion of being."<sup>75</sup> This is an extremely important point because many contemporary theologians begin their thinking about Christian ethics with the idea that it is only by loving our neighbors that we can love God. And it is often assumed that it is out of that love of neighbor that we really come to know and love God. Nothing could be further from the truth for two reasons.

First, in ourselves, as we have seen above, we are sinners who are incapable of living by grace. That is why Torrance rightly held that Bultmann's view of ethics was disastrous. This is because "it rejects the objective decision, the actualized election of grace, upon which the whole of the Christian Gospel rests."<sup>76</sup> Though Bultmann's ethics may be considered radical, in reality it is no more than a "prolongation of man's already existing experience and a reduction of it to what his previous knowledge includes" or might "acquire through philosophical analysis."<sup>77</sup> However, in this approach we humanly remain prisoners of our own "existentialized self-understanding" because that approach firmly disallows Christ acting objectively as our "vicarious Saviour" who alone can enable us to escape our self-will which as

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<sup>74</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 89.

<sup>75</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 115.

<sup>76</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 62.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

such is our free-will. What is implied here is that we do not just sin but that because of the adamic fall, we *are* sinners even in our free-will because sin is the failure to live as God's creatures by acknowledging our total dependence on God.

Sin means that we act as though we could live independently of God by relying on our own goodness in relation to the moral law. Since this really is the problem of sin, it means that even in our acts of free-will, we are still "unable to extricate ourselves from the vicious moral circle created by our self-will, in order to be selflessly free for God or for our neighbor in love."<sup>78</sup> Torrance explicitly asserts that since God has interacted with us within history and within our "moral existence," he has "redeemed us from the curse of the law" which kept us in "bondage to ourselves." The result is that because of Christ freeing us from sin as self-will we can obey his will "without secondary motives" and we thus become "free from concern for ourselves and our own self-understanding" and also free to "love both God and our neighbour objectively for their own sakes."<sup>79</sup> The key point then is that justification by grace "involves us in a profound moral revolution and sets all our ethical relations on a new basis." That can only happen, Torrance insists, "when Christ occupies the objective centre of human existence and all things are mediated through His grace."<sup>80</sup>

Second, any attempt to come to true knowledge of God or what it means to be truly human which does not begin with the Incarnate Word has already bypassed God in an attempt to justify ourselves. In light of what Christ himself has revealed, it is just this behavior that uses the law to avoid actually relying on God's grace. Think for example of two key perspectives from Karl Rahner. First, he says that because "the experience of God and the experience of self are one" and that our self-experience and experience of our neighbor are also one, therefore these three aspects "mutually condition one another." The result is that "man discovers himself or loses himself in his neighbour; that man has already discovered God, even though he may not have any explicit knowledge of it, if only he has truly reached out to his neighbour in an act of unconditional love, and in that neighbour reached

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

out also to his own self.”<sup>81</sup> This works for Rahner because he believes that “the personal history of the experience of self is in its total extent the history of the ultimate experience of God itself also.”<sup>82</sup>

Notice here that Rahner’s view contrasts sharply with Torrance’s idea that it is only through conceptual union with Christ and not with some non-conceptual view of God that we seemingly discover by loving our neighbors that we know the true God. For Torrance, Grace and our experience of grace in no sense mutually condition each other. That is why, as we have seen, Torrance rejects the idea that we can love God by loving our neighbor. Furthermore, in contrast to Torrance, Rahner here places the work of knowing God on us and our love of neighbor instead of recognizing that the enabling condition for true love of neighbor is the love of God revealed and active in Christ alone as described in detail above. Since Christ is God’s grace enabling our knowledge of God the Father, it impossible to claim that knowledge of self and knowledge of God mutually condition each other when grace is not detached from the Giver of grace. Second, Rahner explicitly concludes that “love of God and love of neighbor stand in a relationship of mutual conditioning. Love of neighbor is not only a love that is demanded by the love of God, an achievement flowing from it; *it is also in a certain sense its antecedent condition.*”<sup>83</sup>

It goes without saying that Torrance would flatly reject any such notion of mutual conditioning between us and God because that view obviates the unconditional freedom of God’s love in himself and for us. In Torrance’s view, it does not know of the incarnation and especially of the fact that incarnation was intrinsically related to atonement in that its purpose was to forgive sin and enable fellowship with God by overcoming our self-will. Additionally, it is just because Rahner thinks he can know God and the proper meaning of anthropology through our loving our neighbors that he grounds theology in us instead of in Christ alone with the result that his approach offers a perfect example of what goes wrong in

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<sup>81</sup> Karl Rahner, “Experience of Self and Experience of God,” in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 13, *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 128-9.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>83</sup> Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 71, emphasis mine.



theology when Jesus himself is not allowed to be the *first* and *final* Word in theology. I have documented Rahner's position on this, illustrating that he himself says he cannot begin with Christ alone in considering theological anthropology, because he thinks that is too simple a solution.<sup>84</sup> Instead, he begins by reflecting on our human experiences of self-transcendence which he assumes includes some sort of non-conceptual knowledge of God as the term of our experiences of self-transcendence.<sup>85</sup> In that way he ignores the real problem of sin as self-will as well as its objective solution in God's electing grace which meets us in the incarnate Word.

It is just because Torrance allows Jesus himself to be the *first* and *final* Word in his theology that he also insists that Christian ethics could not find its criteria in any kind of moral responsibility as dictated by the moral law or by any concept of human goodness. Torrance maintained that "from the point of view of ethics we see that human moral awareness tends to sever its connection with God ... to establish itself on an autonomous or semi-autonomous basis."<sup>86</sup> When that happens, people then "relate themselves to God, consciously or subconsciously through duty to their neighbour—that is, they relate themselves to God indirectly through the medium of the universal [the idea of the moral law] ... and do not relate themselves to God in particular."<sup>87</sup> This then is a form of self-justification.

However, if one considers ethics in a strictly theological perspective and thus within faith, then one will see that this approach amounts to a sinful attempt to seize "the ethical imperative of God, making it an independent authority which is identified with human higher nature, so escaping God and deifying humanity—"you

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<sup>84</sup> See Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), Second Edition, Chapters Two and Five.

<sup>85</sup> For a full discussion of how Torrance's view of knowledge of God relates to Rahner's non-conceptual understanding of God, see Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2022), Chapter Four.

<sup>86</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

will be like God."<sup>88</sup> It is just this sinful human behavior that uses the law of God by relying on the moral law or common law in a way that yields obedience to the law without actually committing oneself to responsible action under God. This, Torrance thinks, is what Jesus set us free from by fulfilling the law for us and justifying us by setting us "free not only from the bondage of external law but from [our] own self-imprisonment in the condemnation of [our] own conscience ... he made our judgement of ourselves acquiesce in God's complete judgement."<sup>89</sup> Thus, the "act of grace in justification which breaks through to us apart from law is spoken of as 'revelation.'<sup>90</sup> This righteousness as the act of God in Christ which forgives and justifies us "could not be inferred logically from the abstract order of law or ethics. From that point of view forgiveness is impossible—it is legally speaking immoral or amoral. And if it is a fact, it is a stupendous miracle."<sup>91</sup>

This is exactly why Torrance spoke of a "'teleological suspension' of ethics. Because it entails this suspension, justification or forgiveness is not something that is demonstrable from any ground in the moral order as such. It only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us."<sup>92</sup> For Torrance justification by grace means that just because Christ has put us "completely in the right or the truth with God, Christ calls us completely into question."<sup>93</sup> That is the reason why "the way in which he embodied the love of God among men or expounded to them what the Kingdom of God was like so often rebuffed them."<sup>94</sup> He was indeed offensive to them in what he revealed. And what he revealed was "the vast chasm between the heart of man and the Will of God" so that this "provoked the bitter hostility of man to God and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 112-13.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 65.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

brought Jesus to the Cross."<sup>95</sup> It is precisely in his suffering that God himself launched his "supreme attack upon man's self-centredness, self-concern, self-security, self-seeking and self-will."<sup>96</sup>

Through all this Jesus remained "the absolute grace of God that will only be grace and nothing but grace" as was disclosed when he said "'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."<sup>97</sup> This was God's unconditional love and complete forgiveness by which all are accepted on "the ground of the divine grace." In this way judgment and grace are connected because we are called into question as those who try to establish ourselves in relation to God by relying somehow on ourselves. But in Christ we are set upon the proper foundation of grace by Christ himself. That is why Torrance maintains that this dialectic of judgment and forgiveness is most evident in our "moral life" because in light of this grace we are all exposed as needy sinners so that we cannot be saved by our works in relation to the moral law or even the ten commandments, but only by a faith which totally relies on what Christ himself has done for us. This is why St. Paul could say that God alone is true while every one of us is a liar (Rom. 3:4).

These are crucial points that separate Torrance's thinking from all those contemporary attempts to reach a proper understanding of the triune God and of human freedom by starting with human acts of fighting oppression or human acts of kindness. Those are important of course. But the moment it is thought that the truth of our knowledge of God and our knowledge of responsibility as Christians is to be sought in our human acts of opposing oppression or of being kind, then all is lost. Why? Because, as I have been arguing, what is disclosed by the cross of Christ is that, even in our goodness we are at enmity with God in our self-will and self-reliance and that we need God's grace even to become aware of this in the first place. Moreover, we are completely unable to work our way up to a knowledge of this truth apart from revelation, that is, apart from the reconciliation that has taken place for us in Christ. In this way Torrance held that "divine revelation conflicts

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

sharply with the structure of our natural reason.”<sup>98</sup> This is what rules out the idea espoused by Rahner and many of his followers that natural theology and revealed theology mutually condition each other.<sup>99</sup> Confronted with God in Christ, Torrance thinks that the shape and structure of our minds begin to change. This will involve “a radical repentant rethinking of everything before the face of Jesus Christ” with the result that we would then take up our cross and follow him. He insists that “you cannot separate evangelical theology from that profound experience of the radical changing and transforming of your mind that comes through dying and rising with Christ.”<sup>100</sup>

For Torrance it is specifically in our encounter with Jesus Christ that there takes place a “soteriological suspension of ethics”<sup>101</sup> which enables us to grasp the fact that our justification is a miraculous action of God who makes us righteous by forgiving our sins. But that means that we cannot understand ethics in a properly Christian sense from within the moral law as it now stands or our justification as a legal transaction because, as already noted, from the point of view of morality and law “forgiveness is impossible—it is legally speaking immoral or amoral.”<sup>102</sup> Forgiveness as justification thus cannot be understood “from any ground in the moral order as such” but “only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us. It is a *fait accompli*.”<sup>103</sup> The law is not thereby put aside since God’s judgment is not put aside. Rather this means that Christ brought about our regeneration from within his own personal activity from the divine and the human side and in that way he embodied “an

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<sup>98</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 443.

<sup>99</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 1*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore, Helicon Press, 1965), 98.

<sup>100</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 443.

<sup>101</sup> Torrance, “The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics*, 1991, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 252.

<sup>102</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 118.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

altogether new way of life for us resulting from our being translated out of the bondage of law into the freedom of the children of God."<sup>104</sup>

Here we see the fruits of Torrance's insistence that we cannot love God by loving our neighbor. He claims that God's will is not disclosed to us in terms of abstract ethics or law or even of goodness but only in the free unconditional love of God manifested in Christ himself. That is the love that brings about peace between us and God and thus between us and our neighbors. Torrance claims that as sinners we use the law to "escape from God's judgement, in order to escape from God."<sup>105</sup> This is what he finds so objectionable in Bultmann's thinking. In Torrance's words, "What Jesus did, according to Bultmann, was to think out radically to the end the absolute requirement of man within the relation between what he 'is' and what he 'ought to be' and so made everything pivot upon man's own individual decision."<sup>106</sup> What he left out was the fact that

Jesus Christ has to come to lift man out of that predicament in which even when he has done all that it is his duty to do he is still an unprofitable servant, for he can never overtake the ethical 'ought'. But actually the Gospel is the antithesis of this, for it announces that in Jesus Christ God has already taken a decision about our existence and destiny in which He has set us upon the ground of His pure grace where we are really free for spontaneous ethical decisions toward God and toward men.<sup>107</sup>

Notice here once again that for Torrance Jesus's vicarious human action as our representative and substitute does not overwhelm or make unimportant our human action because it is the enabling power of that free action. However, this takes salvation completely out of our hands because it is not the moral law or common law or the ten commandments which save us. And it is not our obedience to these which saves us either. That is something only God could do, and he did it apart from

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<sup>104</sup> Torrance, "The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ," 253.

<sup>105</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

<sup>106</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 62.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

the law and in fulfilment of its proper meaning. We have seen that Torrance was quite critical of Bultmann's existentializing the Gospel, and for good reason. Here we may ask exactly what it means to live by grace. Torrance's answer is clear: we are summoned to "live out of God and not out of ourselves, in which everything in religion is justified by reference to Jesus Christ because it can have no justification by reference to itself."<sup>108</sup>

## **Torrance and Liberation Theology**

Now, let me briefly contrast Torrance's view of faith as knowledge of the truth and justification as God's action in Christ freeing us for spontaneous action in loving God and on that basis loving our neighbors with the views offered by some contemporary theologians who embrace the method of contemporary liberation theology. That method, as already mentioned, invariably grounds knowledge of God and of human freedom in the human struggles against oppression and racism and other "isms" that threaten our humanity and the ideology that springs from that struggle. I have already noted the difference between a view of God grounded in our own experiences of depth and the knowledge of God that comes from an encounter with Jesus himself, the crucified and risen Lord. In the former approach, the word God is defined from and by us and always leads to some form of idolatry, legalism, and self-justification. That is the approach based on a theology that wittingly or unwittingly is in search of cheap grace. A theology grounded in Christ however is one in which, as Torrance repeatedly insists, the Gospel calls us to "repent and believe, to take up the cross and follow Christ."<sup>109</sup>

What precisely does that mean in this context? It means that we really must accept Christ as our Lord and Savior specifically and thus conceptually because no one other than Jesus himself could substitute himself for us before God. That has some real meaning. Because he has actually accomplished our reconciliation with God in his own personal life of vicarious obedience for us by virtue of the hypostatic union of his humanity with his being as the Son of God, his action for us is total and not in any sense partial. If we do not accept that fact, then Torrance says, we

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>109</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 84.

"empty it of saving significance."<sup>110</sup> Torrance held that it was through the blood of Christ that Jews and Gentiles were united in one body.<sup>111</sup> He also believed that since God the Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was personally and actively involved and present in Christ's crucifixion redeeming us from our lost condition under sin, therefore "the cross was a window into the very heart of God, for in and behind the cross, it was God the Father himself who paid the cost of our salvation."<sup>112</sup> Through Christ's blood then as he acted in "atoning sacrifice for our sin." Torrance maintains that "the innermost nature of God the Father as holy compassionate love has been revealed to us."<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Torrance argues that it is the Holy Spirit who pours out this very love into our hearts because the cross and Pentecost belong together. This leads him to offer one of his favorite passages from Calvin, namely, that "God does not love us ... because he has reconciled us to himself; it is because he loved us that he has reconciled us to himself."<sup>114</sup>

To clarify his point further Torrance looks at Jesus's incarnate life and activity in light of the parable of the prodigal son and says his life is "atoning activity from beginning to end." He asserts that Jesus made himself one with us in our "estranged humanity when it was running away into the far country, farther and farther away from the Father, but through his union with it he changed it in himself, reversed its direction and converted it back in obedience and faith and love to God the Father."<sup>115</sup> Jesus, he says, was "baptized 'into repentance' ... , for as the Lamb of God come to bear our sins he fulfilled that mission not in some merely superficially forensic way, though of course profound forensic elements were involved, but in a way in which he bore our sin and guilt upon his very soul which he made an offering for sin."<sup>116</sup> Torrance goes on to say that Christ's baptism was

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 84-5.

one of "vicarious repentance for us which he brought to its completion on the Cross where he was stricken and smitten of God for our sakes, by whose stripes we are healed."<sup>117</sup> Hence, Christ "laid hold of us even in the depths of our human soul and mind where we are alienated from God and are at enmity with him, and altered them from within and from below in radical and complete *metanoia*, a repentant restructuring of our carnal mind, as St Paul called it, and a converting of it into a spiritual mind."<sup>118</sup>

Thus, Torrance persuasively argues that we are completely unable to extricate ourselves from the sin which places us at enmity with God because he says "our free-will is our self-will" which, as we have seen, is what puts us at enmity with God and each other to begin with. Once again, he notes that sin "is so ingrained" in our minds that we are incapable of genuinely repenting because to do so would mean we could not rely even on our own repentance before God. In that regard Christ "laid hold of us even there in our sinful repentance and turned everything round through his holy vicarious repentance, when he bore not just upon his body but upon his human mind and soul the righteous judgments of God and resurrected our human nature in the integrity of his body, mind and soul from the grave."<sup>119</sup> Our regeneration then is completely tied to the fact that Christ repented once for all in our place and that there will be a final transformation when Christ comes again to make all things new. But that means that our conversion, regeneration, or new birth have already occurred in Jesus himself for us. So conversion means that in "our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake ... we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion."<sup>120</sup> He is the one and the only one who could take our place before God because he was God himself acting *as* man for us. He is the "substance of our conversion" so that without him all "so-called repentance and conversion are empty." Thus, a truly evangelical view of conversion is one in which we turn

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 86.



completely away from ourselves and toward Christ so that we need to be converted "from our in-turned notions of conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself."<sup>121</sup>

How different this view of conversion is from the view espoused within a liberationist perspective. Elizabeth Johnson persistently argues that exclusively referring to God as Father subordinates women to men. While she notes that God is Spirit and beyond identification with male or female sex, her own thinking is in conflict with this. She claims that "the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman."<sup>122</sup> However, if God is Spirit, then there is no gender at all in God. So her claim that the language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction which refer to God as Father and Son conveys the message that God is male is clearly mistaken. If one is referring to the Father through the revelation of his Son, then the message is not and could never be that God is male. That message would confuse divine and human being by projecting gender in some way into God who transcends gender!

The actual message is, or should be, that there is an exclusive and unique eternal relation of being between the Father and Son (Matt. 11: 27) and that our knowledge of God as Spirit, which itself is enabled by the Holy Spirit who is one in being with the Father and Son, comes to us as revelation through our conceptual union with Jesus himself. It does not come *from us at all*, but from *God alone*. Because all that Jesus does "in his human life is identical with the act of God himself" we can say 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."<sup>123</sup> The result is that behind his "life in the flesh" we can say that there "stands the closed circle of the intimate and private relation of loving and knowing, of speaking and doing, that

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; reissued in 2002 as a tenth anniversary edition and in 2017 as a twenty-fifth anniversary edition), 5.

<sup>123</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 127.

exists between the Son and the Father."<sup>124</sup> Torrance himself cites Matt. 11:27 and concludes that "the relation between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father is a closed relation, but entry into it is given 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 the concrete form of a historical relationship of man to fellow man."<sup>125</sup> In his human life we are directly confronted with God acting as our savior in revelation and reconciliation.

So Johnson's mistake, and it is not a minor one, is that she thinks knowledge of the triune God comes *from* us. Following the thought of Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague she claims that the symbol God functions, and *we* must make it function to include women since any continued traditional and exclusive reference to God as Father and Son will not function according to her liberationist goal of overcoming male attempts to subordinate women to men. This of course is a laudable goal; but the point she misses is that this can be achieved only through faith in Christ who has already liberated us from the sin which leads to patriarchy in the first place. For Johnson, within her liberationist perspective, it is out of women's fight against oppression that "women are engaged in creative 'naming toward God,' as Mary Daly so carefully calls it, from the matrix of their own experience."<sup>126</sup> She says "feminist reflection is ... not alone in its use of human experience as a resource for doing theology. What is distinctive, however, is its specific identification of the lived experience of women ... as an essential element in the theological task."<sup>127</sup> For Johnson then, naming God is grounded in women's emerging identity and not exclusively in the revelation of God as it comes to us through his Word and Spirit. Johnson believes that the conflict that arises over naming God "He" or "She" indicates "that, however subliminally, maleness *is* intended when we say God."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>126</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>128</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 98.

By contrast, if one is thinking evangelically, on the basis of the Gospel as depicted above, then since we know God is Spirit and that there really is no gender in God, the moment maleness enters the picture, we know that we are not yet or no longer thinking about the God of the Nicene faith. Important here is the fact that a key experience of women for Johnson is the experience of conversion. She describes this as women's struggle against sexism which affirms their own human worth. It is foundational, she says, as "a turning around of heart and mind that sets life in a new direction."<sup>129</sup> Accordingly, she thinks this is a "new experience of God" from which new understanding arises from women's experiences of liberation to know "what is fitting for the mystery of God to be and to do."<sup>130</sup> Further, she thinks that in "classical theology" conversion has been defined from the perspective of the ruling male as "pride or self-assertion" so that such pride must be divested to "in order to be filled with divine grace."<sup>131</sup> She thus argues

Through women's encounter with the holy mystery of their own selves as blessed comes commensurate language about holy mystery in female metaphor and symbol ... conversion experienced not as giving up oneself but as tapping into the power of oneself simultaneously releases understanding of divine power not as dominating power-over but as the passionate ability to empower oneself and others ... in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God.<sup>132</sup>

This approach is so manifestly opposed to any reasonable view of conversion evangelically understood that it offers an unmistakable example of a self-grounded theology that not only ignores the problem of sin but argues for a view of salvation or freedom which is directly opposed to one that is Christ-centered, as depicted above.

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<sup>129</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 62.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 66-7.

First, knowledge of the triune God does not in fact come from knowledge of ourselves, no matter how deep that may be. It comes from the Father through the Son in an encounter with the historical Jesus as attested in Scripture and through the power of the Holy Spirit and thus through faith and by grace alone. And, as noted above, it comes from a conceptual and ontological union with the crucified and risen Lord himself. Therefore, it does not come from "the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves" as Johnson claims. And because our knowledge of God comes from Christ himself, it never really came from the perspective of the ruling male as Johnson thinks, but from God's own self-revelation, his own naming himself to us in his incarnate Son and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, in her view of "classical theology" she certainly misses Torrance's stress on the unconditional nature of God's forgiving grace by claiming that we must divest ourselves of pride in order to receive grace. Torrance's point is we do not have to do anything to receive grace because that is freely given in Christ for all. Additionally, "pride or self-assertion" affect men and women and not just ruling males because pride in relation to God refers to our unwillingness to live by grace alone. Pride refers to the human attempt to live from our own resources instead of from Christ alone.

