

THE THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM IN T. F. TORRANCE AND ITS ASCETIC CORRELATE IN ST. MARK THE MONK

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Abstract: *Among the chief assets of the theology of T. F. Torrance is his constant emphasis on the centrality of Christ, in particular the historical humanity of Christ. For Torrance, the historic man Jesus Christ serves as the basic axis around which all other Christian concepts revolve, not least of which is the sacrament of baptism. In what follows, Torrance's understanding of baptism will be briefly unpacked, taking note of its unflinching Christocentrism and its emphasis on Christ's baptism as the vicarious baptism of all human nature, into which the faithful are engrafted in their own baptism of water and the Spirit. Having explored some of the nuances of Torrance's view of baptism, the paper will turn to another rich theology of baptism, namely that of the fifth-century Greek ascetic St. Mark the Monk. Some striking similarities will be underlined, particularly in the common emphasis on the vicarious work of Christ bequeathed to the faithful in baptism. However, it will be argued that despite convergence on the centrality of Christ in baptism, the implications of this Christocentrism are worked out quite differently in their respective thought. While for Torrance the vicariousness of Christ's baptism renders the Church and her members an altogether passive recipient of his gift, St. Mark challenges such a tendency by repeatedly linking the gift of baptism with the possibility of active, even necessary, fulfillment of the commandments of Christ among the faithful. Torrance's thought does not appear to forbid such an emphasis, but it is not an emphasis he shares, at least in his work on baptism. Moreover, by creating dichotomies between*

1 I would like to thank Matthew Baker for his invaluable help in the preparation of this article. I should also point out that, despite my name and my patristic sympathies, I am no immediate relation of the Torrance theological dynasty.



understanding baptism as objective or subjective (with a distinct preference for "objective"), or as being either Christocentric or mystical, Torrance's approach gives rise to further difficulties when confronted with the theology of St. Mark, which refuses to make such black-and-white distinctions. In the end, the theology of baptism in Torrance offers a refreshing and vigorously Christocentric vision, but it is one that comes over as incomplete, lacking as it does any explicit ascetic dimension. St. Mark offers the same Christocentrism, but one which flows naturally into the active Christian life. It will be suggested in conclusion, however, that turning to other works in the Torrance canon that do not treat the theology of baptism directly, Theological Science in particular, a sense of active obedience and conformity to the Word of God in Christian life is discussed in remarkably similar ways to St. Mark. Torrance thereby provides a means to nuance his own understanding of baptism and active Christian life, even if the two elements of his thought are not explicitly connected in his works.

I. The Theology of Baptism in the Writings of T. F. Torrance

Torrance develops his theology of baptism most fully in a lecture delivered to the *Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses* in 1970, subsequently forming chapter two of *Theology in Reconciliation* and entitled "The One Baptism Common to Christ and His Church."² The current essay will depend in large measure on his thought as it is found there, although insights from elsewhere in Torrance's *oeuvre* will not be overlooked. Torrance begins by emphasizing the need in theology "to give more rigorous attention to the humanity of Christ," a frequent concern of his.³ When we turn to the sacraments, he argues, we must begin with "the primary *mysterium* or *sacramentum*" who is "Jesus Christ himself."⁴ Baptism must be grounded so firmly and objectively in the historic work of Christ "that it has no content, reality, or power apart from it."⁵ This standpoint leads Torrance to distinguish baptism, properly speaking, from any ritual act or ethical "response of man," putting the emphasis wholly on the "power of [Christ's] vicarious life, death, and resurrection" which alone effects the baptism

2 T. F. Torrance, "The One Baptism Common to Christ and His Church" in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 82-105.

3 Torrance, "The One Baptism," 82. For another more recent turn to this issue, see Patrick Henry Reardon, *The Jesus We Missed: The Surprising Truth About the Humanity of Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

4 Torrance, "The One Baptism," 82.

5 *Ibid.*, 83.

of the faithful, albeit through the sacramental actions of his Body, the Church.⁶ The *baptisma* of Christians refers to Christ's own baptism, which in turn refers not only to the events at the River Jordan, but to the entirety of Christ's life, conceived as a baptism undergone "for our sakes in the whole course of his redemptive life."⁷ The key for Torrance is the vicariousness of Christ's actions for our humanity: his obedience, humility, and submission to the Father as man dignifies human nature with the honor of sonship: "Jesus was baptized with the baptism of our humanity that was anointed by the Spirit and consecrated in sonship to the Father."⁸ It is this baptism of our humanity unto God in Christ that constitutes the meaning of "the one baptism." It is this baptism that the Church undergoes in Christ, but in a qualified sense. As Torrance puts it, "Christ and his Church participate in the one baptism in different ways – Christ actively and vicariously as Redeemer, the Church passively and receptively as the redeemed Community."⁹ But while the means of participation is different, the content is the same: "As Jesus Christ is, so are we in this world, for what happened to him as Head of the Body happens to us also who are members of the Body."¹⁰