Second, language about this God is not simply produced metaphorically and symbolically based on our experiences of who or what we think God is as a holy mystery. Third, when compared to the evangelical view of conversion offered by Torrance, one can see with unmistakable clarity the difference between a Christ-centered view of the matter and one that is entirely untouched by such a view. For Johnson, conversion here is totally understood based on women's experiences of themselves and is presumed to be inherently in touch with God as holy mystery. Jesus Christ is not even mentioned. For Torrance conversion is understood as God's amazing grace actualized in Christ himself by his converting us back to God the Father through his vicarious life of perfect obedience for our benefit. So our conversion is not any sort of reliance upon what we do or experience but rather our participation in the freedom for the triune God through conceptual and ontological union with Christ in faith.

For Torrance then, as we saw above, conversion involves regeneration because we are judged by God's forgiving grace in Christ and so conversion he says is "wholly bound up with Jesus Christ himself" since it is "our new birth, our regeneration, our conversion" which have all already taken place in him for us. The result is that in a properly theological theology that begins and ends with Christ himself conversion can only refer to "our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake. In a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion."<sup>133</sup> So an evangelical view of conversion is one that sees our "new birth" to knowledge of the true God and of God's purposes for humanity "as a turning away from ourselves to Christ" because it is "conversion from our in-turned notions of conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself."<sup>134</sup>

It turns out that the liberationist view of conversion offered by Johnson and many who follow her views is in direct conflict with a properly Christian view of the matter not only because in her view Jesus is decidedly absent. It is so also because it is self-grounded with the assumption that we really can know the true God without experiencing the reconciliation of our minds that took place on the cross for us in Christ himself. So her view ignores the real problem of sin and the proper meaning of salvation as liberation from our own self-grounded attempts to know God and fight against the inequality of women and men. The fact is that in Christ we have been liberated from the sin that leads to patriarchy. And we know about that liberation because it has taken place as an act of God for us in Jesus' own life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Thus, we know that our actual liberation is not and can never be an achievement of ours. It is ours. But it is ours as it is realized for us in him and through our conceptual and ontological union with Christ in faith. To live that freedom is to live by grace alone through faith in Christ.

Without experiencing the reconciling grace of God through the Holy Spirit we will always assume that knowledge of God comes from ourselves and the naming of God from ourselves in our struggles for liberation. All of that is fundamentally at

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<sup>133</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 85-6.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

odds with the fact that true liberation is the liberation *from* our self-will which is our free-will which is already ours in Christ. It is liberation from ourselves since in ourselves we are sinners at enmity with God and each other. Importantly, as noted above, when Torrance equates sin with our self-will what he means is that all our human attempts to live apart from faith in Christ are always attempts to live autonomously and independently of God. That is the impossibility created by sin—God will not let us go, even in our self-will which places us in conflict with the fact that we are created to be in relationship with God by depending upon him. Thus, we cannot heal those who sinfully act to subordinate women to men by changing the name of God since the power of naming God does not come from us in the first place. And in the second place, we do not have the power to overcome the sin of patriarchy no matter how we reconstruct our metaphors and symbols. That power comes exclusively from the power of grace in and through which the reconciliation of the world has already taken place in the history of Jesus Christ for all people. So, there simply can be no true naming of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by tapping into the power of ourselves as Johnson assumed. That power is always the power of sinners who, in pride and self-will, are unable and unwilling to live by grace alone in its identity with Jesus Christ who, as the risen, ascended, and advent Lord still is the only one who can enable knowledge of the Christian God here and now through the power of the Spirit and thus in faith as tied to Jesus himself. It is then a matter of accepting the costly grace of God rather than cheapening it by detaching it from the need to take up our cross and follow Christ alone.

Let me give one more example of a liberationist perspective that purports to be grounded in the Holy Spirit but is not properly grounded in the Holy Spirit at all to show the difference Torrance's view makes in this discussion. In his book, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture*, Rubén Rosario Rodríguez proposes to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit "in liberating work—especially when such work is located outside the church."<sup>135</sup> In his view, theological analysis is grounded in acts of liberation and humility. He thus advocates

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<sup>135</sup> Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 143.

a "doctrine of revelation grounded in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit."<sup>136</sup> But the question is: can one recognize the Holy Spirit by exploring "liberating work"? From within a proper evangelical theology that allows Christ to be the *first* and *final* Word, the answer to this question is an unequivocal no. Why? Because in a strict doctrine of Christology and of the Trinity one cannot separate the Spirit from the Word since they are one in being (*homoousios*) in eternity and in the economy. That means that it is impossible to recognize the Holy Spirit simply by exploring liberating works just as it is impossible to know and love God *by* loving our neighbors.

The idea that one can recognize and understand the Holy Spirit by focusing on liberating works is simply another form of self-justification. It begins theology with what we do without recognizing the fact that unless what we do is grounded in the love of God for us actualized in the incarnation and revealed by the risen Lord, then even if that theology is described as faith seeking understanding, it is clearly an untheological theology. Unless faith is enabled by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father, it is not yet or no longer Christian faith. It is an approach that relies on cheap rather than on costly grace just because it will not recognize that true liberation means taking up our cross and following Christ the Liberator. We need to be liberated from the self-will that refuses to begin and end with Christ himself and not with ourselves. Here Torrance's view of how we know the Holy Spirit is decisive:

the doctrine of the Spirit requires the doctrine of the Son. It is only by the Spirit that we know that Jesus is Lord and can assert the *homoousion* of him, but apart from the Son, and the inseparable relation of the Spirit to the Son, the Spirit is unknowable, and the content of the doctrine of the Spirit cannot be articulated.<sup>137</sup>

Importantly, then for Torrance "The Spirit does not utter himself but the Word and is known only as he enlightens us to understand the Word."<sup>138</sup> This approach clearly

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 213.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 214.

rules out the idea that we can know the Holy Spirit by focusing on any sort of human behavior such as acts of liberation or compassion, however humanly important those acts may be.

In light of what I am arguing here then, beginning with our liberating works detaches revelation from the incarnate Word as the revealer and makes revelation a general catchword for human acts of liberation. At the outset we see a massive difference of views. While Rosario Rodríguez thinks “no tradition speaks with absolute certainty or universal application,”<sup>139</sup> that very assertion eliminates the possibility of knowing the truth in its identity with Jesus himself who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In other words, while it is true that no tradition has control over the truth so that such tradition is in any sense true in itself, that does not mean that one cannot speak with absolute certainty and universal application about the truth. Once that conclusion is drawn relativism follows. A quick example from Karl Barth will make this point clearly. Because he believed there was a way from Christology to anthropology (as did Torrance), he held that everything said about anthropology, that is, about our human relations with God, including our sin and God’s forgiveness of that sin,

can only be said from this point, from [our] being in Jesus Christ. If this rule—which is the basic rule of all sound doctrine—is followed, the statement that God is knowable to [us] can and must be made with the strictest possible certainty, with an apodictic certainty, with a certainty freed from any dialectic and ambiguity, with all the certainty of the statement ‘the Word was made flesh.’<sup>140</sup>

For Barth this means that we can speak with absolute certainty and universal application as long as we are thinking about humanity from the vantage point of our having been reconciled to God in Christ. Any attempt to speak of humanity in its quest for freedom and fight against oppression apart from this christological basis will necessarily mean uncertainty because it would accord anthropology a role independent of the truth known christologically. That would imply that we can find

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<sup>139</sup> Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 143.

<sup>140</sup> Barth CD II/1, 162.



truth in ourselves when what is revealed in and by Jesus Christ is that we are sinners incapable of knowing God and ourselves truly apart from the incarnate Word. True knowledge of God only occurs when Christ's completed atoning reconciliation is actualized in us with the healing of our minds and hearts through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Torrance makes this same point repeatedly when he speaks of cheap and costly grace and stresses the importance of our justification by grace alone, as we have seen. He also does so when he refers to Jesus himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6). He takes that statement with utter seriousness because he firmly and consistently holds that a proper theology must take its stand "on the supreme truth of the Deity of Christ" and thus it must interpret the Gospels "in the light of the epistemic and ontological relation between the historical Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, and God the Father."<sup>141</sup> For example, Torrance says that it is particularly in the Gospel of John that this evangelical truth is emphasized with clarity. He notes that none of the other gospels stress Jesus's earthly, historical, and fleshly reality more than the Gospel of John. At the same time the fourth Gospel stresses "the eternal *I am* of the living God" which is "irresistibly evident in Jesus' self-disclosure, above all at those points where he stands forth as the Lord of life and death."<sup>142</sup> In a manner similar to Barth, Torrance concludes that "the central focus of the Gospel upon the Deity of Christ is the door that opens the way to the understanding of God's triune self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" and that is why any proper interpretation of the New Testament has to be "at once both Christological and trinitarian."<sup>143</sup> Torrance's reaction to Bultmann expresses this point quite decisively:

When Bultmann wishes to reinterpret the objective facts of *kērygma*,  
e.g. as given in the Apostles' Creed, in terms of an existential decision

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<sup>141</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996; reissued by T&T Clark with an Introduction by Paul D. Molnar, 2016), 48.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. It is at that point that Torrance cites many supporting texts such as "I and my Father are one" (Jn. 10: 30); "I am the resurrection and the life ..." (Jn. 11:15); "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me ... He who has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14:6, 9, 11).

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 49.

which we have to make in order to understand, not God or Christ or the world, but ourselves, we are converting the gospel of the New Testament into something quite different, converting christology into anthropology. It is shockingly subjective. It is not Christ that really counts, but my decision in which I find myself.<sup>144</sup>

Additionally, as seen above, Torrance takes seriously the problem of sin and our need to have our minds reconciled to God in Christ *before* we can know God truly and in order for us to love God and neighbor. So Barth and Torrance are very close on this subject.

Since both theologians think the only way to God is through the incarnate Son and that we are united to the Son conceptually through the Holy Spirit and therefore in faith, both of them also agree that it is only on the basis of justification by grace alone that we are justified and sanctified. For Torrance justification cannot be understood as the “beginning of a new self-righteousness” which it would be if our sanctification were thought of as “what we do in response to justification.”<sup>145</sup> Such a view of sanctification would have to mean that finally “our salvation depends upon our own personal or existential decision” instead of upon God’s grace, namely, upon what Christ has accomplished objectively for us in making us free to live from him alone as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.<sup>146</sup> In this context Torrance argued that we should not use political theology “as a basic hermeneutic to interpret the Gospel and mission of the Church” because whenever that happens then we are entrapped in “an ecclesiastical will to power” instead of living by grace by taking up our cross and following Christ.<sup>147</sup> It is only because Christ loved us while we were

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<sup>144</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 286.

<sup>145</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 161.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-3.

<sup>147</sup> See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 79. Torrance thus maintained that “through sin and self-will the Christian religion, as easily as any other, may be turned into a form of man’s cultural self-expression or the means whereby he seeks to give sanction to a socio-political way of life, and even be the means whereby he seeks to justify and sanctify himself before God” (*God and Rationality*, 69).

still sinners and forgave our sins that we are truly free to love him and thus to love God and on that basis to fight against oppression by loving our neighbors.

Here let me briefly contrast the approach of Rosario Rodríguez who speaks for many to that of Torrance in a bit more detail. As noted, Rosario Rodríguez thinks we can know the Holy Spirit from human works of liberation. With that assumption he methodologically separates the Spirit from the Word and thereby confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. This leads him to several problematic conclusions. He thinks that "to participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work." From this it follows that one can locate revelation "in the work of historical and political liberation."<sup>148</sup> As a result his key thesis is that since God desires that we all live peacefully together "guided by God's compassionate justice" he can explore biblical views of the Spirit's work in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity before they became "calcified into exclusivist doctrines."<sup>149</sup> On this basis he argues "that the work of the Spirit serves as a theological locus for pluralistic dialogue and cooperation because the sacred Scriptures of all three faiths share an ethical norm grounded in the themes of liberation, justice and compassion."<sup>150</sup> This may sound promising to the uncritical reader. But it is not.

Torrance would certainly oppose this thinking because it clearly replaces Christ himself with an ethical norm. So, instead of grounding his view of the Spirit and of liberation in the Spirit's enabling us to love God spontaneously as he meets us in Jesus Christ here and now on the basis of his forgiving grace, Rosario Rodríguez substitutes an *ethical norm* that he thinks unites the three faiths, and then searches for instances of liberation, justice and compassion as indications of the actions of the Holy Spirit. This factually undermines the doctrine of justification by grace and separates the Spirit from the Word, thus undoing the unity of the Trinity acting for us in history. The fact that Rosario Rodríguez does this is evident when he asserts that he will begin his theology "with pneumatology *rather than*

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<sup>148</sup> Rosario Rodríguez, 142.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

with christology."<sup>151</sup> As I have been arguing, however, to begin with pneumatology within a properly evangelical theology one would immediately have to begin with Christology because the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ as our Liberator. To have the Holy Spirit is to recognize and acknowledge that Jesus himself is the Lord who enables our knowledge of God in the first place as he speaks his Word to us here and now.

To claim to be speaking of the Holy Spirit without at once being directed toward Christ the liberator necessarily confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. This would have to mean that sanctification has become a work of ours instead of an accomplished work of Christ for us. That is why Rosario Rodríguez can say that to participate in liberation is in a certain sense already a salvific work. It is not. The key indicator that such confusion has occurred will always be the fact that someone thinks the truth of our knowledge of God and of liberation comes from the moral law as it now stands and our obedience to the moral law or from various experiences of compassion or liberation. As seen above, Torrance helpfully maintained that any such approach was bound to fail because it misses the central point that we are not saved and thus not freed from our sin as self-will through faithfulness to the moral law or to any abstract ethical norm, even if that be constructed from the Bible. That approach is a way of hiding from our true responsibility which is to hear the Word of God's forgiving grace and thus to love God in Christ for his own sake. On that basis Christians become free to love their neighbors and fight against oppression without any ulterior motives for themselves or others since they are impelled to do so by the unconditionally free love of God. That approach is what keeps Christians from falling prey to ideologies in their fight for freedom and against oppression in all its forms. Through the Holy Spirit they are conceptually and ontologically united with Jesus Christ the risen, ascended, and coming Lord who alone enables our liberation from sin and for service of God and neighbors.

While Rosario Rodríguez argues in a general way that "all three faiths share a conception of the Spirit as the *historical* manifestation of God in the world *through*

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 145, emphasis mine.

acts of liberation that preserve human dignity,"<sup>152</sup> the truth is that a genuine recognition of the Holy Spirit would require that we look away from our acts of preserving human dignity to Christ himself as the one who justifies and sanctifies sinners. Because Rosario Rodríguez does not do this, he claims that to seek dogmatic certainty "steers us toward theological totalitarianism."<sup>153</sup> Thus he claims that theological knowledge "is more a matter of personal and communal spiritual formation than of detached scientific observation."<sup>154</sup> Armed with that approach he claims once again that "God can be known in human history through divinely inspired acts of justice, compassion, and liberation."<sup>155</sup> This is a problematic assertion even if the acts in question were thought to be divinely inspired simply because no such human actions are capable of making God known to us since only God can reveal God. It is crucial to realize here that seeking dogmatic certainty could never steer us toward theological totalitarianism if it *begins* and *ends* with Christ himself.

Torrance captured this perfectly when he noted that we must never "transfer the centre of authority from the objective revelation of God to ourselves" and that it is only when we recognize the "ultimate authority of the Supreme Truth over all other authorities" that there is "freedom for the faithful, for it makes us to know the truth finally out of itself and by its grace alone, and demands of us an obedience that transcends our respect for the authoritative institutions of the Church."<sup>156</sup> Torrance then asserts that it is only when these institutional authorities are subordinated to the "Supreme Truth" of God himself that they avoid being "authoritarian tyrants" and become instruments of the truth itself. Still, the Spirit always directs us away from the institutional teaching of the Church to "the one Truth of God revealed and incarnate in Jesus Christ, in order that it may serve that

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "Truth and Authority: Theses on Truth," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (3), 240, 242.

Truth in such a way that it is allowed to retain its absolute priority over all the Church's teaching."<sup>157</sup>

The problem here is that Rosario Rodríguez believes that it is appropriate to speak about "human struggles for liberation *as* the historical experience of God."<sup>158</sup> He thinks he can describe the Holy Spirit by exploring the spirit latent in various cultural activities. This can be done therefore "*without* adhering to any one confessional or ideological tradition, which in turn facilitates a certain kind of 'body politic' that embodies the emancipatory practices of spirit in the public arena."<sup>159</sup> On this basis Rosario Rodríguez believes that movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement is one of a number of "'confession-less' yet profoundly spiritual movements of liberation" that "have become the new *loci theologici* ('places of theology') for understanding and encountering the work of the Spirit in history."<sup>160</sup> This means that one might uncritically embrace a movement that is more interested in creating chaos and hatred of the police than in caring for the lives of black persons who are frequently threatened by other blacks within their own communities. And one might also think that Black Lives Matter "presents itself as an emancipatory spirituality for all black lives."<sup>161</sup> BLM, he says, "invoked Martin Luther King, Jr." while encouraging violent rather than nonviolent actions in the pursuit of liberation from perceived oppression. Of course Dr. King was irrevocably in favor of nonviolence in the pursuit of racial justice. But Rosario Rodríguez defends the violence of BLM as "'recovering the radicalism of King's methods and message for the twenty-first century."<sup>162</sup> This supposedly places them on the same foundation as Martin Luther King, Jr. However, it most certainly does not do so because he never would have advocated the kinds of violence clearly supported by BLM.

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 170.

While Rosario Rodríguez notes that "white mainstream" resistance to BLM has labelled that group a terrorist group, he thinks that "the tragedy of Michael Brown" has, by the Spirit, been turned "into a sacramental encounter with God."<sup>163</sup> This, in spite of the fact that Michael Brown was not at all innocent, but was assaulting a police officer. Notwithstanding this, movements such as BLM become the basis for the theme of Rosario Rodríguez's book: "The argument articulated in these pages is simple: faith ought not be reduced to human emancipation, but faith without the liberating works of the Spirit has lost all 'living connection to the reality of God.'"<sup>164</sup> The problem here is this: Christian faith is Christian only to the extent that the Holy Spirit, who is one in being with the Father and the Son, is the enabling condition of liberation. And liberation in the first instance means liberation from self-will, self-reliance, and thus from sin and enmity toward God and thus freedom to love God and on that basis love our neighbors. So, while it is true that faith and works do go together, one cannot recognize the Holy Spirit by focusing on liberating works because it is Christ himself who empowers us to be truly free for others in the first instance.

Here we return to the theme of his book: by focusing on "the work of the Spirit in human history—especially through works of compassion and liberation" Rosario Rodríguez offers

a possible strategy for moving past the impasses between *theologies of the Word* that take a fideistic stance on Scripture as God's self-revelation without subjecting their dogmatic claims to external criticism, and the *theologies of culture* that contend that God can only be known through the medium of culture but lack criteria for differentiating revelation from the cultural status quo. The argument has been made that God is encountered in history *in* works of justice, compassion, and liberation, even when the locus of this spiritual work is a body politic not historically associated with any religion whose members describe their emancipatory work without appealing to

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 175.

explicitly theological language.<sup>165</sup>

From this Rosario Rodríguez concludes that “*wherever* the work of establishing justice, extending compassion, and facilitating human liberation occurs, *there* is the true Spirit of God.”<sup>166</sup> Since these “emancipatory movements in history” are thought to “embody the divine will for all humankind regardless of confessional or creedal origin” Rosario Rodríguez thinks this supposed work of the Spirit leads to the “notion of history as sacrament” which allows us to speak of “divine agency in human history” so that we also can affirm “the work of the Spirit in the religious and cultural ‘other’.”<sup>167</sup>

Here is the problem with this analysis: fideism is the view that Christian faith dispenses with human reason. Hence, Rosario Rodríguez’s claim that faith in God’s self-revelation in Scripture which in the New Testament specifically attests to the work of the Spirit as one in being with the Father and Son according to the Nicene faith is fideistic if it does not subject itself to “external criticism.” Unfortunately, a faith that subjects itself to criticism external to the Word of God has to mean that he thinks there is a criterion for the Spirit and thus for theological truth and true liberation that is other than and beyond the very Word of God attested in Scripture. While Rosario Rodríguez is right to want to differentiate revelation from culture, his attempt to find the truth of the Christian faith in human acts of liberation finally is unable to do so. Why? Because he has missed the most important point of Christian theology at the outset. To have the Holy Spirit is to be bound conceptually and ontologically to Jesus Christ himself who is the incarnate Word who alone liberates us for true knowledge of God and for spontaneous love of neighbor based *solely* on God’s loving us in his incarnate Word while we were still sinners. It is based upon God’s grace which is costly to us because to live by grace means to take up our cross and follow Christ. To have the Holy Spirit confessed at Nicaea and attested in the Bible means to recognize that Jesus is the Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and thus to live in union with him by faith. Identifying works of justice, liberation and compassion as the locus of the Holy Spirit overtly confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit by

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 175-6.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.



directing our attention away from Christ the Liberator and toward our own works which permit descriptions of "divine agency" apart from and without knowing God the Father through his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an approach ignores the problem of sin and the fact that living by faith means living by Christ's forgiving grace and not by our works of justice and liberation. Such thinking inadvertently advances a version of self-justification and modalism by referring to divine action in history apart from the specific actions of God in his Word and Spirit.

A proper theology of liberation does not mean pursuing ideologies that promise liberation but actually enslave their followers by directing them back to themselves and their political and social action as the way toward true liberation. Here I suggest that Torrance has the better view. He insists that Jesus himself *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one can come to the Father except through him. He is right. Since Jesus himself is the very Word of God active in history as the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended and advent Lord, we cannot know the truth of who God is, who the Spirit is, or what true liberation means apart from him. He liberates us for service of God and neighbor. Without being united to Christ through the Spirit conceptually and ontologically we will always define truth in a way that grounds knowledge of that truth in us and what we do, instead of in God acting for us within history in his Word and Spirit. That is precisely what Rosario Rodríguez does in the end when he claims that "truth has been defined as an existential appropriation and practical application of the prophetic work of the Spirit to love the neighbor as oneself."<sup>168</sup> Unfortunately, this is just the view of truth that Torrance rightly rejected when he said we cannot love God *by* loving our neighbors, as discussed above. Sadly, having detached the Spirit from the Word methodologically, Rosario Rodríguez offers history itself as a sacrament instead of realizing that one cannot detach the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular, from Christ himself who instituted those sacraments as the way Christians live in and from union with Christ throughout history. Once again, his view of history as a sacrament allows him to direct attention away from Christ and thus away from the Holy Spirit and toward our human actions in history for theological knowledge and proper Christian action. This just misses Torrance's all-

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 186.

important understanding of justification by grace alone and places us in the unfortunate position of having to rely on ourselves to do something we can never accomplish, that is, to live in the freedom which only God can, did and does provide.

Todd H. Speidell, "The Soteriological Suspension of Ethics in the Theology of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 151-190; #2023-THS-1. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

## **THE SOTERIOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF ETHICS IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE**

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With thanks to the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, I am glad to talk today about T. F. Torrance and theological ethics.<sup>1</sup> While I will mention and allude to how his critics have oddly overlooked him as an evangelical ethicist and basically misconstrued him as an academic theologian who "neglected ethics," I won't repeat in public my critique of their critique I have already published in detail.<sup>2</sup> I will instead mainly make a positive case for TFT as "the precise opposite" (one of his favorite phrases) of his critics' curious charge that he elevated epistemology over ethics or the vertical over the horizontal.<sup>3</sup> I will *prove* (which is rare in theology these days but is still the aim of science and mathematics!) that he displayed an *implicit and comprehensive ethic throughout his entire theological corpus*, which in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was delivered virtually, December 1, 2020, as the Keynote of the Annual Meeting of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, in session P1-103 of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I am very grateful for Chris Kettler's response and the discussion that followed the presentation.

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version was published in *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, Vol. 5: "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and Ethics" (2015), 56-90, which I developed into a book: *Fully Human in Christ: The Incarnation as the End of Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See *Fully Human in Christ*, 1-7, for my summary and critique of what I have called "the Webster thesis," given that John Webster initially formulated the charge that TFT neglected ethics and his doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ evacuates or invalidates our humanity.

fact and interestingly even included many *explicit essays on ethics*. I will suggest as a precise counterpoint to his critics that a careful reader of TFT could characterize his *entire theological project as an ethic of reconciliation*.

As a point of method, my sources for today's presentation are primarily based on my analytical exposition of TFT. My modest goal is for you to hear, read, and appreciate TFT as an evangelical ethicist as a theological resource for your own various ministry contexts. Also as a personal point, I will say that I grew up daily as with inner city violence in the 60s and 70s (in Paterson, NJ: "The Hurricane" and "Lean on Me"), and so my own appropriation of TFT today will include commentary on the current chaos and violence in US cities (and hopefully I'll provoke you a bit in a good way!).

While I'm not a fan of theology based on narratives or stories, I will simply say that I trace my interest in theological ethics to my background as a child and teenager in the 1960s and '70s as I encountered the urban unrest of the time in a very violent city: Paterson, New Jersey (the setting for the movies *The Hurricane* and *Lean On Me*). While I never experienced violence within my home, I routinely witnessed it on the streets, in school, and in my friends' homes (who were black and white, Italian and Puerto Rican, etc.; who were all poor (and I will submit that SES is deeper than race; and who all had in common, unlike me, the lack of a biological father in the home). Unlike my three siblings who never made it out of Paterson, I began a new personal and theological journey, which has included an ongoing interest in poverty, violence, and reconciliation, and I have benefited from my studies both in the social and the theological sciences (which would raise TFT's eyebrows, though I do agree with him that the social and behavioral sciences have not had their Clerk Maxwell or Einstein).

Suffice it to say that I made it out of Paterson (even though someone randomly pointed a gun in my face the night before I left town), and when I arrived at Gordon College the following day, it was a whole new world for me, and three things immediately struck me: 1. Just about everyone there was wealthy (irrespective of race); 2. I experienced culture shock on many levels (like being spooked by animal and insect noises in the woods, and many city folks find urban life more familiar!); & 3. I was woefully unprepared for college and had to work

very hard to catch up (and education is a key way to get out of poverty). I studied psychology and other social studies at Gordon and was considering Fuller Theological Seminary's Graduate School of Psychology, but I read Harold pseudo-evangelical critiques of Fuller Theological Seminary as "neo-orthodox" and the like, which convinced me that Fuller sounded like an exciting place to study theology!

While at Fuller, I continued my interest in psychology, philosophy, and contemporary theologies, especially if they were anti-Evangelical! I recall well when I first met T. F. Torrance at Fuller (where he gave a lecture series that later became *Reality and Evangelical Theology*) that he, Chris Kettler, and I sat in the center of campus. I will say that after recently graduating from a Christian college, I had become an unrepentant rationalist who was suspicious of so-called "evangelical theology" or abstract attempts to "integrate" Christian faith and life. So Chris invited me to a personal meeting with TFT so I could ask him about questions on my mind! It felt like a NJ setup, but since Chris was from KS, I trusted he had my safety and well-being in mind!

As we sat in the center of campus, I asked TFT what he thought about Fuller's commitment to "the integration of theology and psychology." He replied to me: "I notice that Fuller's Schools of Psychology and Theology are located on opposite sides of the street"! I thought that was very funny, and it reinforced my impression that a deeper level of so-called "integration" (which is implicitly dualistic!) was lacking in my Christian liberal arts education. Also, my seminary studies neatly divided biblical, theological, and pastoral subjects, and I had started to take courses with RSA (a student of TFT) and GWB (co-editor with TFT and chief translator of KD), both of whom challenged me toward a genuine evangelical theology that's interrelated with church ministry and social ethics.

I also asked Prof. Torrance about a confused comment I had heard concerning his critique of dualism, to wit: "How do you reply to the charge that if you're not a dualist, then are you a monist?" He again offered a pithy and cheeky reply: "Monism is merely one-half of dualism." Unlike others who didn't appreciate TFT's directness, I loved his quick, witty, incisive, and humorous replies as he was starting to encourage me to think more deeply about such facile labels and

categories in favor of going deeper theologically in a more genuinely evangelical way.

Another question I asked of TFT (given that I had heard that Tom was “conservative”) was: “What do you think of politics?” His shortest reply to me of all my questions: “Boring.”

I will include examples of how TFT explicitly wrote about ethics, plus some of my own theological-social commentary as I’ve realized my increasing indebtedness to him, but I will say in advance that TFT was an early influence upon me not to politicize theology but to think more deeply about developing a distinctively Christian social ethic, which upholds the living presence of Christ as the one who assumed and redeemed our humanity with ramifications for the entire moral, social, natural, and cosmic order. I do not plan to preach or prescribe that if you agree that TFT provides a better basis for ethics than how you currently operate, then that necessitates a commitment to this or that cause, unlike the politicized posture of much of contemporary culture and pseudo-theologies. I will give some examples of how TFT in his context addressed moral issues (which I’ve done in greater detail elsewhere) to help us think theologically anew in our own church settings.

TFT did make an immediate and overwhelming impression upon me for another reason. While he had greater intellectual depth than I had before experienced, what was actually and personally different for me: He believed in God with a genuine sense of piety that actually rivaled his intellect, which caused a pause for me since I wanted more but hadn’t encountered it until I started taking courses with RSA, GWB, TFT, and later with JBT too. While taking courses with these my mentors, I was also reading thousands of pages of KB & Co., and it finally occurred to me that I had ceased to listen to the living God in favor of my *a priori* concerns of philosophical theology and ethics!

Over time, I came to understand that for Torrance, *Christ* is the personal ground and ontological basis of Christian ethics. Christ has disabled and discontinued our human attempts to justify ourselves before God and others, and he also has fulfilled what he has abolished on behalf of the redemption of all people — which I will suggest as an alternative to the polarized politics and escalating

violence of our times. Christ both negates our futile attempts to be “free” and “independent” apart from God *and* he overcomes the split between God and humanity that we have effected in our personal, social, and political lives. When God assumed our disordered human nature in Christ, he healed us from within the *depths of our being and throughout the entirety of the cosmos!*

I would like to acknowledge one other informal mentor and personal friend, Alasdair Heron. While we were planning on starting up the TFT journal, somehow I started regular correspondence with him (no doubt because I kept emailing him, but he kept replying, and I was glad that a former Editor of SJT mentored and befriended me as a new journal editor until he died of cancer). He emailed me from hospital about his many thoughts about the journal, quite faithfully so for well over five years, and when I told him about the critical and negative comparison of TFT to KB, wherein the latter was more “prolific” re: “ethics” and the former was not, he simply said: In Basel, KB taught courses in theology *and* ethics, whereas in Edinburgh, TFT taught ecclesiastical history and then dogmatic theology, but “ethics” was relegated to the pastoral ministry division. He didn’t live long enough for me to question him further regarding TFT’s way of including “ethics” in his whole theological enterprise in response to New College’s basic theological dualism!

Torrance’s critics did not get that the vicarious humanity of Christ does not displace our humanity but affirms, restores, and liberates our humanity! Torrance did announce a *soteriological* suspension of autonomous ethics, understood as a human attempt to justify ourselves through moral law, effort, and virtue. T. F. Torrance’s theology did reflect his broad concerns as a churchman, professor, author, editor, evangelist, and minister of the Gospel, who *intentionally* suspended, not neglected, “ethics” — especially understood as a human attempt at self-justification through morality — and instead clearly and explicitly articulated a *Christian ethic grounded in the interrelationship of incarnation and atonement as a reconciliation of all things in Christ*. Contrary to his critics, I will argue that his unitary theological ethic presents an *evangelical and comprehensive ethic of reconciliation rooted in God’s grace*, which encompasses, sustains, and transforms

the entire human and created order and provides an alternative to the politicized theologies and racialized politics of our contemporary context.

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## **Torrance's Entire Theology as an Ethic of Reconciliation**

Torrance described his theological ethic as a "soteriological suspension of ethics," alluding to and playing on Kierkegaard's "'teleological suspension of ethics' in the transition from a merely moral to a religious situation before God."<sup>4</sup> The Son acts personally and ontologically within the depths of our human existence in its estrangement, rebellion, and violence in a vicarious way to assume and redeem our humanity.<sup>5</sup> Christ's humanity heals our humanity in relationship to others on all levels of life. Following the lead of Kierkegaard as an incarnational theologian (not a textbook "existentialist philosopher," as top SK scholars have argued in our latest issue of *Participatio* — if it's ok to include an ad here!), Torrance treats "ethics" not as a form of autonomous moral philosophy but as a matter of personal participation in Christ based on union with Christ. Contrary to legalistic moralism — which perhaps is the prevailing nomistic ethos of our day and age and also our perpetual attempt at self-justification apart from Christ — TFT favors *an account of justification that places human morality under the cross of Christ in order to reestablish a Christian ethic of faithful obedience and joyous gratitude to our God of reconciling grace.*

The vicarious humanity of Christ means that we may and must rely on his faithfulness to God to uphold and undergird *our humanity*, including (from *TF*):

all my human responses to God, for in Jesus Christ they 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

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<sup>4</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 160, including n. 50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 156, 185.



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 his Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to his critics, Christ's humanity validates, grounds, and establishes our fallen and faltering humanity as we participate in his covenant-keeping in our place and on our behalf. More of Christ does not mean less of our humanity, which is such a curious mathematical formulation! Christ's faithful and obedient humanity is precisely what makes room for our humanity and places a *higher, not lower*, expectation on us when we neglect or refuse to be who we are and are becoming in him.

*Christ's humanity frees us to be human!* Because "we rely wholly upon the vicarious faith of Christ and not upon ourselves even in the act of faith ... we are really free to believe ..."<sup>7</sup> Christ's vicarious faith makes both possible and necessary our act and life of faith. His vicarious humanity sanctifies and informs and reorients our moral order, social reconciliation, and political responsibility, away from moral conformity to an external and impersonal legal-religious code and toward a filial, trusting, and loving obedience to God!

*The vicarious humanity of Christ militates against the warring political ideologies of our day in favor of a filial ethic*, in which God has included us irrespective of race, class, or gender and has made us new beings with a new status as part of God's extended family. Christ has healed "the ontological depths" of our disobedient and alienated humanity and bent it back to "filial union with the Father." In union with our brother Jesus, we *are* sons and daughters of the Father. Christ has redeemed humanity "out of the depths of our actual existence through the incredible oneness which Christ forged with us in his vicarious humanity."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, New Edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 98 (emphasis Torrance's).

<sup>7</sup> Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), cix.

<sup>8</sup> Torrance, "The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 238-9.

Because Jesus was and is God acting as one among us, God's reconciling work in the world is a reality and source of our true humanity. The vicarious humanity of Christ bends back our disobedient humanity toward God, so that we may truly and freely participate in Christ's humanity as we live and act in union with him.

Christ's humanity establishes his atoning work in "our human existence" *precisely because* it is anchored in God's own self-giving and reconciling being. The Spirit mediates Christ to us and us to Christ, so that we may actually participate in his vicarious and redemptive humanity. We live in union with Christ by the Spirit, for "Calvary and Pentecost belong integrally together."<sup>9</sup> Christ's cross and Spirit work together to bind us to Christ by God's grace, so that we may believe and live and act in union with him. Contrary to an unfortunate popular political axiom, "the personal *is* the political," for TFT, "the ethical" is personally and profoundly rooted in a theology of *God's grace* — which is sorely lacking in contemporary pseudo-theologies and so-called liberation theologies that tend to divide up humanity in somewhat and surprising simplistic ways by race, class, and gender — given that politicized theologies baptize various social categories as a context, basis, or precondition for "doing theology" — and thereby constrain, control, and contradict God's gracious and reconciling work in Christ!

Christ's atoning work extends to all humanity and the whole creation, so "that the whole moral order had to be redeemed and be set on a new basis through the atonement." In Christ, we move from personal and social moralistic legalism to a trusting and active obedience to the living God, which is to say from self-will to genuine freedom (a distinction that you'll immediately understand if you're a parent or teacher of adolescents)! Christ heals the very "unbridgeable rift between what we *are* and what we *ought* to be, for no matter how much we try to be what we ought to be we can never transcend that deep rift in ourselves."<sup>10</sup>

The atoning mediation of Christ entails, Torrance proclaims, "'a soteriological suspension of ethics' in the establishing of a new moral life that flows from grace in which external legal relation is replaced by inner filial relation to God the Father." By

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 242-3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 249-51.

the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, "this new life of ours in him is inwardly ruled by the indicatives of God's love rather than externally governed by the imperatives of the law."<sup>11</sup> For Torrance the *merely ethical* is legal, extrinsic, and lived out in a way that fails to recognize the person and work of Christ and our reconciled relationship to God in him as a way to look beyond our own human skin and predicament. Mere morality, for Torrance, must be superseded by the indicatives *and* imperatives of God's grace — and the indicatives *precede and include* the imperatives. In this way Christ fulfills humanity's covenantal obligations to God, with his own filial obedience as the Son of God on our behalf, so that we now may participate by the Spirit as beloved children of our Father. Hence, *we may actually share in Christ's faith and obedience, and through his person and work we may live humanly as his brothers and sisters and sons and daughters of his Father — and contrary to the divisive politics of our current day, we must do so! If you support race-and-class-based politics, which today pits blacks against whites, cops, and local business entrepreneurs, you are re-crucifying Jesus Christ, who has broken down these dividing walls of hostility and in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female!*

Christ's atoning work is not merely moral or political but *ontological* (and the following is from TFT's "Atonement and Moral Order"):

Here the ultimate ground of the moral order in God is no longer a detached imperative bearing down abstractly and externally upon us, for it has now been embodied once for all in the incarnate Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and takes the concrete and creative form of new righteousness that transcends the split between the is and the ought, the righteousness of our Lord's obedient Sonship in which our human relations with our Father in heaven have been healed and reconciled. We are now made through justification by grace to share in the righteousness of God in Christ. Thus we are made to live in union with him and in the communion of his Holy Spirit who sheds the love of God into our hearts, and informs our life with the very mind of Christ the obedient Son of the Father. *This does not represent merely a*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 252-3.

*conceptual change in our understanding of the moral order, but a real ontological change resulting from the interlocking of incarnation and atonement in the depth and structure of our human existence and the translation of the Son/Father relation in Christ into the daily life of the children of God.*<sup>12</sup>

Torrance believes that *Christ's humanity places our humanity and the whole moral order* on a "wholly new basis" (even in his more theological works, such as from *Incarnation*):

In Jesus Christ, God has intervened decisively in the moral impasse of humanity, doing a deed that humanity could not do itself. That impasse was not simply created by the inability of human beings to fulfill the holy demands of the law and justify themselves before God, but created by the very nature of the (moral) situation of man before God, so that it could not be solved from within itself as demanded by the law. Thus the intervention by God entailed a complete reversal of the moral situation and the setting of it on a wholly new basis ... as sheer gift of God's grace which is actualized in them as reality and truth.<sup>13</sup>

Christ's atoning work effects and announces "the great change and renewal of all things," "the whole of creation," and "*cosmic peace*."<sup>14</sup> It is not merely a personal or private affair because it extends in and throughout all strata of human life, including and transforming historical and horizontal existence. In Torrance's words (from *Atonement*):

Hence we must think of the reconciling work of God in the cross, not only as once and for all completed and effected, but as travelling within and through our historical existence, as it were, as continually

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 254; emphasis added.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. R. T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. R. T. Walker (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2009), 168-9.

operative in reconciling intervention within history and all the affairs of humanity, and in the whole cosmos — *Immanuel*, God almighty with us in the midst of history, bearing all its sin and shame in his holy love, for he has already gathered it up upon himself.<sup>15</sup>

All things are reconciled in Christ as “God’s presence in sheer grace” breaks into the fallen cosmos, “so that not only human life but the whole of creation has been set on a wholly new basis.”<sup>16</sup>

God’s reconciling work and personalizing presence penetrates and transforms the social spheres and horizontal domains of human life (also from *Atonement*):

For humanity, the redemption of the cross involves at the same time reconciliation of man with fellow man, of all men and women with each other, and particularly of Jew and Gentile, for the middle wall of partition has been broken down and God has made of them one new man in Christ Jesus. The word of the cross is not that all men and women are as a matter of fact at one with one another, but that such at-one-ment is achieved only in desperate and crucial action, through atonement in the death and resurrection of Christ. But because that has been finally achieved in Christ, the cross cuts clean across the divisions and barriers of the fashion of the world and resists them. It entails a judgement upon the old humanity of Babel and the proclamation of the new humanity in Christ Jesus which is necessarily one and universal. That becomes evident in the Christian church, whose function is *to live out the atonement in the world*, and that means to be in the flesh the bodily instrument of God’s crucial intervention.<sup>17</sup>

Reconciliation is a universal event, which the Spirit effects and actualizes as believers become “joined to Christ and therefore joined to a new universal humanity.” Thus the crucified Christ breaks down “all the barriers of race and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 199.

language" as he leads Christians "to proclaim reconciliation to all and to live it out, for it is by that same motion of universal reconciliation that he and she have themselves been redeemed in the cross."<sup>18</sup> Clearly our new status in Christ is a call to participate in Christ's transforming and reconciling action, not the curious criticism of "passive inaction"! *We are to be who we already are and are becoming as brothers and sisters in Christ.*

The risen and ascended humanity of Christ raises our humanity to a new status in him in order to participate in Christ's ongoing work of reconciling the world. "The staggering thing about [the ascension]," Torrance insists (and in clear-cut contradiction to his critics) "is that the exaltation of human nature into the life of God does not mean the disappearance of man or the swallowing up of human and creaturely being in the infinite ocean of the divine being, but rather that human nature, while remaining creaturely and human, is yet exalted in Christ to share in God's life and glory." Our new status in Christ does not function "as a flight from history, but precisely the reverse, as the invasion of history by the kingdom of Christ through the everlasting gospel."<sup>19</sup> *The vertical invades and redeems the horizontal:* "Participation in Christ carries with it participation in one another," Torrance clearly and emphatically proclaims, "and our common reconciliation with Christ carries with it reconciliation with one another."<sup>20</sup>

Torrance advocates an Athanasian-Trinitarian-ontological ethic in continuity with the ancient and orthodox faith and over and against an Arian-unitarian-moralistic ethic (from *Mediation of Christ*):

If Jesus Christ is only morally related to God himself, then the best he can be is a kind of moral Leader who through his own example in love and righteousness points us to a better moral relationship with the heavenly Father ... The Church then becomes little more than a way of gathering people together on moral grounds or socio-political issues ... But if Jesus Christ is God the Creator himself become incarnate among

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 294-6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 375.

us, he saves and heals by opening up the dark, twisted depths of our human being and cleansing, reconciling and recreating us from within the very foundations of our existence.<sup>21</sup>

In the Incarnation, the Son assumes both our human nature as created and as fallen, healing what he has assumed as a prolepsis of our humanity in the crucified, risen, ascended, and coming humanity of Christ. The Arian view, however, more simply, superficially, and self-defeatingly relies on a doctrine of human self-justification (also from *Mediation*):

Thus there has opened up a deep gap in our relations with God and with one another which we cannot bridge.... The human heart is so desperately wicked that it cunningly takes advantage of the hiatus between what we are and what we ought to be in order to latch on to the patterns and structures of moral behavior required of us, so that under the image of what is good and right it masks or even fortifies its evil intentions. Such is the self-deception of our human heart and the depravity of our self-will that we seek to justify ourselves before God and our neighbors ...<sup>22</sup>

Jesus Christ, however, "became the humanising Man who constitutes among us the creative source for the humanising of mankind," the true healing, restoring, and establishing of human morality and social existence (again from *Mediation* and worth quoting in context).

Now if from this perspective, in light of the fact that as the Mediator between God and man Jesus Christ is the personalising Person and the humanizing Man, we look back at the doctrine of the Church, we may be able to see more clearly why the Church is not merely a society of individuals gathered together on moral grounds and externally connected with one another through common ethical ideals, for there is no way through external organization to effect personalizing or humanizing of people in society or therefore of transforming human

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<sup>21</sup> Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 61-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

social relations. But that is precisely what takes place through the ontological reconciliation with God effected in the Mediation of Christ which binds the Church to Christ as his Body. Through union and communion with Christ human society may be transmuted into a Christian community in which inter-personal relations are healed and restored in the Person of the Mediator, and in which interrelations between human beings are constantly renewed and sustained through the humanizing activity of Christ Jesus, the one Man in whom and through whom as Mediator between God and man they may be reconciled to one another within the ontological and social structures of their existence.... *The very same message applies to human society, for in virtue of what takes place in the Church through corporate union and communion with Jesus Christ as his Body, the promise of transformation and renewal of all human social structures is held out in the Gospel, when Society may at last be transmuted into a community of love centring in and sustained by the personalizing and humanizing presence of the Mediator.*"<sup>23</sup>

*Reconciliation is a personal and social, private and public, historical, political, and even cosmic affair* because God's humanity sanctifies and humanizes our humanity in its vertical and horizontal, societal and cosmic dimensions. Christ has even redeemed the space-time structures of the cosmos, the actual conditions of our humanity and all that supports human existence (from *ST&R*):

[I]t is necessary to see that the resurrection means the redemption of space and time, for space and time are not abrogated or transcended. Rather are they healed and restored, just as our being is healed and restored through the resurrection. Of course we cannot separate our being from space and time for space and time are conditions and functions of created existence and the bearers of its order. The healing and restoring of our being carries with it the healing, restoring, reorganizing and transforming of the space and time in which we now

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 72; emphasis added.



live our lives in relation to one another and to God.<sup>24</sup>

We may now participate in "the life-giving New Man" by his Spirit and through his body the Church, both to proclaim and to practice the reality of reconciliation in Christ within this fallen world.<sup>25</sup> God in Christ by the Spirit has moved human moral activity out of the sphere and business of legalistic moral self-promotion into the sphere of God's Kingdom, wherein our standing with God is both *gift* (with gratitude to the covenant faithfulness of the Son whose humanity includes and reorients ours) and *task* (but not a Kantian sense of moral autonomy that reduces true religion to mere ethics). In Christ, we may and must love God from the heart, obey him throughout all of life, and love all our neighbors, both near and afar, as our brothers and sisters in God's Kingdom.