Having established an identity between the baptism of Christ and the baptism of the faithful, Torrance moves on to unpack the sacramental question. He repeatedly attacks what he sees as a post-Augustinian "sacramental dualism" in the West between water-baptism and Spirit-baptism, which in itself divides the one baptism of the Church. He insists instead on the need for a "stereo-understanding" of the one baptism, which includes water and Spirit, and which is wholly God's work in us.¹¹ But parts of the early church, he claims, fell prey in their understanding of baptism to "a syncretistic Gnosticism", "a mystical notion of redemption," and "mythico-ritualistic modes of initiation and participation in the divine", i.e. to a Neo-Platonizing travesty which ultimately does away with the vicarious work of Christ for us.¹² Although there are some heroes in his story, namely Irenaeus, Athanasius, and the early pro-Nicenes, all of whom refused to create a sacramental theology based on the division between the noetic/intelligible and sensible realms rather than the work of Christ, these heroes appear few and far between. While Augustine is commended for his "Irenaean

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 86.

9 Ibid., 87.

10 Ibid., 89.

11 Ibid., esp. 92-9.

12 Ibid., 94.

Christocentricity" in expounding the doctrine of baptism, his thought falls short of the mark for its persistent "dualism between the intelligible and sensible worlds," which shifts our gaze away from the "mighty acts of God in Christ" to the workings of grace in the human soul.¹³ The mention of grace brings Torrance to the crux of his argument: it is the Western doctrine of supernatural grace mediating between the intelligible and sensible worlds that undermines and ultimately destroys the Christian doctrine of baptism. What is needed is a total re-orientation back to the redemptive acts of God in Christ for us: only then can our theology of baptism be placed on surer footing. Torrance invites us to marvel at the sheer grandeur of baptism's true meaning as compared with an impoverished notion of created and mediating grace: "That is what will always baffle us about the saving act of God in us: it is the direct activity of God in which he is personally and immediately present in his own transcendent being, and is not just some created relation effected between us by his divine causality."¹⁴ The emphasis in the closing pages of his essay is placed squarely on this sovereign and free gift of Christ's divine life to the faithful in baptism: "in Jesus Christ God has once and for all assumed human nature into that mutuality [between Father and Son] and opened his divine being for human participation. This took place vicariously and redemptively, for it was *our* human nature which God assumed in Jesus Christ."¹⁵ The vicariousness of Christ's life for our salvation is given a supreme status, and any hint of a Christian's own activity in this salvation is forcefully denied, insofar as "his act of grace remains sovereignly free and is not trapped within a reciprocity between man and God that begins with man and ends with man."¹⁶ Thus in receiving baptism, we rely "upon Christ alone and his vicarious faithfulness."¹⁷

The themes Torrance develops in his essay "The One Baptism" just discussed are scattered throughout his writings, and it is evident that he held dearly to the principle of Christ's vicarious humanity in his understanding of both baptism and the Church. It is no surprise that his thoughts regarding baptism should re-surface in some detail in his essay "The One Church," which analyzes and expounds the final lines of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.¹⁸ Here the

13 Ibid., 97-8.

14 Ibid., 101.

15 Ibid., 101-02.

16 Ibid., 103.

17 Ibid., 104.

18 T. F. Torrance, "The One Church" in *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (New York: T&T Clark, 1991), 252-301. The lines from the Creed he deals with are: "I believe in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. I confess

significance of baptism as being in the Name of the Trinity is stressed as the incontrovertible basis for the Trinitarian faith of early Christians and the development of Trinitarian theology in the fourth century.¹⁹ In discussing this significance, Torrance turns once again to the relationship between the baptism of Christ and the baptism of the faithful. His words, which give an eloquent summary of his theology of baptism, are worth citing at length:

Baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit initiates people into the sphere in which all the divine blessings of forgiveness of sins, resurrection, and eternal life are bestowed and become effective, but does the emphasis fall on baptism as an objective event in Christ or as a subjective event in our experience of Christ through the Spirit? No doubt baptism properly understood involves both, but a noticeable difference in emphasis already arose in the early Church, for example in the teaching of Cyril of Jerusalem compared to that of Athanasius. With Cyril there was clearly a greater stress upon baptism as a mystical replica of what took place in Christ, an interiorisation in the soul of the spiritual reality signified by baptism. With Athanasius, however, there was a considerable stress on the fact that even when we consider our adoption in Christ to be sons of God as taking place in the Spirit, we must think of that not as viewed in ourselves, but as viewed in the Spirit who is in God. For Athanasius the decisive point, to which we have referred already, was that in his baptism in the Jordan the incarnate Son of God received the Spirit upon the humanity he had taken from us, not for his own sake, but for our sake. That is to say, it was our humanity that was baptised, anointed, sanctified and sealed in him. Thus when he was baptised for us we were baptised in him. Our baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity, therefore, is to be understood as a partaking through the Spirit in the one unrepeatable baptism of Christ which he underwent, not just in the Jordan river, but throughout his life and in his death and resurrection, on our behalf. That vicarious baptism was the objective truth behind the *ἐν βάπτισμα* of the Creed in which its depth of meaning was grounded.²⁰

And again, a little further he writes:

When he died for us and was buried, we died and were buried with him, and when he rose again from the grave, we were raised up with him – that is the truth sealed upon us in “one baptism.” Jesus Christ underwent that one

one baptism for the remission of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”

19 Torrance, “The One Church,” esp. 256, 264. This idea recurs in *The Trinitarian Faith*: see, for instance, 45, 193, 196, 230-31, etc.