Torrance's trinitarian-incarnational ethic assumes and announces an interrelationship of faith and godliness: of worship, behavior, and thought. As he writes (in *ST&R*),

An outstanding mark of the Nicene approach was its association of faith with 'piety' or 'godliness' ... that is, with a mode of worship, behavior and thought that was devout and worthy of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This was a distinctively Christian way of life in which the seal of the Holy Trinity was indelibly stamped upon the mind ... of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

The Creator is the Redeemer, who intervenes in human affairs, binds and reconciles the whole universe in himself, and grants a contingent freedom to participate in his own freedom — all dependent upon the genuine humanity of the Son in his oneness of being and agency with his Father.<sup>27</sup> The Spirit of Christ actualizes within the Church the whole life and ministry, person and work of Christ, "healing and restoring and deepening human personal being" as "*personalised persons*," both "in relation to God and in relation to one another." The Spirit "actualises among us the

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<sup>24</sup> Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 90-1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-9.

<sup>26</sup> *Trinitarian Faith*, 17.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 91, 107, 137ff.

self-giving of God to us in his Son, and resonates and makes fruitful within us the intervening, atoning and intercessory activity of God on our behalf.”<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to the highly divisive and specifically racialized terms of our age, which presents a new form of a human-centered prolongation of the Fall and Tower of Babel: Social reconciliation *under the cross of Christ and grounded in the very being and life of God himself exposes the moral order itself for leading us back into legalistic moralism as human agents before God*, and so our contemporary moral contexts need to hear and witness *God’s gracious healing in Christ*. Torrance understands Christ’s atoning work operating on “the inner ontological relations” between Christ and God and between Christ and humankind, which (from *TF* and quoting in context)

implies that the very basis for a merely moral or legal account of atonement is itself part of the actual state of affairs between man and God that needs to be set right. The moral relations that obtain in our fallen world have to do with the gap between what we are and what we ought to be, but it is that very gap that needs to be healed, for even what we call ‘good’, in fulfillment of what we ought to do, needs to be cleansed by the blood of Christ.... The inexplicable fact that God in Christ has actually taken our place, tells us that the whole moral order itself as we know it in this world needed to be redeemed and set on a new basis, but that is what the justifying act of God in the sacrifice of Christ was about.... Such is the utterly radical nature of the atoning mediation perfected in Christ, which is to be grasped, as far as it may, not in the light of abstract moral principle, but only in the light of what he has actually done in penetrating into the dark depths of our twisted human existence and restoring us to union and communion with God in and through himself. In this interlocking of incarnation and atonement, and indeed of creation and redemption, there took place what might be called a ‘soteriological suspension of ethics’ in order to reground the whole moral order in God himself.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 190, 230, 249.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 160-1.

For the “suspension” of ethics, for Torrance, provides a permanent *transformation* of the very grounds and categories of moral decision-making and action and a *disruption* of our epistemological and ethical categories by God’s gracious action in Christ. *God’s grace is the antidote to the politicized, angry, and divisive politics of our day and age!*

While Torrance discusses an “epistemological inversion” required for our knowledge of God, which is based on God’s self-revelation rather than our mythological projections,<sup>30</sup> I will similarly speak of a related *ethical inversion*. In place of an autonomous morality arising from a center out of ourselves, Christ reconciles us to our neighbors by relating us to *God*, who is personal, dynamic, and relational. “While the being of God is not to be understood as constituted by his relation to others,” writes Torrance, “that free outward flowing of his Being in gratuitous love toward and for others reveals to us something of the inmost nature of God's being ...”<sup>31</sup> Torrance insists that we have no life based in our autonomous and self-justifying selves but only in Christ (from *Incarnation*):

Thus in living out to the full in our humanity the relation of the Son to the Father, and therefore in bringing the Father into direct and immediate relation with the whole of our human life, Jesus Christ was the perfect man perfectly reflecting the glory of God, but as such and precisely as such, the whole course of Christ's perfect human life on earth was identical with the whole course of the Father's action toward mankind.<sup>32</sup>

Christ as the Son of the Father in the presence and power of the Spirit overcomes the perennial and intractable human split between the *is* and the *ought*. Torrance’s ethic in short, is not moralistic or legalistic but filial! Because Christ is our brother, we are God’s children as sisters and brothers, blacks and whites, rich

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<sup>30</sup> Torrance writes, “Within the sphere of divine revelation an *epistemological inversion* takes place in our knowing of God, for what is primary is his knowing of us, not our knowing of him.” See *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 105.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-4.

<sup>32</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 126.

and poor, Democrats and Republicans, and many others too who don't fit into today's oppositional categories. Christ's true humanity, God as one among us, is the actual basis of our human-ethical activity in and through the Church. Torrance does indeed have moral antennae, which however are rooted in our filial relationship with Christ in, by, and through the Spirit in relationship to our gracious God.

*Torrance's explicit Christian ethic is based on the atoning work of Christ, not on the self-justifying action of the sinner!*

I will transition from TFT's implicit and comprehensive ethic of reconciliation (and even there he addressed the whole moral order as redeemed by Christ) to his more explicit treatment of ethics in a way that will be suggestive but not prescriptive. Torrance helps me provide a christological critique of contemporary church and society, and he also provides examples of his own theological thinking about moral issues in his setting. I will offer some personal comments too based on my personal and theological concerns, but I do not intend to offer *abstract and theoretical models of ministry or politicized prescriptions* as much as *paradigmatic pointers to Christ* and an invitation to participate in his work in your own setting (whether as pastor, professor, businessperson, etc.).

TFT's trinitarian-incarnational ethic rests on a foundational axiom and evangelical call to church and society to *hear before we speak* (from his essay in *G&R* "The Eclipse of God"): *Jesus Christ alone frees us to love God and our neighbors* by sharing in his life and our renewed and transformed humanity, "not out of a centre in ourselves ..." Furthermore, "It is only in and through Jesus Christ that man's eclipse of God can come to an end and he can emerge again out of darkness into light," which means "to hear a Word coming to him from beyond which he could never tell to himself."<sup>33</sup> Perhaps churches could plan "silent protests" in public to invite others to join us as we *listen to God*: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14, English Standard Version) and sing together in multiethnic witness songs like: "Christ Has Broken Down The Wall"!

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<sup>33</sup> Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford, 1971), 54-5.

Torrance continues his trinitarian-incarnational ethic in his brilliant essay "Cheap and Costly Grace" (also in *G&R*): *Christus pro me* frees us from the autonomous ethical enterprise and refers us back "to the objective intervention of God in Christ, a saving act independent of man himself by which he is liberated even from himself, for there is nothing that man can do by way of knowledge or decision or believing that can deliver him from his in-turned, self-centred self."<sup>34</sup> As Torrance continues in this explicit essay on theological ethics,

Let us consider then what is involved in justification by Christ alone. It means that it is Christ, and not we ourselves, who puts us in the right and truth of God, so that He becomes the center of reference in all our thought and action, the determinative point in our relations with God and man to which everything else is made to refer for verification or justification. But what a disturbance in the field of our personal relations that is bound to create! ... How different altogether, I thought, was the *ethical disturbance* that attended the teaching and actions of Jesus or the *upheaval that broke in upon contemporary society and law* when He proclaimed the absolutes of the Kingdom of God, and summoned people to radical obedience ... What the Gospel of Jesus proclaims is that God Himself has stepped into our situation and made Himself responsible for us in a way that sets our life on a wholly new basis.<sup>35</sup>

*Jesus healed our self-willed inner being, so that we may be truly and fully responsible for moral action*, which for Torrance is truly and decidedly evangelical, for "in Jesus Christ God has already taken a decision about our existence and destiny in which He has set us on the ground of His pure grace where we are really free for spontaneous ethical decisions" toward God and one another.<sup>36</sup> Justification by Christ alone suggests a soteriological suspension and categorical transformation of self-justifying ethics (rom *G&R* again):

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 58-9.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 60-2 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 62.

God Himself has intervened in our ethical predicament where our free-will is our self-will and where we are unable to extricate ourselves from the vicious moral circle created by our self-will, in order to be selflessly free for God or for our neighbor in love. It means that God has interacted with our world in a series of decisive events within our historical and moral existence in which He has emancipated us from the thralldom of our own failure and redeemed us from the curse of the law that held us in such bitter bondage to ourselves that we are now free to engage in obedience to God's will without secondary motives, but also so free from concern for ourselves and our own self-understanding that we may love both God and our neighbour objectively for their own sakes. *It is thus that justification involves us in a profound moral revolution and sets all our ethical relations on a new basis, but it happens only when Christ occupies the objective center of human existence and all things are mediated through His grace.*<sup>37</sup>

*Even Torrance's explicit theological ethic reposes on the interrelationship of Incarnation and Atonement!* "Apart from Christ's incarnational union with us and our union with Christ on that ontological basis," he warns, "justification degenerates into only an empty moral relation."<sup>38</sup> Christ is the very ground and grammar of theology, salvation, and ethics, I submit on Torrance's behalf -- with the *homoousion* as the lynchpin of all of the above! Torrance relies upon Athanasius vs. Arius for his interrelated theological ethic over and against the moralistic vacuum that gives way to political power as is so evident in contemporary US society and culture.

Torrance's recurrent call for an "epistemological inversion" suggests an ethical correlate that turns all political programs and human projects, which today are especially based on anger, divisiveness, and hostility, on their collective head (quoting again from *G&R*):

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 62-3 (emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 64-5.

By pouring forth upon men unconditional love, by extending freely to all without exception total forgiveness, by accepting men purely on the ground of the divine grace, Jesus became the center of a volcanic disturbance in human existence, for He not only claimed the whole of man's existence for God but exposed the *hollowness* of the foundations upon which man tries to establish himself before God.<sup>39</sup>

I will offer Asheville, NC, where I moved six years ago, as a case study of contemporary Arianism, and I do think Torrance's ethic helps Christians be more constructively critical in our local communities and larger society. AVL is a place where syrupy and self-centered spirituality, which goes by the colloquial phrase "spiritual but not religious," is the dominant "religion" of the town, except it's disorganized and do-it-yourself religion and qualifies for what TFT has called the hollow foundations that humans erect in place of the living God. You can't drive around town without frequently encountering large political placards in front of houses and churches based on an emotivist ethic of self-expression, such as:

"BLM" — which can mean anything from a sentimentalized sympathy to the ambiguous call for "defunding" the police to the overthrow of global and imperialistic capitalism!

"LOVE IS LOVE" — a mindless tautology with which it's hard to disagree, except that it's not God's universal and unconditional love but a partisan political point aimed at so-called "conservatives," "Christians," and those who disagree with how the very vocal locals understand "love" (or related loaded terms, such as "inclusiveness" and "diversity")!

"LOVE OVER DOGMA" — or "*homoagape*" over *homoousion* (with thanks to JBT for the term "*homoagape*")! After I moved to Asheville, I taught for a local Christian college while a professor was on sabbatical, and I saw this sign in front of a church while driving to my 8 AM class. I asked my students if anyone saw any irony in this proclamation of LOVE OVER DOGMA, and a freshman at 8 AM shouted out: "That *is* their dogma!"

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 66 (emphasis added).

When I moved to Asheville, I emailed the local university's religious studies dept. to see if there was interest in my serving as an adjunct to teach Christian theology and ethics. The Head of the dept. replied to inform me that as a public university that they were bound to conform to "the constitutional mandate for 'the separation of church and state'"! I informed him that that phrase didn't appear in The Constitution but inquired of him, given that they were already offering all kinds of courses in world religions and spiritualities, if he thought that only Christianity should lack a voice in the public square.

An autonomous ethic that's independent of Jesus Christ, to summarize Torrance's point, suggests a sinful self-reliance, but (still from *G&R*): "Justification by grace alone removes from us all false props, all reliance upon external authorities, and all refuge in worldly securities, and throws us not upon ourselves but upon the pure act of God in His unconditional love, so that the ethical and the religious life are lived exclusively from a centre in Jesus Christ."<sup>40</sup> Torrance does call us to engage in our local and national cultures as we participate in Christ in each of our own settings, and I'm suggesting that we subject current fads and political slogans to christological critique and learn to think theologically and develop theological instincts for what Christ is doing in our contemporary contexts. While eschewing a "self-justifying ethical approach" based on a "loud insistence upon external social relations" — a human-centered proclamation of love which "has at its heart a refined form of egoism"! — Torrance (in his Auburn Lectures of 1938-39) calls us to follow the risen Jesus as he transforms "our relations with others, whether in family, society, or state etc."<sup>41</sup>

In "The Word of God and the Response of Man" (also from *G&R*):

We recall that in Jesus Christ the Word of God has established reciprocity with us in the conditions, structures and limitations of our creaturely existence and within the alienation, disorder and disintegration of our human being where we are subject to the wasting power of evil and the divine judgement upon it, in order to lay hold of

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>41</sup> *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 80-9.



our world and sustain it from below, to recreate its relation to the Creator and realize its true response to Him as God and Father of all. That is to say, in Jesus Christ the transcendent Rationality of God has planted itself within the created order where its bounds, structures and connections break down under the negation of evil, in order to reintegrate spiritual and physical existence by setting up its own law within it, and restore it to wholeness and integrity in the form, as it were, of a meeting of the Rationality of God with itself in the midst of estranged existence and in the depths of its disorder. In this way, the incarnation has affected the whole creation, confirming the primordial act of the Word in conferring order and rationality upon it.<sup>42</sup>

As an example, Torrance writes about abortion (and whether you agree or not with him, it exemplifies his explicit theological ethic without it becoming a universal rule or self-established ethic):

we must think of the human person as transcendently determined in his or her existence as soul and body, which not only constitutes him or her as a personal human being before God, but maintains him or her in relation to him as the ultimate Ground and Source of his or her creaturely order... The human embryo is fully *human being, personal being* in the sight and love of his or her Creator, and must be recognised, accepted, and cherished as such, not only by his or her mother and father, but by science and medicine.<sup>43</sup>

I will add as a practical point that he distributed this pamphlet on abortion to members of BP! He also spoke about abortion to pro-life Presbyterians in North Carolina, to whom he repeated one of his basic axioms for his theological ethic: "As such we are ultimately to be understood not from an independent center in ourselves, but only from above and beyond ourselves in a unique relation to God."<sup>44</sup> So he not only challenged members of BP to think theologically about abortion, but

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 162f.

<sup>43</sup> "The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child" (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 18-9.

<sup>44</sup> "The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child" (Lenior, NC: Glen Lorian Books, 2000), 11.

he also challenged pro-life Presbyterians to think more theologically as he appealed interestingly to the Virgin Birth (!): "The eternal Word of God become incarnate *was and is himself the metaplan*, the creative and regulative force in the birth of each human being, come among us as one of us to be Lord and Savior of the human race!"<sup>45</sup>

Torrance upholds a unitary view of Christian service in and through Christ on behalf of all humanity and creation: "We cannot hold apart the ministry of love from the activity of science, nor may we pursue our scientific exploration of the universe except in obedience to the God of love." He continues:

If we are to follow this Jesus in the modern world we must surely learn how to apply scientific knowledge and method to such terrible problems as hunger, poverty, and want, without falling into the temptation to build up power-structures of our own, through ecclesiastical prestige, social success or political instrumentality, in order to make our ministry of compassion effective within the power-structures of the world, for then we would contract out of Christian service as *service* and betray the weakness of Jesus. On the other hand, if we are to engage in scientific exploration of the universe, in response to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ by whom it was made, we must learn to respect the nature of all created things, using pure science to bring their mute rationality into such articulation that the praises of the Creator may resound throughout the whole universe, without falling into the temptation to exploit nature through an instrumentalist science in the interest of our own self-aggrandizement and lust for power, for then also would we contract out of Christian service as *service* and sin against the hiddenness of Jesus in the world.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13-4.

<sup>46</sup> *God and Rationality*, 163-4.

Torrance thus argues for a concept of order in a way that shows the integral relationship of his Christian ethic with his entire view of theology and science (from *CFM*):

Hence, far from thinking of the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ as in any way an interruption of the order of creation, or some sort of violation of natural law, we must rather think of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Christ ... as the chosen way in which God, the ultimate Source of all rational order, brings his transcendent mind and will to bear upon the disordered structures of our creaturely existence in space and time.<sup>47</sup>

For the Incarnation of the Word is (*CFM*):

the creative order of redeeming love, and the kind of order that is unable to reveal to us its own deepest secret but can only point mutely and indefinitely beyond itself. Yet since this is an order that we may apprehend only as we allow our minds to yield to the compelling claims of reality, it is found to be an order burdened with a latent imperative which we dare not, rationally or morally, resist, the order of how things actually are which we may appreciate adequately only as we let our minds grope out for what things are meant to be and ought to be.<sup>48</sup>

Torrance, for example, wrote an essay on Anselm as a way of discussing and relating telling and doing the truth. Here we see TFT's interrelationship of the epistemological with the ethical: knowing things *kata physin* ("in accordance with their nature"), which also means knowing God according to his nature and acting in accord with it. He notes the close relation "between telling the truth and doing the truth ... signifying, by word or act, that that which is, is what it is and what according to its nature it ought to be." Truth, then, refers "to a condition of reality beyond itself ... the truth or rightness of that to which it refers," from which "there

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<sup>47</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 21.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

derives a universal obligation for things to be true . . . for truth is a demanded form of rightness: a thing is true not only when it is what it is but when it is rightly what according to its nature it ought to be." Moral action is both rational and voluntary (not the former over the latter as his critics misread TFT), "for only when the mind and will act together can the rightness of will be fulfilled for its own sake." In short, "[T]he rightness of sanctification depends on the rightness of its *end* and its *object*, of its *why* and its *what*, which are determined for it by an objective correctness ..." and through which we participate "in the Supreme Truth or Supreme Rightness of God."<sup>49</sup>

TFT explicates *contingent order and freedom*, wherein the "independence of the world depends entirely upon the free creative act of God," which allows "a methodological turning away from knowledge of God" and yet: "The mystery of contingency cannot be grasped or thought out within the framework of the latent processes of the contingent world or their inherent lawfulness: its deepest secret lies outside its own reality" ... "for as soon as the dependence of the universe upon the Creator is pushed aside, the independence of the world tends to arrogate to itself the status of a wholly self-supporting and self-explaining necessary system" (41).<sup>50</sup> And so, *the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ announces a theology of grace in a way that* "God moves out of himself to become one with his creatures, while remaining what he is in all his eternal constancy as God," so that "the ontological and epistemological [and I'll add "ethical"] situation has been altered," *and therefore the interrelationship of incarnation and atonement as the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ announces a contingent order and freedom*, so that "the natural axis of the universe is to be found not within the universe itself ... but in its relationship to God its transcendent Creator" (69f.).<sup>51</sup>

Torrance wrote an entire monograph on law, which I mention as an example of how he did explicitly relate his Christian ethic well beyond the walls of the church even into the very structures of society. In JL&PL, he criticizes "modern ethics

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<sup>49</sup> Torrance, "The Ethical Implications of Anselm's *De Veritate*," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 24 (1968), 309-11.

<sup>50</sup> *Divine and Contingent Order*, 35f., 41

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 65, 115, 69f.

where the norms of behaviour are tracked back to mere convention and social utility, without any claim that they are objectively grounded in being or constrained by an order in the rational nature of things independent of ourselves” – e.g., the lack of a “deeper and more enduring foundation that we have allowed in our legal science or in our political constitution. We need to rediscover the ontology of juridical law,” rather than a legal positivism that practices “the ontological uprooting of moral and judicial law from its objective ground in the Ultimate Truth and Rightness of God himself.” Modern legal theory too often relies upon “a moral positivism, as ethical principles and concepts uprooted from their ontological grounds tend to be treated as little more than traditional arrangements ... ” – unlike modern physical science which “has moved from a positivist to a realist outlook ...”<sup>52</sup>

Similar to his essay on Anselm and ethics, he argues that legal science must think and behave “strictly in accordance with the nature of things.” Similar to his essays on abortion, he bases the true nature of law on “the ontological substructure of personal and social relations” or “person-constituting relations,” such as the human family which is “governed by mutual sharing, love and concern.” This “ontological structure of interpersonal human relations ... points all human law-making beyond itself to a normative source and self-sufficient ground in Almighty God.”<sup>53</sup>

Our contemporary society does not point “beyond itself” but is *incurvatus in se*, even as it shouts in the streets its moral and social ideals (whether for or against “BLM”!) – and *shouting* at each other violates COVID protocol, even if you’re wearing masks and staying 6’ apart! Torrance quotes his friend Polanyi that “moral perversion” feeds upon “moral perfectionism”<sup>54</sup>, and so one can rationalize even violence in the name of “social justice”! The various politicized and adjectival pseudo-theologies of our day baptize a “natural axis” (especially today of race and class) in contradiction to Christ in whom we are one and so throw people back upon themselves). Instead, God our Father relates us to himself “in his grace so that our

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<sup>52</sup> Torrance, *Juridical Law and Physical Law: Toward a Realist Foundation for Human Law* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), ix-x, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 41-5, 53.

<sup>54</sup> *D&CO*, 90.

relation to him correspondingly takes the form of freedom and faith"<sup>55</sup>! We may thus be "saved from [our] diseased self-reference" as we confess the incarnation, which means that God has presented himself to us "in an entirely new way" in a way that "makes our creaturely existence his own"; and acknowledge the cross and resurrection because they mean that "God has refused to hold himself aloof from the violence and suffering of his creatures" and "that all creation with which God allied himself so inextricably in the incarnation has been set on the entirely new basis of saving grace."<sup>56</sup>

*Christ* sends his Church into our world of "disharmony and dissension" with "deep divisions" socially, culturally, and racially and "sharp political and ideological confrontations" to "proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation, live the reconciled life, and be a reconciling community." "Reconciliation in the Church means living out together the reconciled life" in Christ, and yet division within the church "is a fearful blasphemy" that "implies a divided Christ."<sup>57</sup>

Torrance's essays in *Gospel, Church, and Ministry* offer a personal glimpse of the man who was first and foremost a minister of the Gospel, include several of his explicit essays on theological ethics (including one of his best, "Service in Jesus Christ"), and can help us focus on the church's distinctive role in society. Regarding parish ministry, Torrance practiced the interrelationship of the proclamation of the Gospel and pastoral visitation, and likewise later, his theology lectures and the personal power of the Gospel. For example, Torrance had weekly dinner and discussion with his parishioners, who considerably helped him relate the Gospel to daily life and work. In a monthly study with parishioners of the Sermon on the Mount, Torrance recalled how one parishioner raised his farm workers' salaries above the government standard, which increased the prosperity both of the farmer and of his workers.<sup>58</sup> Service in Jesus Christ by his body the Church *exceeds*, not displaces, government standards and programs, and I think the essays in this book

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 105-108.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 133-38.

<sup>57</sup> *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans), 21-2.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 35, 50.

could be helpful to church pastors as they consider how to participate in what Christ is doing in their contexts, especially by listening to informed parishioners.

When the Church becomes merged with society and culture, Torrance warns, its “mild form of Christianity” leaves it with no message to the modern world. The Church should not identify herself with any social order or political regime, “far less with the 'status quo'” (and those who call TFT “conservative” should consider how he didn’t fit into a neat, little political box):

The Church can only be the Christian Church when she is ever on the move, always campaigning, always militant, aggressive, revolutionary... to turn the whole order of State and society, national and international, upside down.... By throwing the social environment into ferment and upheaval, by an aggressive evangelism with the faith that rebels against all wrong and evil, and by a new machinery through which her voice will be heard in the councils of the nation as never before, the Church will press toward a new order. Whenever there is evil in the industrial and economic order, in the political or international sphere so in the social fabric of ordinary life, the Church must press home the claims of the Christian gospel and ethic.... [T]he great task of the Church is the redemption of the world and not a comfortable life in little, religious churches and communities.<sup>59</sup>

The Church is both conservative and revolutionary: the servant of the living God, not to uphold and justify the status quo but to take initiative in society to check the authoritarian State. The Church must recover her distinctiveness and believe again that the proclamation of the gospel is her primary task, refusing to identify with any social system or political program and especially taking offensive action against the status quo.<sup>60</sup> The Church witnesses to the gospel as it advances “the claims of the Christian gospel and ethic” in all spheres of life: personal, social, industrial, economic, political, and international. For God is ushering in a new order of “peace and brotherly relations on the basis of the Christian ethic” — checking for

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 76-81.

example the basic human tendency toward a will to power or a focus upon ourselves, and instead presenting to society the Christ who presents himself as the one on behalf of the many to redeem the world.<sup>61</sup>

Torrance's Athanasian vs. Arian love-ethic proclaims that "God is the great householder who has come to take control of his own house and family and order it according to his love," TFT proclaims, for "in the whole human life of Jesus the order of creation has been restored." The Christian Church participates in the redeemed order of humanity and creation in Jesus Christ, who took the form of a Servant — "not simply an imitation of his obedience but a fulfilling of God's will through participation in Christ's obedience" by the person and power of the Spirit.<sup>62</sup>

Christian service, for Torrance, is not an optional matter: "The great characteristic of all Christian service or *diakonia* is that while it is certainly fulfilled under the constraint of the love of Christ it is a service *commanded* by him and laid by him as a *task* upon every baptized member of his body." He continues (in close step with Barth): "The content of the commandment and the content of the service in obedience to it derive from the self-giving of God himself in Jesus Christ the Lord. He gives what he commands and commands what he gives. He commands a service of love, and he gives the love that empowers that service."<sup>63</sup> Torrance's ethic is one of obedience to the person of Christ and participation in his work and not adherence to the primacy of moral oughts reflected in the moralistic legalism so prevalent in our contemporary society.

For example, he notes that human mercy mirrors and participates in the mercy of God himself (*GC&M*): "It is the very property of God's nature to be merciful, and in mercy it is that nature that he has come to share with men and women in Jesus, that they, too, may be merciful as he is merciful."<sup>64</sup> Reminiscent of Matt. 25 (and Calvin), Torrance proclaims his unitary theological ethic:

Hence Christ is to be found wherever there is sickness or hunger or

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 81-4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 94-7.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 140-2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 145.



thirst or nakedness or imprisonment, for he has stationed himself in the concrete actualities of human life where the bounds and structures of existence break down under the onslaught of disease and want, sin and guilt, death and judgement, in order that he may serve man in re-creating his relation to God and realizing his response to the divine mercy. It is thus that Jesus Christ mediates in himself the healing reconciliation of God with man and man with God in the form, as it were, of a meeting of himself with himself in the depths of human need.<sup>65</sup>

The Church cannot be in Christ without being in him as he is proclaimed to men in their need and without being in him as he encounters us in and behind the existence of every man in his need. Nor can the Church be recognized as his except in that meeting of Christ with himself in the depth of human misery, where Christ clothed with his gospel meets Christ clothed with the desperate need and plight of men.<sup>66</sup>

The Church must resist a two-fold temptation. First is the enticement to use *worldly power to secure success*, "not only to institutionalize its service of the divine mercy but to build up power structures of its own." The Church should nonetheless support on behalf of the poor and hungry "scientific methods in the production and distribution of goods from the vast wealth with which God has endowed the earth." Second is the allurement of retreat into a *spiritual ministry of forgiveness*, which concedes corporate responsibility to the State for the betterment of human welfare. This second temptation, like the first, means "the Church would decline the burden of human need at its sharpest point and deflect the real force of Christian witness, and so run away from the agony of being merciful as God is merciful."<sup>67</sup> I would add a sociological point modern urban America differs significantly from TFT's parish settings, so that Christian or parachurch organizations can provide specialized ministries (such as KARM and IFHC).

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 154-5.

While Torrance's Christian ethic is not primarily moral or political — and perhaps its greatest strength is its service as a counterpoint to the many politicized theologies of our day! — it is centered on the Church's service *to God in the world* (not to the world!). And Christ calls his Church to a three-fold ministry of service to: (1) believe in intercessory prayer as a direct reliance upon God and as a direct engagement with the world, rather than "frantic attempts" to make its ministry and message relevant, powerful, and successful based on human agenda and standards; (2) practice evangelistic and suffering witness on behalf of all people in their estrangement and separation and alienation from God; and (3) live the reconciled life first and foremost by healing its own internal divisions, which mirror the divisive forces of evil in the world, so that it may "live out in the midst of a broken and divided humanity the reconciled life of the one unbroken Body of Jesus Christ — that is *diakonia*."<sup>68</sup>

One preeminent moral issue for the one body of Christ is what Torrance boldly calls an "'apartheid' between different churches"<sup>69</sup>

Until the Christian Church heals within itself the division between the service of Jesus Christ clothed with his gospel and the service of Christ clothed with the need and affliction of men, and until it translates its communion in the body and blood of Christ into the unity of its own historical existence in the flesh, it can hardly expect the world to believe, for its *diakonia* would lack elemental integrity. But *diakonia* in which believing active intercession, bold unashamed witness, and the reconciled life are all restored in the mission of the Church will surely be the service with which Jesus Christ is well pleased, for that is the *diakonia* which he has commanded of us and which he has appointed as the mirror through which he reflects before the world his own image in the form of a Servant.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 161.

Christ “does not override our humanity but completes, perfects, and establishes it,” especially in light “of bringing Christian understanding of the personal relations within the Holy Trinity to bear upon social relations and structures ...”<sup>71</sup> The vicarious humanity of Christ, very far from “invalidating” human being and agency, does just the opposite. Christ assumes, heals, and sanctifies our humanity, placing “all our human life and activity before God,” “under the judgment of the cross ... our goodness as well as our badness,” and redeeming and reorienting the ontological depths of our humanity through his true humanity.<sup>72</sup> Torrance does indeed affirm an intrinsic and integrated relationship between what Christ has done as one among us, in our place and on our behalf, creating a new and transformed basis for human morality, interpersonal relations, social structures, and the created order, which invites us beyond legalistic moralism and partisan politics to christological critique and confession in society and transformation within the church.

For example, Torrance began writing on women in ministry in the early 1960s and published his “The Ministry of Women” in 1992, which shows how long TFT has been addressing moral issues and also could also serve as a close analogy to today’s renewed racialized politics. The call and ordination of women for the ministry of the Gospel, for Torrance, is based on an evangelical egalitarianism that presupposes the “radical change” effected in Christ — i.e., “the old divisions in the fallen world have been overcome in Christ and in his Body the Church,” a reversal and “healing of any divisive relation between male and female.”<sup>73</sup>

Torrance argues concretely and forcefully:

Thus any preeminence of the male sex or any vaunted superiority of man over woman was decisively set aside at the very inauguration of the new creation brought about by the incarnation. In Jesus Christ the order of redemption has intersected the order of creation and set it

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<sup>71</sup> Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994), 13, 26.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 30, 35, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Torrance, *The Ministry of Women* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1992), 3-5.

upon a new basis altogether. Henceforth the full equality of man and woman is a divine ordinance that applies to all the behavior and activity of 'the new man' in Christ, and so to the entire life and mission of the Church as the Body of Christ in the world.<sup>74</sup>

[I]n view of this representative and substitutionary nature of the sacrifice of Christ, to insist that only a man, or a male, can rightly celebrate the Eucharist on the ground that only a male can represent Christ, would be to sin against the blood of Christ, for it would discount the substitutionary aspect of the atonement. At the altar the minister or priest acts faithfully in the name of Christ, the incarnate Saviour, only as he lets himself be displaced by Christ, and so fulfils his proper ministerial representation of Christ at the Eucharist in the form of a relation 'not I but Christ,' in which his own self, let alone his male nature, does not come into the reckoning at all. In the very act of celebration his own self is, as it were, withdrawn from the scene.<sup>75</sup>

## **Christological Critique and Conclusion**

Christ took upon himself our sinful and alienated humanity, redeeming and restoring us as children of God and as brothers and sisters in him. He has said No to all of our attempts to undo his reconciliation of all things unto God. He is not captive to political slogans that divide instead of unite, such as Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter, for Christ as Reconciler breaks down these dividing walls of hostility. The Jewish man Jesus has taken on our humanity — in all of its racial, ethnic, historical, economic, and geographical diversity — and both judges and heals it. He says No to our ongoing attempt to erect and perpetuate barriers of anger, hatred, and bigotry, and he says Yes to his Father's mission to reconcile all things, all peoples, and all cultures *in him*. *Christ's humanity matters*, and our lives matter more, not less, as we receive our true humanity in him by the gift of his Spirit.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 12.

TFT's Christian ethic dispels theology made in our own image on behalf of this cause or another and instead considers what the Word of God is doing in our world, which suggests filial relations over and against the political divisiveness that dominates current public discourse. Therefore, a theological starting point is not whether we are black vs. white, pro- or anti-cops, well-to-do or underprivileged, one of the "oppressed" or "oppressors" (a very fluid category that significantly overlooks SES in our contemporary context), etc. If the Christian Church believes and participates in Christ's reconciling ministry in the world, it would pray and call for an end to the public pitting of blacks vs. whites, which contradicts that Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility, and black communities vs. police departments, which puts the poor, whether they be black or white, in vulnerable situations to increased violence and aggression.

And so the Church has a vital role in today's society to proclaim and point to the preeminence of Christ, both in church and society, which means to live by and attest to *God's grace* as the Christian alternative to the racialized politics and the politicized pseudo-theologies of our day and age.

Consider a case study of the city of Seattle, which like other US cities has been beset by the violence and suffering of God's children. If you're not familiar with the case study method, it presents a fact-based situation in an open-ended way that calls for the audience's response. (If you teach theology and would like a more creative teaching tool, consider for example the case of Karl Barth: Should he in his public teaching role start classes with a state-mandated salute to Hitler on utilitarian grounds or refuse to do so because it violates the First Commandment?) A case study approach does allow one to go suggestive and not prescriptive as one deals with the reality of a situation, and Seattle with its mayor, city council, and chief of police are one of the case circumstances in contemporary society:

Seattle's Mayor, Jenny Durkan, ordered former Chief of Police Carmen Best to cede public space to what peaceful protesters announced as a "cop-free zone" and she dubbed a "summer of love" (which she later said was in jest and yet admitted was a matter of poor word choice). Eventually, rioters and looters wreaked havoc and killed innocent people (including a teenager) and protesters occupied space in front of the mayor's private residence. So a possible question for later:

What would Seattle's mayor and city council do (and I can tell you what actually happened)?<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, Pastor Donn T. of the AME Zion Church of Seattle and Pastor Todd S. of Seattle Anglican Church, who had been friends and colleagues for many years and read and discussed TFT together, planned a joint church service of reconciliation in Christ, which would include hearing God's Word (e.g., Eph. 2:14) and singing choral songs (e.g., "Christ Has Broken Down The Wall"). They requested a meeting with Carmen Best in order to plan an appropriate place where she and her police officers could be included, and they could provide basic safety and security for parishioners, local residents, and businesses. Pastor Donn and Pastor Todd left unresolved the question: Should we include Holy Communion as a joint act of participation and reconciliation in Christ our one Lord or observe our Lord's admonition first to deal with our alienated brothers and sisters before returning to the altar? (The two pastors disagreed, which we can return to later if it's of interest.)

Todd S. concluded the service by plagiarizing a TFT sermon (using an excerpt from a sermon he delivered in St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh) on the preeminence of Christ as "the one Mediator of reconciliation":

"3. *Christ is the one Mediator of reconciliation.* If all things were created by Christ and for him, *then he alone can unite them*, when evil threatens to disintegrate them - whether they are things in (on) earth or in heaven, things visible or invisible. If all the fullness of God dwells in Christ and *he* has made peace through the blood of his Cross, then what we have here is a *cosmic peace*. There are no differences under heaven, or even in heaven, which do not fall under the reconciling

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<sup>76</sup> Mayor Durkan recanted, but Seattle City Council later and nonetheless approved deep "defunding" cuts to the police dept. (\$3 million), which resulted in the massive attrition of young cops with racial diversity and sensitivity training and led Carmen Best, an African American woman, to resign. Here's a thought for Seattle: Defund police *unions*, which defend bad cops with seniority and rehire the younger police force that the former Chief of Police thought were more suited to contain the chaos in their city and build better relationships with its residents (and I'd add business owners too, given the long-term devastating consequences for a community when local businesses are destroyed while the police force is disempowered to protect a local community).

power of Christ and his Cross. Even the visible and the invisible realities are reconciled to one another.

If this is the Christ whom we preach, the one Mediator of reconciliation through the blood of the Cross, how can we preach that Gospel, unless we are prepared to act out that reconciliation in our own lives and bodies, and so refuse to let divisions among us give the lie to the Gospel with which we are entrusted?

Let us listen to the words of Jesus himself: 'If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave there your gift and go your way, *first be reconciled to your brother*, and then come and offer your gift'.

Are we ready to let this govern our relations with other Churches, even to govern Holy Communion in our own Church as well as inter-communion with other Churches? - first go and be reconciled with your brother'.

Are we ready to let this reconciliation affect also our social and national life, so to set Christ and his Cross in the midst of all that divides us, that he may heal our wounds, unite and bind us together in one Body until every wall of partition is demolished by the Cross?

... *Come*, let us put the love of God incarnate in Christ in all his creative power, with healing and compassion and reconciliation unbounded, absolutely first in all we think and do; and to him, with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory for ever and ever. Amen."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> From a sermon "The Pre-eminence of Jesus Christ," given by TFT in St. Giles' Edinburgh, May 24, 1977, *Expository Times* 54f.

PRACTICAL POINTS FOR DISCUSSION ON CHURCH IN SOCIETY:

My last job was Director of Education for a healthcare corp. (and when you earn a PhD in theology, it's wise to train broadly and do contingency planning for unanticipated career paths and spheres of service). I was hired to oversee school for troubled teens in residential treatment in a way that would overcome the daily chaos and violence of students afflicted with mental health issues, chemical dependencies, and violent criminal records and would integrate school within the overall context of clinical treatment. During my job interview with the CEO, he asked me for my diagnosis of why their teenage patients were out of control not only in school but throughout their whole hospital setting. I said, "The adults are not in charge or providing the kind of structure that adolescents need, and the more troubled and chaotic kids are, the more all adults need to get onto the same page in order to provide a tighter structure, which will contain chaos, reduce physical restraints, and care in a deeper way than letting kids 'express themselves.'"

Our contemporary society needs greater structure (as we have seen in Seattle and many other chaotic cities), and I'll comment on the church's unique role vis-a-vis society: The Church of Jesus Christ should offer intercessory prayer for social healing and reconciliation; proclaim Christ as the one breaks down and heals barriers between us; and practice what we preach on several levels of ecclesial existence:

*\*intrachurch:* proclaiming Christ as The One who demolishes our ongoing Towers of Babel and continued walls of hostility; confessing how we re-crucify Jesus Christ in our collective life; and living the reconciled life ourselves in our local church communities;

*\*interchurch:* especially if local churches would challenge and overcome denominational, ethnic, and racial divisions, including offering an alternative to BLM vs. ALM as they confess together Jesus' Sonship to the Father as a filial bond between blacks and whites, which is sadly unlikely, even though TFT wanted as much as anything to live and act as the one, not the broken, body of Jesus Christ;



*\*parachurch*: with specialized ministries in Jesus' name and with a focus on SES more so than race — e.g., when I lived in Knoxville, I thought it important to support *Knoxville Area Rescue Ministries*, a Christian social outreach ministry that provides food and shelter, personal and healthy relationships, job training, Christian worship and Bible study (which disqualifies it from United Way funds!), and in short, holistic and comprehensive services toward overcoming the cycle of poverty and on behalf of personal restoration and wholeness; & *InterFaith Health Clinic*, which is an ecumenical and interfaith effort to provide comprehensive medical and wellness services to the working poor, who are among the most vulnerable because they're not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid or have good enough jobs to qualify for private insurance;

*\*and extrachurch* — e.g., through personal relationships, such as when Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon and instructed the latter to receive the former as a Christian brother and partner in the faith, which about 2000 years ago profoundly undercut the very foundations of slavery, even and especially in a time when slavery was customary. If I were a church pastor in an area with chaos and violence on the streets, I'd develop professional relationships and call a meeting with church, police, business, and political leaders.

And so re: BLM, a *stronger relationship* with a local police presence in violent neighborhoods is vital for the most poor and vulnerable, including the basic need for safety and security where gang and gun violence has overtaken areas; the restoration of order, including preventing the destruction of local businesses in inner cities that represents long-term damage to people, families, and business owners in those communities (and the talk about African Americans as especially vulnerable to COVID elevates race over the deeper matter of SES since comorbidity factors such as obesity and other health conditions are most highly correlated with COVID, and so economic improvement is important for the health of all people irrespective of race); and COVID is a concern too with public protests!

*COVID: language and science*

"Social distancing" is imprecise language and the last thing that all of us need! More precise language would be "physical distancing" and "distant

socializing.” The 6’-rule is a public slogan that assumes asymptomatic exposure and overlooks variables, like that coughs propel droplets up to 50 MPH and sneezes up to 250 MPH! So if you’re singing in the choir or protesting on the streets with someone who is symptomatic, 6’ of physical distance might not protect you, even if wearing a mask and washing your hands! BLM public protests violate basic COVID protocol, which states allowed while they outlawed church worship services! The unfortunate language of “social distancing” overlooks our basic human need to do the opposite: human connection while we figure out ways to protect ourselves and our loved ones through “physical distancing” and “distant socializing,” especially since loneliness and social isolation have now been identified as a higher morbidity factor than obesity.

Christian D. Kettler, "Response to Todd H. Speidell," *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 191-198; #2023-CDK-1. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

## **RESPONSE TO TODD H. SPEIDELL**

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First, I admit that I treasure the over forty years of friendship with Todd Speidell in ways that words cannot describe. We met in the early nineteen eighties being introduced to the thought of Thomas Torrance as mediated through Ray Anderson at Fuller Seminary. For us, that was theological dynamite and we were changed forever. It was God's grace to me that Todd was a part of that experience or theology as "co-humanity," in Barth's phrase. That will not, however, keep me from commending to you his 2016 book, *Fully Human in Christ: The Incarnation as the End of Christian Ethics* as a landmark in the study of Christian ethics. If it has not received the attention it deserves, let me suggest to you it may be because of, 1) theologians, who are afraid to see how ethics are integrally connected with the work of theology and 2) ethicists, who are afraid that, misreading the Kierkegaardian irony in the subtitle, they might see this book as the end of their tenured faculty positions in Christian Ethics!

All of this is to say that this essay builds upon the groundbreaking work in *Fully Human in Christ* and reminds us of the breadth and depth of the theology of Thomas F. Torrance in a way perhaps we have never thought of before. For this, we should be very thankful to Todd. The criticisms I make here, of course, are because he motivates one for further discussion.

As Todd puts it, "Reconciliation is a personal and social, private and public, historical, political, and even cosmic affair." For Torrance, even space and time

needs to be redeemed and healed (see *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 90-91). This cosmic reconciliation is needed because the need is so great when we observe how widespread and deep is the “nomistic form of human existence,” as Torrance frames it, which we know from justification by grace. This is slavery to ethical self-justification. Is this made manifest all too often, unfortunately, among the practice of Christian ethics? Speidell might look at some examples of how Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been misused in recent years and through the decades and read with or without his pacifism or being a responsible person means daring to become guilty because Christ became guilty (without sin) for us (his *Ethics*).

At a place where Speidell cites the implications of justification by grace through faith in Torrance is where the vicarious humanity, as Speidell mentions in other places, may be developed by Speidell. This ontological healing which is no “detached imperative” involves justification by grace through faith and *theosis* (deification) because of their grounding in Christ’s vicarious humanity (“The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. de S. Cameron, 254). The relationship between justification by grace through faith and the vicarious humanity of Christ in Torrance is essential for his program in defining justification in something other than forensic categories. As Torrance says, in justification Christ “becomes the center of reference for all our thought and action ... But what a disturbance in the field of our personal relations that is bound to create!” (*God and Rationality*, 60-62). Then Torrance’s chagrin that there is no mention of Jesus Christ in a well-known book on *The Elements of Moral Theology* is telling. He assumes there should be! And certainly because of the incarnation: “God Himself has intervened in our ethical predicament...” as Speidell cites Torrance (*God and Rationality*, 62-63).

A desperate need for the all-encompassing vicarious humanity of Christ is seen starkly in the wickedness and all-pervasiveness of sin. Speidell points out the place of sin in Torrance’s *The Mediation of Christ* (71). As is characteristic of Torrance, he attacks the subtle Kantian underbelly of modern ethics: what we ought to be, but Torrance exposes that we cannot be what we ought to be. We

desperately need the vicarious humanity of Christ, more than just as "moral relation" to God (*The Mediation of Christ*, 61-62).

From the very beginning, Speidell emphasizes that Torrance's theology and ethics are interwoven with the incarnation. To use Todd's words, "When God assumed our disordered human nature in Christ, he healed us within the *depths of our being*," summing up much of the direction Torrance will go that has radical implications for ethics. Speidell continues, "*Christ* is the personal ground and ontological basis of theological ethics. Christ both displaces and discontinues our human attempts to justify ourselves before God and others and he also fulfills what he destroys because he is the new and true man on behalf of the redemption of all people." In other words, I would add that there is no place here for a medieval "grace perfects nature" theme since Christ offers redemption for all of creation. Theologically grounded in the relation between the incarnation and the atonement, Torrance offers indeed a "cosmic" reconciliation in Christ. With language such as Christ "displaces and discontinues our human attempts to justify ourselves," Speidell rightly reflects the joint importance of the vicarious humanity of Christ and justification by grace through faith in Torrance's thought.

Many critics, however, as Speidell points out, have cited a "neglect of ethics" in Torrance. This is where Speidell sees a "suspension," not a neglect. Torrance especially comments on ethics as an autonomous field and all human attempts at self-justification through morality. Christ is the personal ground of ethics who displaces us with himself and in no way neglects ethics, only its autonomy and its attitude and practice of self-justification. Only a distinctive Christian ethic is able to counter a secular ethic based on ideology. Sadly, the church all too often succumbs to such ideologies.

Christian ethics ceases to be Christian because, as Bonhoeffer wrote in his *Ethics*, it asks "What is the good, and how can I do the good?," abstract questions, rather than the personal question, "What is the will of God?" This question we do not ask apart from Christ, the One who answers that question with his perfect freedom and perfect obedience.

Speidell rightly stresses Torrance's "filial ethic" that is grounded in the vicarious humanity of Christ that frees us to be human. This "filial ethic" is seen to be more in contrast to the "nomistic ethic" based on law that Torrance found in what he called "Classic Calvinism" subsequent to John Calvin. Here some mention of the influence of John McLeod Campbell on Torrance might be helpful. It was McLeod Campbell's alternative to the "Classic Calvinism" of justification as only improving a legal status that promoted what Torrance calls, in his *Scottish Theology*, "Evangelical Calvinism." This "filial union with the Father" is uniquely emphasized in McLeod Campbell's famous book *The Nature of the Atonement*. It was in McLeod Campbell that Torrance found a great resource for development of his doctrine of the vicarious humanity, not just vicarious death, of Christ. Therefore, because of this "filial union" of the vicarious humanity of Christ, the transformation, the "bending back" of our disobedient humanity takes place.

As Speidell points out, Torrance offers a richer, theological basis for Christian ethics because it is solidly *ontological*, totally grounded in being and reality, not simply surface appearances or perceptions. Emphasizing Torrance's life-long trenchant critique of dualistic thinking would serve Speidell in good stead. The powerful chapter entitled "Emerging from the Cultural Split" in *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* is one good source. In this chapter, Torrance traces the history of dualistic thinking, including both ancient and modern manifestations. Dualism frequently cannot bear ontological or realist thinking.

Torrance's richer, ontological gospel is what our day desperately needs to hear. Speidell speaks eloquently of how it criticizes the shallowness of so much of political sloganeering of our time. Theology and the church must not and does not need to join that crowd but can offer an alternative. In his *Atonement* lectures, Torrance makes it clear that the church is connected to the atonement as it is true to its "function to live out the atonement in the world" (*Atonement*, 199). Such strong words connecting the church and the atonement are rarely found in discussion of atonement theories, but Torrance is led to do so, one may think, because of the richness and ontological depth of his atonement teaching. Whereas the church is full of bromides concerning reconciliation, it is somewhat lacking the connection with the atonement that can give it ontological depth and not just

sloganeering. This can be true of either "Christ paid the penalty for our sins" or "No justice, no peace."

A personal story comes to mind that brings home the practical and pastoral effects of such a rich ontological theology. Todd and I experienced this when Torrance himself visited Fuller Seminary and we were privileged to share many meals with this dear Christian gentleman, much to our delight. One morning at breakfast in the Fuller refectory, a derelict came in, as many did at Fuller, in the heart of downtown Pasadena, where many such poor fellows knew they could hit upon guilt-ridden seminarians for a quick buck. This fellow sat down at our table and immediately started to sprout some kind of pseudo-religious gibberish. He was used to being coddled by well-meaning seminarians. But Thomas Torrance cut to the quick! He looked at him and said, "My dear fellow, I believe you need to be born again." This was no religious cliché for Torrance but getting to the heart of the matter, to "ontological love," if you will. Just handing him a few dollars may help our guilty consciences, but the issue was the "radical surgery" that only the gospel brings. This would apply to such great programs in social ethics, as has been seen in American cities since the nineteen sixties of "urban renewal," which often just built tenements of despair and drug use.

The imperative here cannot be more crucial, and biting. If we actually do participate in Christ's faith and obedience, if we actually are sons and daughters of God, Speidell contends, to encourage the divisive politics of our day is unacceptable. As he bluntly puts it, "If you participate in divisive politics, you are re-crucifying Jesus Christ!"

I can hear again the bluntness and frankness of Thomas Torrance: "My dear fellow, I believe you need to be born again!"

It must be admitted, however, that Torrance himself had a place to be divisive when it was an issue that concerned the very nature of the gospel, and even including the gospel in society. Even many years after he was Moderator of the Church of Scotland, in 1990, he issued an "Urgent Call to the Kirk," for the church to return to the gospel ("The Kirk's Crisis of Faith" in *Life and Work*, October, 1990), as cited by Kate Tyler in her recent work, *The Ecclesiology of Thomas F. Torrance*

(pp. 181-83). Torrance was concerned that the more “the distinctive doctrines of divine revelation are set aside in the obsession of the Church to be socially relevant, the more the Church disappears into secular society” (“The Kirk’s Crisis of Faith,” p. 16). In his trenchant essay of 1972 found in *Theology in Reconciliation*, “The Church in the New Era of Scientific and Cosmological Change,” Torrance had already sounded the alarm:

Perhaps the worst thing Churchmen could do would be to lose their nerve at the wide gap opening up between historic Christianity and modern patterns of human behavior, and allow themselves to be panicked by the *avant-gardes* into translating the Christian message into current social manifestations which are themselves part of the sickness of humanity. That is alas the line so often pursued by reactionary liberals in the name of ‘involvement,’ as though the Church were a sort of religious discotheque, whereas I want to challenge them to follow the example of the Greek Fathers in undertaking the courageous, revolutionary task of a Christian reconstruction of the foundations of a culture: nothing less is worthy of the Christian Gospel. (*Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 271)

The Church as a “religious discotheque” indeed! Or, As Torrance put it in a pithy way in an essay on “Cheap and Costly Grace” in *God and Rationality*: “The more the Church tries to get ‘with it’ the more it makes itself an otiose relic of the past” (p. 71).

Tyler comments that this “Urgent Call,” however, was seen by many as divisive. Many did not see the church in such a crisis. Some expressed a lack of concern for social justice.

Torrance, however, as Speidell points out, does not neglect the totality of our humanity. To do so would be to possess a docetic Christology. Those who have experienced Christ as truly God and truly human must live “humanly as his brothers and sisters,” in Todd’s words. This is never portrayed more vividly as in Torrance’s beautiful picture of Matthew 25 and the parable of the sheep and the goats, “where Christ clothed with His Gospel meets with Christ clothed with the desperate need



and plight of men" ("Service in Jesus Christ" in Anderson, ed., *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, 724). This is the answer to the questions in Matt 25:37, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?" ... The answer is, "One of the least of these who are members of my family" (v. 40). *Christ is on both sides*.

With Christ on "both sides," reconciliation can truly be the rich "universal event," as Speidell tells of in Torrance's theology (p. 11). Torrance, the child of missionary parents, possesses an essentially missionary theology, so in the *Atonement* lectures, as Speidell points out, the crescendo is in universalization of the gospel when "all the barriers of race and language are broken down" (*Atonement*, p. 200). This is in stark contrast with many currents in Christian social ethics today which even when speaking of being "After Whiteness" are still entrenched in their own racial or ethnic privilege, and therefore, bigotry. Such "adjectival" theologies were represented sadly on the cross, as Torrance points out, where Jesus was crucified by the "political" theology of his day (*The Mediation of Christ*, p. 31). Speidell nicely paraphrases the consequence of incarnational theology, as represented by Torrance and the Nicene tradition up through Barth: "Clearly our new status in Christ is a call to transform action, not passive inaction! *We are to be who we already are and are becoming in Christ.*"

Torrance is not without writings that speak on the relationship between the church and society, as Speidell indicates. He can speak as loudly as any Reformed theology for the church to see its mission in participating in Christ's mission to "transform" culture, although he will hasten to add that it is first the church that needs to be transformed into "a community of love" through its "ontological reconciliation" through Christ (*Mediation of Christ*, 72). This certainly echoes the traditional Reformed category of the church's relation to culture called "Christ transforms culture," as famously suggested in H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. It would be interesting to hear if Speidell thinks Torrance has any distinctions that would answer the usual criticisms of that paradigm by Anabaptists ("Christ against culture") or Roman Catholics ("Christ over culture"), taking into account that Niebuhr's categories themselves are roundly criticized themselves today (George Marsden?).

One shares Speidell's somewhat less than super enthusiasm for Torrance's actual ventures into "hot button" moral issues, probably for the same reasons. And maybe wistfully thinking that Torrance himself did not explore all the implications in his day. ("Dogmatics" was completely separately chair from "Ethics" and "Practical Theology" at the Edinburgh of his day ... but have we so improved at our seminaries today?)

On the ordination of women, Torrance argues for the new creation in Christ and the importance of not reading masculine gender into God as reasons not to restrict ordination to males (*The Ministry of Women*, 5). Certainly this is an improvement from the Vatican's insistence that priests must be male because all of the apostles were male!

One wonders whether Torrance could interrelate such themes as abortion and law, found in pamphlets by Torrance, with more with ontological reconciliation, filial relationships, and the vicarious humanity of Christ. Perhaps it is up for the next generation to do so! I believe Todd's generous work of critique is the first step for that next generation.

**PART III**  
**BOOK REVIEWS**



Ivor J. Davidson, Review of Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God in Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (T&T Clark, 2022), *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 201-212; #2023-IJD-1. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

## REVIEW OF

### **PAUL D. MOLNAR, *FREEDOM, NECESSITY, AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD: IN CONVERSATION WITH KARL BARTH AND THOMAS F. TORRANCE***

(London and New York: Bloomsbury T. & T. Clark, 2022), xiv + 354 pp.

**Ivor J. Davidson, Ph.D.**

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This book extends Paul Molnar's major writings on divine freedom and the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, and on the work of the Holy Spirit in human knowledge of the Triune God.<sup>1</sup> His earlier studies have deployed the work of Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance against an array of other witnesses in modern theology, beset by a common affliction: a propensity to render the being of God somehow dependent upon creation, historical process, or human experience. The corrective? A fundamental obligation that Barth and Torrance discerned: theologians need to give due account of the ontological primacy of God *in se* over God *pro nobis*.

For Molnar, Barth and Torrance recognized that the Triune God is who he ever is in himself: wholly realized, in need of nothing, subject to no necessity without or

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<sup>1</sup> Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002; 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 2017); Paul D. Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

within. This God simply *is*, in the essential plenitude that is eternally all his own as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He does not give himself his Triune being in electing to be the One who has fellowship with creatures. His commitment of himself to that fellowship, and his entire self-movement to bring it about, is a matter of his loving freedom: his unfathomably generous and majestic resolve to live the fullness of his own life with us rather than without us. What it means to say that God is thus “for us” is specified where the eternally Triune God lovingly enacts in time his antecedent completeness: definitively, in his Son or Word enfleshed, Jesus Christ, made known in the Holy Spirit’s power. Absent such an account of the relation between God’s immanent being and his economic presence and action, all manner of things go wrong.

The present work brings together a number of substantial essays in further applications of the same logic, and of its highly specific Christological investments. The prevailing concern is this: “everything in theology really looks different when Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, is allowed to be both the *first* and the *final* Word in theology.” If Jesus Christ has somehow to have a place found for him in a theology, or to be fitted into a scheme of reflection developed from some other starting-point than the actuality of God’s unique disclosure of his Triune perfection in him, it is “already too late” (p. vii). In eight trenchant chapters, Molnar details examples of the kinds of contemporary problems he has in mind, setting out once again his firm convictions as to the better path. Barth and Torrance remain the chief guides. Four chapters reissue or revise material published previously; four are new. A preface outlines the structure of the book and its recurring themes.

The first chapter introduces the overall approach to the treatment of God, freedom, and necessity. Molnar remains strongly concerned to rule out a range of compromises to essential divine freedom, contesting theological claims that might be said in one way or another to present God’s acts of creation, reconciliation, and redemption as necessary for the realization, development, or fulfilment of God’s being. Key emphases are reiterated from Molnar’s earlier work, with a particular slant here towards exposing some of the difficulties that ensue when eternal relations are collapsed without remainder into temporal works. Divine action *ad extra* is loving, gracious, and sovereignly effective precisely because it is the action

of the One who is complete in the essential relations of his own love. To say that God's outward turn is free and unconstrained is not to say that it is arbitrary or capricious, or that there is some other God lurking behind the God who thus makes himself known; it is to insist that these actions are what they are inasmuch as they are grounded in the being of the God who is beyond constitution or augmentation in or through them. It is *this* One, in the fathomless goodness of his eternal plenitude, who commits himself to fellowship with us.

The alternative, Molnar contends, is a God in some sort of need – and a series of theological disasters. Certain ways of characterizing the mature (as distinct from earlier) Barth's putative legacies on the logical relationship of the Trinity and election have been heavily challenged in Molnar's work already; such approaches are referenced here once again as disregarding Barth's enduring emphases on the primordial completeness of the eternally Triune God whose decisive history with us is the enactment of grace. For Molnar, the proposal that, logically speaking, God first determines his being as Triune in determining to be God with and for us in Jesus Christ is an instance of what goes awry when the incarnation of the eternal Son in time is seen not as a movement of loving freedom but as some kind of necessity for the Triune God to *be* the Triune God. Eternal divine plenitude is eroded; a dependent deity in one sense or another comes into view; contrary to the appearances of a case that majors on the need to avoid speculation on divinity in detachment from Jesus Christ, Christology itself is in fact attenuated. Other examples of errors in regard to God and necessity are also explored in the chapter: panentheisms of one form or another; misconstruals of the nature of divine passibility as it is in fact enacted, in redemptive as distinct from self-jeopardizing capacity in the life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Son; attempts to posit a dialectical relation of freedom and necessity in God which appeal to an analogy between divine and creaturely being in representation of divine love – and thus obscure the glory of the reality that it is the God who is beyond conceivable lack in his own love who in love creates and saves.

The second essay considers Barth in relation to Roman Catholic theology. Molnar focuses on two prominent exemplars of post-Vatican II approaches, Walter Kasper and Elizabeth Johnson. Both consciously work out their positions in light of

Karl Rahner's arguments on the need to move beyond a neoscholastic theology and its alleged tendencies towards extrinsicism. Kasper for his part is critical of aspects of Rahner's theology; Johnson remains fairly heavily reliant on Rahner's transcendental method in her articulation of a feminist theology of experience in the reading of scripture and tradition. For Molnar, both still trade on assumptions essentially at odds with Barth's account of revelation and the immanent Trinity. In their differing ways, Kasper and Johnson continue to work with a version of the *analogia entis* that remains irreducibly problematic on Barth's terms; fidelity to revelation demands attention to Jesus Christ as both first and final Word.

Natural theology is also the subject of the third chapter. Here, in a revised version of an article first published in *Participatio*,<sup>2</sup> Molnar takes issue with Torrance's so-called "new natural theology," the proposed methods of which he sees as in tension with Torrance's general strong commitment, after Barth, to a theology of revelation in Christ. What Torrance commended at large was not a natural theology but a theology of reconciled human nature. Where Torrance spoke of a version of a theology that might serve as "infrastructure" or "intrastructure" of revealed theology, he did so not in advancement of a coherent synthesis of natural and revealed theology but in inconsistency with his own reasoning elsewhere on revelation as a matter of grace from start to finish, and as such specifiable only as found in Christ by the Spirit's action. Molnar is critical of attempts to read "new natural theology" as a natural theology in any conventional sense of that term, albeit it contained elements of such a thing, not least in its references to ostensible analogies between the relationship of natural and revealed theology and the relationship of geometry and physics. Molnar contends that Torrance's scientific theology at large assuredly did not commend an account in which pre-understandings of the Triune God specifically might somehow be had through reflection on the world. Barth himself closed the door to such notions more consistently, but Torrance also frequently stressed that it was only within the sphere of God's new creation, as reconciled in the person and work of the one mediator, Jesus Christ, that reliable knowledge of the Triune God could be found.

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<sup>2</sup> Supplemental volume 4 (2018): 148–83.



The fourth essay is a substantial new piece, which sets Torrance directly in dialogue with Rahner on the nature of knowledge. Rahner advocates, on the basis of a philosophy of religion, an unthematic or non-conceptual knowledge of God as antecedent to reflection, and thus speaks of experience of the "nameless" and of anonymous Christianity. Torrance's approach locates itself in the realm of interruptive grace as encountered in the incarnate Word, and thus confesses that mystery is disclosed in its own revolutionary and specific terms. Molnar argues that Torrance duly recognized that only through revelatory divine action could God be rightly as opposed to falsely apprehended. Such action involves, immediately and radically, a granting of conceptual knowledge and delighted confession. Its consequence is creaturely encounter with ultimate reality: being united to Christ by the Spirit through faith, and with Christ approaching the Father.

Chapter five presents a critique of the concerns of liberation theologians to argue from human experiences of liberation to knowledge of God. For Molnar, there can be no legitimate movement from human struggles for freedom or the pursuit of liberating praxis as such to knowledge of the God who truly liberates. In the gospel we are directed by the Spirit to the reality of reconciliation in Christ, in whom alone true freedom has been established in comprehensive terms. Discovering that we are in Christ liberated from enmity with God by God himself, and thus freed both to love God and to love our neighbours and fight against all that oppresses them, we are summoned to live a freedom that cannot be generated by human initiative or correlated with any merely human programme of political, social, or economic liberation, howsoever worthy such an endeavour may appear in itself. Compromises to the particularity of the freedom decisively secured in Christ – which has indeed established serious responsibilities for Christian agents in the world – are anthropocentric in their cast; Jesus becomes but a Christian cipher for a salvation towards which people may evidently aspire to work along all kinds of paths. If "fight against oppression is the starting point or locus for theological reflection, then theology becomes an ideology employed to advance whatever agenda is considered necessary to attain that end" (p. 165). Efforts to overcome a polarity between a theology of the Word and an account of divine presence established upon human emancipatory experiences typically do not give due place to Jesus himself as the only true liberator and light of the world, whose unique achievement defines and

impels right efforts to free others from the effects of structural oppression. Deliverance from sin and its dire effects within and between us involves deliverance from our own efforts at liberation as substitute for the irreducible person and work of the Christ.

The sixth essay is another new one, on an ever-important question: the nature of language for God. Molnar deploys Torrance's contrast of "disclosure" and "picturing" (or "picture") models: is God to be named in accordance with his self-unveiling, or on the basis of human experiences of relationality? Needless to say, Molnar contends vigorously for the first approach as determinative of faithful theological speech, and presents it in strong antithesis to the arguments of feminist theologians who propose changes to classical trinitarian language. Central to his critique of revisionist arguments and their appraisals of the connections between gender, power, doctrine, and liturgy is a Torrancean construal of conversion. To be a new creation in Christ is to be turned away from ourselves – whoever we are – in consequence of an achievement that has secured equality and freedom for all. The alternative to biblical and credal language for the God of the gospel, Molnar reasons, is not freedom: it is the bondage of idolatrous imagination, according to which God is either fashioned after our image or elusive of our knowledge entirely, an abstract or amorphous something rather than the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, known in the Holy Spirit's power. The God who in reconciling and redemptive action makes known that he eternally subsists as God in these specific relations in himself is the One who has in fact set us free for transformed human relationships, and whose evangel condemns all our falsehoods, including all forms of abuse or subordination of women by men in the church. The God who in freedom has made himself known as he truly is stands in genuinely liberating contrast to an ambiguously subjective divinity, characterized only by the dictates of human projection and all its misapprehensions of where human freedom, dignity, equality, and empowerment are properly to be found.

An earlier study of Molnar's examined Torrance's claims that a doctrine of universalism was a "menace to the gospel."<sup>3</sup> For Torrance, while it might be hoped

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<sup>3</sup> Paul D. Molnar, "Thomas F. Torrance and the Problem of Universalism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68 (2015): 154–86.

that God would save everyone in the end, any statement that he definitely will is a pernicious attempt to determine what God must do for us – a denial of God’s sovereign freedom in salvation and his unique authority to judge all aright. Chapter seven extends that discussion in critical engagement of a recent strong case for universal salvation by David Bentley Hart. Molnar argues that Hart’s insistence on a universalist understanding of the Christian message as the only true account of its logic<sup>4</sup> violates the principles that Torrance adduced as biblically important. Hart’s case relies on an understanding of a properly functioning moral intelligence governed not by the gospel but by a version of natural theology. Once again, the matter of divine freedom seems to be reduced to terms imposed by unregenerate reason rather than seen in light of an account of sin, evil, judgement, and salvation defined, as they must be, only in Christ. For Molnar, Torrance was far more careful.

The final chapter considers whether Christians worship the same God as those from other Abrahamic faiths. The question is approached via Barth’s critique of religion and his argument that it is in Jesus Christ alone and his action to justify that any claim to truth is established: the basis of true belief can only be the electing grace and covenant fidelity of God as enacted in his reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ, a reality by which Christian religion as well as other religions stands judged. The truth of Christianity is in no way grounded in Christians but in Christ himself. Molnar prosecutes his case through critical dialogue with the views of a representative of each of the three faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. His argument is that Muslims, Jews, and Christians are not united by their attachment to monotheism: they are in fact divided by it. This is so not only because the nature of monotheism is differently appraised by each but also because no religious commitment as such can so unite. Only God can tell us the true identity of his being; in doing so uniquely in Christ he has shown that Christians no less than Jews and Muslims are dependent entirely on the grace of God for salvation. Christians cannot affirm oneness in general terms as a basis for their proper relations with Jews or Muslims, nor can they locate a common truth in shared investments in ethical or religious practices. The basis for solidarity is revelation – the gospel of the Triune God who reconciles – not religion.

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<sup>4</sup> David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

Molnar's knowledge of both Barth and Torrance is considerable, and he pursues their core dogmatic commitments with clarity and passion. His vigorous style once again bears evident debts to his heroes: there is maximal presentation of positions, great fondness for strong contrasts, a pervasive interest in tracing out the directions in which fundamental principles lead. The accents in the reading of Barth are undoubtedly reflective of Torrance's own, and there are some obvious sympathies with Torrance's ways of characterizing Western historical theology at large. As a collection of essays rather than a monograph, the book evinces a degree of internal repetition, but in that the author's major concerns are undeniably clear. It serves to make its case by way of a cumulative set of studies on the dangers of not taking the route that Barth and Torrance did in fidelity to scripture and creed.

Those familiar with Molnar's work will recognize a good number of the targets. There are also some new ones: Brandon Gallaher's study of freedom and necessity in modern theology in chapter 1;<sup>5</sup> Rubén Rosario Rodríguez' case for a comparative theological analysis of the Spirit's presence in liberating praxis in chapter 5;<sup>6</sup> Hart's essay on universalism in chapter 7. Examples drawn from Roman Catholic theologians deeply invested in correlationist and symbolic renditions of doctrine remain an obvious focus, and assessment of Rahner's various legacies again looms large; but Molnar also engages in strong critiques of Protestant or Orthodox approaches that he finds wanting. He sees a properly functioning Christology as lacking across confessional boundaries, and is ready to challenge Reformed thinkers as well as others who seem not to have learned from Barth and Torrance as they might. The illustrations across the board are by definition selective (perhaps most obviously in the treatment of Barth vis-à-vis Roman Catholic theology in chapter 2), but their range is also sufficient to show that a fair few of the critical questions with which Barth and Torrance reckoned can hardly be domesticated as the theological issues of a generation or two ago: they continue to call for careful thought in light of further instantiations of the themes.

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<sup>5</sup> Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

For those who might be tempted to suppose Molnar thinks neither Barth nor Torrance ever got anything much wrong, chapter 3 shows he is quite willing to identify tensions in Torrance's thought (just as elsewhere he has, for example, criticized the mature Barth's reasoning in comparison with Torrance's on a due theological articulation of the obedience of the Son).<sup>7</sup> In reality, valuable contributions are again made to the ongoing scholarly assessment of both figures. Molnar's interaction with Alexander Irving's reading of Torrance's "new" natural theology is one instance, as is also Molnar's consideration of Alister McGrath's use of Torrance in the construction of a contemporary natural theology. In the latter case especially, Molnar's comments tender a contribution to a much larger critical conversation on Torrance's representations of the relationship of theology and the natural sciences, and on the helpfulness or otherwise of those representations for the depiction of theology's engagements with other academic disciplines more broadly, particularly where the interests of such engagements may be framed in strongly apologetic terms.

By addressing themes of obvious pertinence for theology and church – the nature of religious experience; the status of doctrine; the use of language in worship; what it means to know and proclaim freedom in Christ; the relationship of Christianity to other faiths; the claim that a God who is love, or a fellowship of relations, must as such be envisioned in accordance with our understanding of such things, or that he must surely save us all in the end – Molnar shows that close attention to the dogmatics of Trinity and Christology ought to be no diversion from practical questions of everyday faith, but the very context in which those issues can be responsibly appraised. His proposal is that only a theology submissive to the tutelage of the gospel set forth in scripture and confessed in creed *can*, in reality, address them well.

Running through the whole text is an impassioned soteriological argument. For Molnar, those who envisage theological epistemology and its entailments in other terms have yet to ponder the weight of sin, and how enduringly perilous the lure of self-justification. This is, at heart, the recurrent problem for him in a great many of the theologies with which he takes issue: in closely associating the content

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, ch. 7.

of thought about God to that which is in one way or another available to us (however variously or vaguely) in our own experiences of creatureliness, or nameable merely as felt stimulus to the better enactment of their conditions, theologians appear repeatedly to postulate a divinity malleable to the imperatives of creaturely self-will. They thus ignore a fundamental reality. Sinners are not dynamically structured toward the Triune God made known in Jesus Christ: they are at enmity with him. The chief expression of their wickedness is their tendency to establish idols in his place, whether those generated by appealing visions of moral idealism or emblemized in such mobile symbols or negativities as may be attached to an elusive mystery. The enormity of that plight is itself made known only in Christ; it is in recognizing him as the one who frees from the bondage of self-will and its delusions that otherwise lost and confused fashioners of falsehoods discover the truth and what it means to live it out in his Spirit's power. Only in reconciling and transformative encounter with the personal relations that eternally subsist within the Godhead – in being drawn into the fellowship of the eternal Trinity in wondrous mercy – do they find out what is actually the case about God, and about their proper ends as his redeemed creatures and adopted children. Only thus do they learn to speak to him and of him as they ought.

Molnar is concerned, as his heroes often were, to expose and dismantle flimsy theological edifices. Those inclined to assume – not always on the basis of much primary reading – that Barth is best pigeon-holed (and thus largely ignored) as patron saint of a dodgy, atavistic cult called “neo-orthodoxy,” or at any rate of an especially noisy subsect of it called “Barthianism,” Torrance one of its high priests, will doubtless find much of the reasoning a trial. It is fair to say that an exposition of divine freedom and creaturely knowledge of God in Jesus Christ could well draw deeply on the insights of Barth or Torrance without remaining quite so much in their shadow; whether that might soften the challenges for some such readers I cannot rightly say. But the work is in any event pitched as a “conversation” with these two sources in particular, and as an invitation to heed some important expressions of their wisdom, counter-cultural as it may be. In effect, Molnar says, we ignore the substance of their arguments at our peril, and the evidences of that are clear.

Perhaps the material collected does risk a certain mixture: in part a reading of Barth and Torrance as strong contrast to a range of other approaches in theology and their wide contemporary impacts; in part a *Sachkritik* of possible tensions or inconsistencies in Barth's and Torrance's thought (Torrance's more than Barth's here); in part a set of arguments about how Barth and Torrance might or might not be legitimately invoked in the interests of a strategy such as a reconceived natural theology; in part an appeal to the beauty of a joyful confession of Jesus Christ as first and last word. Such may be a natural consequence of an assemblage of occasional essays with other pieces. The overall effect is nevertheless a weighty set of reflections on theological method and the places to which it may take us.

A slightly less energized or fulsome treatment of sheer differences, a more leisurely exposition of the positive realities, and a somewhat wider lens on the possible philosophical and cultural roots of the ideas concerning freedom, necessity, and knowledge to which Barth's and Torrance's dogmatics stand as corrective might at times be welcome. But sharp as the polemic can be, lengthy the argumentation and evidence, these studies are undoubtedly aimed at constructive ends: at theology's due articulation of great good news concerning the God who loves in freedom and in love really does come to us in Jesus Christ, the Alpha and Omega of all our true confession. Not everyone with general sympathies for Molnar's essential contentions would necessarily seek to frame all of the issues just as he does; there are of course questions also that Reformed theologians themselves might legitimately wish to ask about aspects of both of the Reformed theologies here celebrated so warmly by a Catholic enthusiast. But the soteriological refrain in particular that Molnar brings out in respect of the knowledge of the Triune God of the gospel is surely of immense importance; its general inflection in these chapters ought to be congenial to many an Augustinian.

The book is vintage Molnar: a collection of astute exercises on matters about which he has thought long and hard, and on which he shares a compelling theological vision with considerable skill and panache, tracing out its implications in further areas of immediate relevance for contemporary Christian consideration. The volume will be read with appreciation by all who have valued his work on Barth and Torrance, and with profit by anyone with a concern for the vital connections

between a robustly theological theology and the practices of faith in today's world. It fully deserves to be pondered also by those who have yet to reckon in seriousness with the issues of enduring significance it ventures determinedly to address.



Jerome van Kuiken, "Up, Up and Away: Christian Kettler's Corpus and the Rise of 'Affective Barthianism': A Review Essay," *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 213-228; #2023-EJVK-2. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

**UP, UP AND AWAY: CHRISTIAN KETTLER'S CORPUS  
AND THE RISE OF "AFFECTIVE BARTHIANISM"  
A REVIEW ESSAY**

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Thirty plus years is no short time to devote to a single research question. From the days of his doctoral studies up to his recent retirement from teaching at Friends University in Kansas, longstanding Torrance Fellowship member Christian Kettler has explored the implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ (hereafter VHC). This is the doctrine that the incarnate Christ substitutes himself for us not only in his death but in the whole of his life, thereby to enable our right response to God through participation in Christ. In this essay, I review the half-dozen books Kettler has published on the subject.<sup>1</sup> My aim is to trace their signal contribution to Barthian and Torrancean theology through the development of an "affective Barthianism." A pair of forewarnings to the reader: first, in the service of clarity, my exposition does not always follow Kettler's order of publication. Second, in imitation

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<sup>1</sup> Christian D. Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010); *The God Who Believes: Faith, Doubt, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005); *The God Who Rejoices: Joy, Despair, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry—Ministry as Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010); *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ in the Church, the World, and the Self: Essays, 1990–2015* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017); *The God Who Loves and is Loved: The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Response of Love* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020).

of his penchant for using popular culture to make theological points and in homage to our shared interest in superheroes, I illustrate the major movements of this essay using a character whose alter ego's initials are the same as Chris Kettler's: Superman (aka Clark Kent).<sup>2</sup>

## Origin Story

After an upbringing in Kansas, young Clark Kent journeys far from his childhood home and discovers his life's purpose under the tutelage of the extraterrestrial Jor-El. So too Kettler grew up a Kansan and went away to Fuller Seminary in California, there to be mentored by Ray Anderson in the theology of Karl Barth and the Torrances. When T. F. Torrance himself visited Fuller in 1981, Kettler served as his teaching assistant and fell under the spell of his VHC doctrine. It became the subject of his doctoral dissertation (with J. B. Torrance as its external reader) and of a lifetime of further study.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Jor-El provides his pupil with the cosmic framework that he needs in order to fulfill his destiny of serving humankind, so Anderson gave Kettler a theological framework within which to pursue his calling of reflection on VHC. Kettler introduces us to that framework in *Reading Ray S. Anderson: Theology as Ministry, Ministry as Theology*. The subtitle underlines Anderson's determination to think together his Barth- and Torrance-influenced beliefs and his pastoral experience. Each of the book's six chapters ends with a practical case study and accompanying reflection questions to further the synthesis of theology and ministry.

The chapters themselves work through Anderson's teachings in roughly creedal order. *Chapter One* discusses his theological method and doctrine of God: the proper motive for studying theology is for the sake of ministering to human need; as revelation is inseparable from reconciliation, so our theology (grounded in God's self-revelation in Christ) should be integrated with our ministry (based on

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<sup>2</sup> Superman appears in Kettler, *God Who Rejoices*, 27, 33, 107, 282–283; *Breadth and Depth*, 44. On his lifelong love of superheroes in general, see *God Who Rejoices*, xxiii, 105, 283. The theological first fruit of my own interest in superheroes is Jerome Van Kuiken, "Sin and Sam Raimi's Spider-Man: A Spider-Hamartiology," in George Tsakiridis, ed., *Theology and Spider-Man* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Kettler, *Vicarious Humanity*, v; *God Who Believes*, ix–xi.

God's own ministry of reconciliation in Christ). Anderson's concretely-oriented doctrine of God ignores "perfect being" attributes in the name of a loving, grieving divine Father who is present in *this* crisis, *this* Christ, and *this* church.

*Chapter Two* treats theological anthropology. Again, Anderson accents the concreteness of human persons as we encounter them in their fallenness, finitude, complexity, and communal relations. It is these to whom God is present and whom God calls to wholeness in the incarnate Christ.

*Chapter Three* covers Christology and soteriology. Here VHC is on full display: the fully divine Son has assumed a full, fallen human nature so as to renew it from the inside out. He therefore offers not only forgiveness but also healing for our emotional distress; not only saving grace but also the faith to receive it on our behalf even when our own faith falters; not only justifying grace that frees from legalism but sanctifying grace that draws toward maturity.

*Chapters Four and Five* both deal with pneumatology and ecclesiology as seen through the lens of Christology. The "real presence" of Christ manifests through *kenotically* being with others: just as Christ shared table fellowship with sinners, so Christians must embrace solidarity with the fallen world. But the "real presence" of Christ also includes *ek-statically* being with God, as expressed in liturgy, sacraments, the fruit of the Spirit, and charismatic gifts. Thus, the church follows the VHC pattern by both uniting with sinful humanity and lifting it up to God.

*Chapter Six* concludes with corporate and individual eschatology. Corporately, the church is called to live for the future, becoming all Christ intends his bride to be. Individually, Anderson responds to pastoral concerns about suicide, end-of-life care, and persons' eternal destinies by emphasizing the merciful Lordship of Christ. Since judgment belongs to him, our responsibility is simply to minister compassionately to concrete persons in concrete circumstances.

Kettler's survey of Anderson's teaching highlights both its Barthian Christocentrism (note how Christology serves as a touchstone for each doctrinal locus) and its pastoral posture (note as well how Anderson links each locus to

ministry). This double helix of theology and ministry becomes the DNA of Kettler's own writing, as we shall see. Like Jor-El, Ray Anderson mentors well.

## **A Fight for Truth, Justice and the Vicarious Way**

Once Superman accepts his destiny, he battles a lineup of villains (such as Lex Luthor, Brainiac, and Doomsday) in the name of truth and justice.<sup>4</sup> The same spirit hangs over Kettler's published doctoral dissertation, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation*. His orienting concern is the cry in an unjust world, *Where is salvation made real?*, and a case study from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* bookends his monograph. To this agonized question, he opposes seven contending replies: six classified as anthropocentric, the seventh Christocentric. John Cobb's process theology detects in cosmic evolution the emergence of salvation, while Leonardo Boff's liberation theology seeks to forge it in the fires of sociopolitical change (Chapter One). The theologians of hope date it to God's self-constitution on Good Friday (Jürgen Moltmann) or Easter Sunday (Wolfhart Pannenberg) and tether God too tightly to Western liberal values and world history, respectively (Chapter Two). John Hick's pluralism discerns salvation in universal religious experience (Chapter Three). Hans Küng's humanism uses felt needs as a guide (Chapter Four). All these six options reduce the reality of salvation to an immanent domain, whether in ourselves, our institutions, our history, or our universe.

Against them one and all stands not the Man of Steel but the Man of *Stellvertretung* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's term for "vicarious representative action").<sup>5</sup> Kettler deploys VHC to anchor the reality of salvation in the accessible transcendence of God incarnate. The dissertation examines VHC from a full range of angles. Its *source* is the "humanity of God" as advocated by Barth: God's eternal

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<sup>4</sup> For a brief history of the shifting mottos that have summarized Superman's ideals, including the now-dropped "the American Way," see Variety, "Superman changes motto to 'Truth, Justice and a Better Tomorrow,' says DC chief," *NBC News* (Oct. 17, 2021), [www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture-news/superman-changes-motto-truth-justice-better-tomorrow-says-dc-chief-n1281716](http://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture-news/superman-changes-motto-truth-justice-better-tomorrow-says-dc-chief-n1281716).

<sup>5</sup> Although this term does not appear in Kettler's corpus until *God Who Rejoices*, xvii, the concept suffuses all his writings.

disposition toward communion with humankind (Chapter Five). Its *scope* encompasses theological epistemology and hermeneutics, Scripture, creation, justification, faith, the church, sacraments, and eschatology, as spelled out by T. F. Torrance and John McLeod Campbell (Chapters Six and Seven). Its *depth* condescends to the level of vicarious repentance: because of our sinful inability to be perfectly penitent, Christ stands in for us even here (Chapter Eight). Its *goal* is eschatological exaltation, as embodied in the ascended Christ (Chapter Nine). Its *locus* in the world is the church, but—lest the anthropocentrism that Kettler earlier challenged creep back in—only as Christ substitutes his faith and obedience for our own. The reality of salvation in both its objective and its subjective aspects ever remains enclosed in Christ himself (Chapter Ten). Inasmuch as the church is Christ's body, however, its union with Christ means that the reality of salvation has empirical correlates in the church. The Spirit of Christ produces faith and love in Christians to witness to Christ's own faith and love (Chapter Eleven). In his epilogue, Kettler sketches how the church lives out VHC by vicariously believing for an unbelieving world. Just as Christ's own vicarious faith enables rather than excludes Christians' faith, so Christians' vicarious faith enables rather than excludes unbelievers' coming to faith. Yet the parallel remains inexact: unlike Christ, the church has no power in itself to save or heal. The best it can do is lead the needy into the Savior's presence.

When the dust of battle settles, VHC emerges victorious. Still, the treatment of Christians' own faith and love in the final chapter and epilogue tantalizes by its brevity. And if the transcendent reality of salvation may *correlate with* (though never *collapse into*) Christian experience, might there be a way to leverage VHC similarly vis-à-vis cosmic and historical processes, sociopolitical structures, human felt needs and non-Christian religious experiences? In short, to what degree may the concerns of the "anthropocentric" opponents from the start of Kettler's dissertation be rehabilitated within a "Christocentric" (Barthian) system? His remaining publications have explored some of these possibilities.

## Pathos, Ethos, Cosmos

To be compelling to readers and viewers, a superhero must have extraordinary abilities and adventures. Superman's powers are legendary and his exploits take him from his city of Metropolis across the world and the universe. But a truly compelling hero also shares human emotions, aspirations, moral dilemmas, and weaknesses. Superman is a sympathetic character because he experiences love for Lois Lane, loss of his parents and home world of Krypton, temptation to abuse his powers, weakness from kryptonite, and even death at the hands of Doomsday. As Batman once confessed, "In many ways, Clark is the most human of us all."<sup>6</sup>

Having championed VHC in his dissertation, Kettler has spent his career making the doctrine compelling by relating it to human emotions, aspirations, moral dilemmas, and weaknesses—including his own. He also has taken VHC beyond its home locus in the church out into the world and even the cosmos. Throughout these writings, he walks in Anderson's footsteps by bringing theology to bear on human need.

Kettler ended his dissertation with a discussion of Christians' faith. He picks up this thread of thought in *The God Who Believes*. Throughout this book, he uses the novel *Jayber Crow* as a literary case study of his points. He also offers himself as a case study in his own pilgrimage from teenage naïve faith to college-age attempts to resolve doubt via rationalistic apologetics to his Barthian breakthrough into rest of soul on VHC.

The vicarious faith of Jesus lays the foundation for Kettler's consideration of the problem of doubt as an intellectual and emotional phenomenon and as both a virtue (against gullibility) and a vice. Doubts arise about how well we know God and God's will for our lives, how evil and suffering in the world square with God's existence and character, how reliable the Bible is, and how we can know truth at all in a postmodern, pluralistic culture. In each case, Kettler refers us to Christ. He knows and believes in God as trustworthy Father. He models our vocation of loving

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<sup>6</sup> Jeph Loeb, *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies*, quoted in Mark Cormier, "Top 25 Superman Graphic Novels: #14-10" (May 28, 2013), <https://simplysupermanbatman.wordpress.com/2013/05/28/top-25-superman-graphic-novels-14-10/>.

obedience to God.<sup>7</sup> He has shouldered the world's evil, suffering, and doubt ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") to bear them away and bring life and healing. He interprets Scripture for us in such a way that its reliability relies on his. He is the only one fit to decide what is true, yet he is also the one whose atonement affects all people, whatever their culture or religion, even in ways we do not perceive. And because he has done all these things, we can find grace in him to help us overcome our unbelief and live by faith—not faith in our own faith but in his.

The second installment of the *The God Who ...* series delves into the dyad of joy and despair. In *The God Who Rejoices*, the author again speaks of his own joys (including the joy of comic books) and lingering despair (in the sense of melancholy, sorrow, or sense of loss, not clinical depression or abject hopelessness). He also uses material from Dostoyevsky, *Jayber Crow*, Bob Dylan, science-fiction writers, and others to illustrate his claims. The first half of the book examines the phenomenon of despair in terms of its possible sources (biochemistry? self-love? God?), objects (ourselves, earthly things, eternal things), manifestations (boredom, tragedy, Kierkegaardian "unconscious despair"), and suggested antidotes (self-awareness? contrition?). His own prescription is VHC: the Redeemer has "borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isa 53:4 KJV) so that we need no longer bear them alone.

The book's second half then pivots to joy. Kettler catalogues its varieties, from earthly joys (again, comic books) to perverse pleasure in others' pain (*Schadenfreude*) to the pangs of longing (*Sehnsucht*) and ultimately to God's own delight as incarnate in Christ. For the Christian, joy arrives as a gift of grace that sparks thanksgiving. Such joy lives in ongoing dialectic with sorrow as God's people

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<sup>7</sup> Here and elsewhere Kettler sides with Barth over Torrance in ascribing obedience to God the Son in his deity, not merely his humanity. See *Vicarious Humanity*, 95–97; *God Who Believes*, 113; *God Who Rejoices*, 233–234; *God Who Loves*, 12, 52, 107. For a recent critique of Barth's view by an analytic theologian, see Thomas H. McCall, *Analytic Christology and the Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, Oxford Studies in Analytic Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), ch. 4. Analytic theology has its detractors—one wag has quipped about "theology done by and for Vulcans"—but here is a prime case in which careful logic like Spock's can benefit the Kirk's dogmatics (even the *Kirchliche Dogmatik!*).

penitently despair of their sins and rejoice in their forgiveness. This binary of joy and despair marks even the life of God: against theologians who see only impassible bliss and beauty in the Infinite, Kettler asserts that God freely opens his heart to share the world's pathos. Likewise, present joy and despair foreshadow the eschatological revelry of God's Kingdom and misery of outer darkness. All these duos of sorrow and rejoicing lead us back to VHC, to the Lamb slain yet standing at God's throne.

Kettler's trilogy culminates with the greatest virtue, love. *The God Who Loves and is Loved* once more links its topic to Bob Dylan, *Jayber Crow*, and others, as well as Kettler's life experience with the love of family and pets. Love's ultimate foundation, though, lies not in our experience but in the inner dynamics of the Trinity. Love in God is without need, yet he freely, unconditionally, and passionately shares his love with the world he created, permitting it to affect him. Through VHC, we become participants in that love as Christ both loves us and loves for us so that we may love aright in union with him.

Kettler reflects on the relationship among the various loves. Love of God is preeminent and exclusive. Love of neighbor is distinct from love of God (contra Karl Rahner) and closely allied with justice (contra Reinhold Niebuhr and in qualified agreement with Nicholas Wolterstorff). Together, these two loves rein in self-love, *eros*, and friendship. But such lesser loves do not fall outside the scope of God's redemptive concern. Kettler reserves a chapter to apply VHC to "[Romantic] Flames, Friends, and Families" (Chapter Four). Christ's assumption of our fallen humanity puts the lie to our fantasies of an "ideal," unfallen partner or family, while his resurrection means the renewing of all things, including our close relationships. Kettler ends his volume by underscoring love as both *being* and *act*. Love is essential to humanity and embraces the entirety of who we are; and love must express itself in concrete action, including in community. These final points circle us back to the beginning of the book: love is likewise essential to God (the Trinity) and is expressed in the Son's action of embracing the entirety of our brokenness to restore us to communion with God (VHC).

The last book in Kettler's corpus is a collection of eight essays spanning a quarter century, *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement*. The first chapter



rehearses themes from Kettler's dissertation and *Reading Ray S. Anderson* on the integration of theology and ministry, VHC, and the church as the locus of atonement's actualization. This and the sixth chapter include case studies.

From the "Metropolis" of the church, Kettler next ventures forth into the world—indeed, the universe—to apply VHC to an intriguing array of issues: cross-cultural interactions amid globalization (Chapter Two); aesthetics (Chapter Three); the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (Chapter Four); ecological disaster (Chapter Five); and genetic engineering (Chapter Seven). The remaining chapters return close to home by using VHC to diagnose our weaknesses (Chapter Six) and illusions about an "ideal" self and community (Chapter Eight). Repeatedly in these essays, VHC brings solidarity with the created order and its need, judgment on distortions of God's good design, and new life and healing through the risen Christ.

The books of Kettler's canvassed in this section have more than made good on his dissertation's closing foray into relating Christian virtues to VHC. Usually without naming his old nemeses, his writings also have rehabilitated Küng's concern with felt needs, Moltmann's advocacy of divine passibility, Cobb's cosmic outlook, and Hick's interest in religious pluralism, all within Kettler's own transcendental Christocentric framework. Pannenberg's historicism and Boff's liberationism remain unaddressed and so unhealed ... as of yet. (More on this later.) Meanwhile we turn to take the true measure of Kettler's achievement.

## **Hero vs. Hero**

One standard trope of superhero stories is that of dueling heroes. Two (or more) heroes with competing agendas or perceptions cross paths and end up clashing. These conflicts prompt fans to assess how evenly matched the contestants are and what unique strengths each possesses. Not even Superman is immune to this trope. Most notoriously, multiple times plot writers have pitted him against Batman.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Beedle, "Batman v Superman: Five Breathtaking Comic Book Battles" (Mar. 17, 2016), [www.dccomics.com/blog/2016/03/17/batman-v-superman-five-breathtaking-comic-book-battles](http://www.dccomics.com/blog/2016/03/17/batman-v-superman-five-breathtaking-comic-book-battles).

Theologians employ this same trope. A recent release by Simeon Zahl features a three-way matchup of Augustinianism vs. Thomism vs. Barthianism (under which Zahl brackets T. F. Torrance) on the role of experience in the Christian life.<sup>9</sup> Repeatedly Zahl pummels Torrance for the absence of concrete experiential content from his theological writings, a dearth allegedly driven by his Barth-inspired dread of subjectivism. Instead, Torrance evinces a “*complacency with theological abstractions,*” going on ad infinitum about the ontology of salvation but offering no practical particulars.<sup>10</sup> Thomism, by contrast, has a well-developed account of Christian experience but harbors unrealistic expectations about infused grace and habituation as mechanisms for producing saintliness.<sup>11</sup> Zahl himself champions an “affective Augustinianism” that takes with full seriousness the role of embodied emotional experience in theology—not as its *source* (contra Schleiermacher) but its *constant context* and *proper correlate*. That is, doctrines are developed by human beings whose bodily feelings and doings both influence and are influenced by their theologizing. Good theology recognizes this reciprocity and so actively addresses the practical implications of doctrine.<sup>12</sup>

Zahl flags up several advantages of affective Augustinianism: 1. A *via media* between making experience foundational and ignoring it.<sup>13</sup> 2. Support for the church’s evangelistic mission by demonstrating how doctrine impacts practical experience.<sup>14</sup> 3. Interpretation of both negative affects (e.g., a sense of unworthiness, a fear of death) and positive ones (like love and joy) using the Reformers’ templates of condemnation by law vs. justification by grace through faith and *simil iustus et peccator*.<sup>15</sup> 4. Basis for rapport with Pentecostals and

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<sup>9</sup> Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>10</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 6–8, 26–33, 70–72, 81, 95–101, 184–85 (quotation from p. 70; italics his).

<sup>11</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 81–82, 108–116, 186–88.

<sup>12</sup> See especially the introduction and first chapter of Zahl, *Holy Spirit*.

<sup>13</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 17, 26–33.

<sup>14</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 4, 78–79, 117–118.

<sup>15</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 4–5, 234, and chs. 3–5 as a whole.

Charismatics regarding Christian experience of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> 5. Recognition that Christian experience is diverse and cannot be predicted or prescribed completely (as by a standard pietist conversion narrative). 6. Preservation of a place for habituation in Christian sanctification without expectations of total personal transformation. 7. Discernment of social and political structures as shapers of godly and ungodly affects.<sup>17</sup> 8. Basis for rapport between theology and other disciplines, specifically the hard and social sciences.<sup>18</sup>

Now that we have surveyed Zahl, we are in a position to appreciate Kettler's accomplishment: Working independently of Zahl, he has developed an "affective Barthianism" that resolves much of Zahl's critique of Barth and Torrance. Compare the advantages of affective Augustinianism touted above with Kettler's corpus: 1. In his Anderson-trained hands, experience is neither the stone that the builders rejected nor the cornerstone. As he puts it, experience ought not serve as "the criterion of theology," but "Jesus Christ still *meets* our experience because he took upon [himself] our 'flesh.' Therefore, its effect is seen in our concrete, real-life experiences."<sup>19</sup> 2. Again reflecting Anderson's influence, Kettler's works not only speak at length of practical experience but also provide case studies from his own life, others' lives, literature, music, and film. 3. He digs a deeper foundation for Reformation soteriology than Zahl by interpreting both negative and positive affects in light of VHC. Doctrines of justification by grace through faith and *simil iustus et peccator* find surer footing ontologically and experientially in Christ himself—his faith, his assumption of sinful human nature, his justification and exaltation.<sup>20</sup> 4. In addition to introducing the rapport with Pentecostal and Charismatic theology that Anderson sought to build, Kettler builds a bridge of his own by outlining a VHC-

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<sup>16</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 5–6, 236, 241.

<sup>17</sup> On these last three advantages, see Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 239, ch. 5 as a whole.

<sup>18</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 234–235, 239–240.

<sup>19</sup> Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 10 (emphasis his).

<sup>20</sup> In *God Who Loves*, 14, Kettler specifically urges (contra James K. A. Smith) that our fallen condition requires a more radical cure than simply the reconfiguration of our affections; the depths of our ontology must be healed by VHC.

centered mysticism.<sup>21</sup> 5. He allows for a variety of experiences from melancholic to sanguine, from *Sehnsucht* to *Schadenfreude*, all beneath the banner of VHC. His commitment to the normativity of Christ's experience rather than our own militates against prescribing one-size-fits-all spiritual narratives; for instance, he opposes pressuring people into deathbed conversions.<sup>22</sup> 6. While wary of the pitfall of perfectionism,<sup>23</sup> he has a real role for habituation in the Christian life.<sup>24</sup> 7. Positioning the church as the locus of atonement means it has a potent social influence in vicariously believing, rejoicing, and loving on behalf of those who struggle to do so for themselves. 8. Kettler puts theology in dialogue with such disciplines as social and biomedical sciences, aesthetics, and superhero studies.

The comparison above reveals that Zahl's affective Augustinianism and Kettler's affective Barthianism are largely evenly matched. Zahl's special strength is his sophisticated incorporation of "affect theory" from the social sciences into his theology. What sets Kettler apart is his integration of doctrines, disciplines, and experiences under VHC. It is not hard to conceive of a less collisional, more collaborative relationship between the two systems—one in which Kettler profits from Zahl's insights into the theological value of affect theory while Zahl adopts Kettler's Christocentrism. After all, despite occasional spats, Batman and Superman usually work well together.

## Man of Tomorrow

Some superheroes hark back to a mythic past: Wonder Woman and Thor, for example. Unlike them, Superman embodies a futuristic vision. One of his monikers is "the Man of Tomorrow." We have reviewed Kettler's corpus and noted his achievement of an affective Barthianism. With his retirement comes opportunity for him to add to his corpus or, alternatively, for others to extend his VHC-centered

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<sup>21</sup> Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 138–143; *God Who Believes*, 74, 78–79.

<sup>22</sup> Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 190.

<sup>23</sup> Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 32–33.

<sup>24</sup> Kettler, *God Who Believes*, 112–113; cf. *God Who Loves*, 14.

project. What follows are six fertile fields for future research. The first four draw on Zahl's suggestions for further study.<sup>25</sup>

*Pneumatology.* Both Zahl and Kettler focus on the Holy Spirit's so-called ordinary effects as manifested in the affective fruit of the Spirit: faith, joy, and love. But both Zahl and Anderson acknowledge the research potential of the extraordinary effects of the Spirit, too: the charismata.<sup>26</sup> What are the implications of VHC for prophecy, exorcism, healing, and other miracles today (all of which Jesus did during his earthly ministry), as well as speaking in tongues—which Jesus is never recorded to have done while on earth?

*Bioethics.* Kettler already has devoted a chapter in *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement* to an analysis of genetic engineering in view of VHC. This issue begs for revisiting in conversation with affect theory and Zahl's query concerning human genetic enhancement: "If both sin and righteousness are tethered to the body, does it follow that we might be able to enhance our way to holiness in the future?"<sup>27</sup>

*Christology: Descent.* Although Zahl asks about the implications for hamartiology of the fact that "sin ... manifests in, and cannot be fully disentangled from, innate features of our biology and psychology,"<sup>28</sup> he never inquires about its fallout in Christ's own biology and psychology. That is, he does not raise an issue at the root of Kettler's VHC program: that of Christ's sinlessness in relation to his assumption of fallen human nature. While this issue has received a great deal of

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<sup>25</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240–241.

<sup>26</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 236; Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 138–143.

<sup>27</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240 n. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240.

coverage from a theological perspective,<sup>29</sup> it could benefit from interaction with the hard and social sciences.

*Christology: Ascent.* Zahl sees the Holy Spirit as spanning the distance between current Christian experience and “the historical particularity of Jesus of Nazareth.” He wishes to explore their interconnection in a future study.<sup>30</sup> This map of theological reality, though, appears to omit an important landmark: the Ascension. Here Kettler’s oeuvre may be of service for spelling out how the Spirit links believers not merely *backwards* to a figure who lived two millennia ago but *upwards* to one whose history is ongoing.

*Church History.* Speaking of the continuing history of the ascended Christ leads to the riddle of its relation to church history. To what degree may we infer what Jesus in heaven is “up to” on the basis of his body’s doings on earth? Kettler records Anderson’s provocative question, “Does Jesus Think About Things Today?” and his view that the movement to ordain women is a fresh work of Christ’s Spirit in the church.<sup>31</sup> This opinion presumes that one may read divine intentions off of churchly events. Is Anderson correct? C. S. Lewis’s friend Charles Williams wrote *A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* that begins with Christ’s ascension and rehearses the unfolding of church history in terms of the doctrine of coinherent substitutionary love—not only between Christ and Christians but among Christians themselves in communion with Christ.<sup>32</sup> Williams is a natural conversation partner to a project focused on VHC. More recently, historian Philip Jenkins has called for a

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<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., Daniel J. Cameron, *Flesh and Blood: A Dogmatic Sketch Concerning the Fallen Nature View of Christ’s Human Nature* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016); E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Oliver D. Crisp, “On the Vicarious Humanity of Christ,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 3 (2019): 235–250; Rafael Bello, *Sinless Flesh: A Critique of Karl Barth’s Fallen Christ* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020); Jerome Van Kuiken, “Sinless Savior in Fallen Flesh? Toward Clarifying and Closing the Debate,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 64.2 (2021): 327–340.

<sup>30</sup> Zahl, *Holy Spirit*, 240–241 (quotation from latter).

<sup>31</sup> Kettler, *Reading Ray S. Anderson*, 108–113. “Does Jesus Think About Things Today?” is the title of one of Anderson’s writings.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2001).

complementing a theology of church growth with a theology of church death in light of the dwindling of ancient Christian communities in Asia and North Africa over the course of centuries.<sup>33</sup> While he proffers some brief theological suggestions of his own, his reflections could be augmented significantly by grounding them in the doctrine of VHC. As previously Kettler has written about that doctrine's entailments for individual Christians' and local churches' experiences of faith and doubt, joy and despair, and love, so now he could apply it to global and regional churches' experiences of love (cf. Williams), faith, doubt, joy, and despair (cf. Jenkins). Doing so would begin to tie up a loose end left dangling since his dissertation: rehabilitating Pannenberg's tenet that history is revelatory.

*Political and Economic Theology.* The other loose end from Kettler's dissertation is the rehabilitation of Boff's liberation theology. Kettler has analyzed the cultural impact of globalization in *The Breadth and Depth of the Atonement*, but its political and economic impact also deserve scrutiny. What has VHC to do with Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos, with Brexit and Trumpism? Or, from a different angle, consider that *The God Who Believes* and *The God Who Rejoices* received glowing endorsement from Willie James Jennings,<sup>34</sup> who went on to author a bombshell book on Christian theology's historic complicity in racism.<sup>35</sup> Kettler's books often cite Dietrich Bonhoeffer and J. B. Torrance; how might their theologically-funded opposition to Nazism and apartheid, respectively, be combined with Kettler's prior work to produce a fresh reflection on how VHC judges and redeems the structural contributors to doubt and despair, faith and joy among communities of color?

Whether Kettler himself takes on any of these research suggestions or leaves them to others, his legacy rests secure. His investigative reporting on VHC for over three decades and across six books has fleshed out the human interest story in Barth's and Torrance's dogmatics. Unlike the Man of Steel, then, Kettler has

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<sup>33</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

<sup>34</sup> On the back cover of *God Who Rejoices*, Jennings commends both books as "soon to be in the category of Christian classics."

<sup>35</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

performed his heroic endeavors not as a caped superbeing from Krypton ... but as a mild-mannered writer from Kansas.



Christian D. Kettler, Review of Todd Speidell, Greg Marcar, and Andrew Torrance, eds., *Søren Kierkegaard: Theologian of the Gospel* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2021), *Participatio* 11: "The Priority of Grace in the Theology of T. F. Torrance" (2023), 229-233; #2023-CDK-2. Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike.

**REVIEW OF**  
**TODD SPEIDELL, GREG MARCAR, AND ANDREW TORRANCE, EDS.,**  
***SØREN KIERKEGAARD: THEOLOGIAN OF THE GOSPEL***

(Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 243 pp.

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Karl Barth famously spoke of there being three kinds of people: those who never went to school with Kierkegaard, those who went to school with Kierkegaard (and never left it), and those who went to school with Kierkegaard, profited from him, and went on. (*Fragments Grave and Gay*, pp. 102-3). Barth obviously saw himself in the latter category. He criticized his first start in dogmatics as being too "existentialist" and perhaps still saw too much influence of the great Dane in his burgeoning dogmatics work. So many still see Kierkegaard as primarily the father of existentialist philosophy and only perhaps devotionally a Christian. The editors and contributors of this fine volume make it clear that Kierkegaard was clearly an incarnational Christian theologian first of all, with a continuing relevance for contemporary theology.

Readers of this journal will find much that is similar in Supplemental Volume 5 (2019) of *Participatio*, yet some essays have been revised or changed in title.

In the introduction the editors clearly see a commonality between Kierkegaard and Luther, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and also extending to T. F. Torrance.

"Truth is subjectivity" is not just individuality but Truth as active Subject. This is certainly persuasive when one considers the bulk of SK's work as being, as is popular to say today, theology *coram deo*, before God, not from a detached neutrality. It is from this perspective that God in Christ demands radical discipleship.

The chapters, involving eleven contributors, are divided into two parts: Part I: "Incarnational Theology and Ethics: and Part II: "Faith, Sin, and Offense." These are two worthy categories it seems, but the editors separate the first part, on ethics, from the second, which is on "what it is to be and live as a human self ... " This seems to be an arbitrary separation – both categories would seem to deal with ethics. In fact, some essays in Part I do not seem to deal with ethics *per se* ("Kierkegaard and the Trinitarian Grammar of Theology"), whereas Part II includes essays that seem to be better suited for the first on "Incarnational Theology" ("Kierkegaard: Father of Existentialism or Critic of Existentialism?"). Regardless, all of the essays maintain the steady thesis of the volume: Kierkegaard should be seen primarily as a theologian of the incarnation, not as an existentialist philosopher.

Murray Rae's essay "Kierkegaard and the Trinitarian Grammar of Theology" seeks to explore the trinitarian ground of SK's theology, despite what seems to be the scarcity of mention of the Trinity in the Dane's work. Instead of being an individualist, Kierkegaard sees the Christian center in communion with God through Christ (much like T. F. Torrance), but not based on any capacity in ourselves. Kierkegaard's aversion to doctrinal formulation is related to his opposition to Hegelian speculation, Rae argues. But SK does work with an Anselmian "faith seeks understanding" in the context of human existence. (One could almost hope for a study of Kierkegaard on theological existence in relation to a theology of ministry as *praxis* in T. F. Torrance's student, Ray S. Anderson!) The incarnation drives SK to deal with actual existence, as seen in the famous parable of the king who becomes like the maiden from *Philosophical Fragments*. Rae's emphasis on communion with God in SK is quite telling when one considers how often SK is discounted in contemporary thought as an "existentialist," allegedly for *lacking* communion! (An example is in the otherwise classic work of John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 103-4.)

The essay by David J. Gouwens, "Kierkegaard's Incarnational Realism: The Grammar of Christian Knowledge" more extensively compares Kierkegaard with T. F. Torrance when it comes to the issue of whether or not SK was a realist in epistemology, as Torrance claims. Gouwens exhaustively reviews the debate and concludes he was, even with saying "truth is subjectivity." The passion behind this does not deny that it is through faith that one knows the objectivity of God: "inwardness is shown to be objectivity" (*Journals and Papers*). Gouwens points out a fascinating parallel between SK and the fathers Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria in this regard. So Torrance also, many do not see, has a place for "inwardness," if you will, in his three tiers of knowledge of God, beginning with "the evangelical and doxological level" (*The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, p. 156.)

This is not to deny, Gouwens stresses, the differences between Torrance and Kierkegaard on realism. Torrance's concern for "scientific realism" is beyond the concerns of SK's "unscientific" reflections. His understanding of "grammar" is much more widespread than Kierkegaard. This is not to say, however, that they are in conflict.

"Paradox" and "the infinite qualitative difference" between God and humanity are often seen to be examples in Kierkegaard of logical separations and the separation of God from humanity. Andrew Torrance, however, claims in his essay, in Kierkegaard, they are expressions of the nearness of God. In fact, among the church fathers, one can find a profound emphasis on paradox in Cyril of Alexandria's Christology. Later, Andrew Torrance points out, we can find this in the Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The point is that Kierkegaard is against any theology that is a "puzzle-solving exercise." Rather SK expresses what T. F. Torrance calls the "explosive force" of God becoming human, something we cannot fit neatly in logical categories.

In like manner, Leo C. Barrett's essay, "Kierkegaard and the Beauty of the Cross" counters the popular view of Kierkegaard as the "theologian of gloom" because he sees the cross as a center of joy in his work. Sounding very Lutheran at this point, SK builds up the importance of the crucifixion as the source of the forgiveness of sins, a source for great joy. The *kenosis* doctrine of Philippians 2 is

very much in mind here, where exaltation does not exist without prior humiliation, but they are not necessarily always sequential in the Christian's life.

G. P. Marcar, in "Busyness, Worry, and the Prototypical Love of Christ" answers the typical criticism of Kierkegaard's *Works of Love* that it ignores present social and economic conditions. Rather, the emphasis is that it sees everything in the priority of love of God. But this is not to neglect the love of neighbor. This can be seen also in the wider soteriological context of SK's writings: the importance of the incarnation, Christ becoming "humanity's redeemer" as the priority over everything else, and therefore Christ become "the Prototype" of love for humanity.

In "Kierkegaard: Father of Existentialism or Critic of Existentialism?" C. Stephen Evans presents a masterful criticism of the view that Kierkegaard is the direct source for the existentialist view of "radical choice" such as represented by Jean Paul Sartre. No, SK believes in the human creature as a being before God (*coram deo*), so his view of "truth is subjectivity" is quite different, with all the hopes, desires, and anxieties of human beings. Also, he does not share the foundationalism of Descartes, the Enlightenment, or Hegel's "System." In the end, contra Sartre, the self cannot invent the self, but stands before God. This self before God (*coram deo*) is found by Philip G. Ziegler as a remarkable correlation to Lutheran theology in his essay, "The Theological Self in Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death*."

How one remains *coram deo* is explored by Joshua Cockayne in "Communion and the Remission of Sin: A Kierkegaardian Account." What is the relation between forgiveness of sin and remission of sins in Kierkegaard? Is there a place for the Eucharist here in SK's theology despite his rare mentions of the sacrament?

To be *coram deo* for Kierkegaard most famously, perhaps, is to be a "radical disciple," best exemplified in his later writings such as the *Attack Upon Christendom*. George Pattison, however, believes this was a degeneration from his earlier Christian theology. In "Kierkegaard on Sin, Ambiguity, and Gospel Radicality: Towards a Response to George Pattison," Aaron P. Edwards answers Pattison that SK did not forsake his Christian position but was in continuity with it. In fact, he was in continuity with the critical stand of Luther and the Reformation as well as his

earlier writings on being confronted by the living Christ. The earlier writings have a dramatic difference between them because of the different pseudonyms they are written under (Johannes Climacus, Anti-Climacus, etc.). This is a point also made by Stephen Backhouse's essay, "The Difference the Incarnation Makes: The Changing Nature of Faith and Offence in the Pseudonyms of Søren Kierkegaard."

Finally, Sylvia Walsh's remarkable essay, "The Inverse of Jest and Earnestness in Kierkegaard's Theology," sees Kierkegaard not as a theologian of gloom but of jest. SK sees the jest in the religious person's religious claims. But he also sees true jest in God's "gracious jest" when God acts and allows us to participate in his actions.

This is a fine collection that deserves a wide reading by both scholars and those beginning to journey through reading Kierkegaard.