20 Torrance, “The One Church,” 292-93.

baptism vicariously as Redeemer, but by uniting us to himself through his Spirit he makes us participate in it receptively as those whom he has redeemed. The central truth of baptism, therefore, is lodged in Jesus Christ himself and all that he has done for us within the humanity he took from us and made his own, sharing to the full what we are that we may share to the full what he is. Baptism is the sacrament of that reconciling and atoning exchange in the incarnate Saviour. When we understand baptism in that objective depth, we are directed away from ourselves to what took place in Christ in God. Hence St Paul was accustomed to speak of our dying and rising in Christ in the aorist tense. However, if we think of baptism not objectively as βάπτισμα but subjectively as βαπτισμός, then the only meaning we can give to it will be in terms of what we do or experience, or in terms of the efficacy of its valid performance as a rite.²¹

Before turning to the theology of baptism in St. Mark the Monk, and from there comparing and contrasting the two theologians, I would like to highlight an interesting and important element in these passages from Torrance. As seen in his article "The One Baptism," the objectivity and subjectivity of baptism are distinguished. What is interesting here, however, is that Torrance initially admits that "no doubt baptism properly understood involves both," and yet he goes on to challenge if not dismiss any understanding of baptism – even that of Cyril of Jerusalem – which is not wholly focused on the *objective* aspect (i.e. the historic work of God in Christ for us). All subjective readings are viewed, it appears, with the utmost suspicion. This is a significant point that will re-emerge in the last part of our discussion.

II. The Theology of Baptism in the Writings of St Mark the Monk

It may initially come as a surprise that the theology of T. F. Torrance should be brought into conversation with that of a fifth-century ascetic, whose writings, moreover, were perhaps entirely unknown to Torrance. Yet in the writings of St. Mark, particularly his treatise *On Baptism*, we find numerous grounds for fruitful dialogue between the Greek-speaking Christian ascetic tradition and Torrance's patristically-minded Reformed theology.

The precise identity and date of Mark the Monk (also known as "the Ascetic," "the Egyptian," and "the Hermit") remains unsolved, although a placement somewhere in the first half of the fifth century with at least some link to Egypt is

21 Ibid., 293.

probable.²² His popularity amongst subsequent generations of Eastern Christian ascetics is significant, crystallized to a certain extent in recent centuries by the inclusion of three of his works in the first volume of the *Philokalia*, a now classic compendium of ascetic texts first published by Sts. Nikodemus of the Holy Mountain and Makarios of Corinth at Venice in 1782.²³ He can thus safely be employed as a representative of Eastern Christian ascetic thought, which in turn will allow us to use the dialogue between Torrance and Mark as a dialogue between Torrance's thought and Eastern Christian ascetic theology more broadly.

When Mark the Monk turns to the issue of baptism, he is doing so within a particular context of theological debate. While for Torrance the debates fuelling his theology of baptism revolve around sacramental dualism and the Trinitarian and Christological basis of the Church's and each Christian's life, for Mark, the debate is more ascetically-oriented. Specifically, Mark appears (especially in his treatise *On Baptism*) to be countering Messalian tendencies or groups within the ascetic Christian movement. I say "appears" because he never overtly identifies his foes, but it is almost certain that he had Messalian theology in mind. The debate for Mark centers on the nature and efficacy of baptism: in short, is baptism a secondary facet of the Christian life, subservient to the ascetic struggles of the Christian in the quest for salvation (the Messalian position), or does baptism freely confer the foundation and goal of the Christian life, the content of salvation, which is lovingly responded to and experienced through the keeping of Christ's commandments (St. Mark's position)? We might be tempted to draw a neat parallel here with the struggles of the Reformation – salvation by works (Messalian/Roman Catholic) versus salvation by faith or grace alone (Markan/Protestant) – and indeed, St. Mark figured conspicuously in several Reformation and post-Reformation debates.

22 For a discussion and relevant bibliography, see Alexis Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity: Eastern Asceticism and the Framing of the Christian Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88-95. The best general analysis of Mark's theology remains the unpublished dissertation by (Kallistos) Timothy Ware, "The Ascetic Writings of Mark the Hermit" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1965). For Mark's view of baptism, see (Kallistos) Timothy Ware, "The Sacrament of Baptism and the Ascetic Life in the Teaching of Mark the Monk," *Studia Patristica* 10/1 (1970): 441-52 and Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity*, 92-4, 100.

23 The three works included are: *On the Spiritual Law*, *On those who think they are made righteous by works*, and *Letter to Nicholas the Solitary*. An English translation of these works can be found in *The Philokalia*, trans. G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. T. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 1:110-160. A complete English translation of his works has now been made: T. Vivian and A. Casiday, trans., *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, 2 vols. (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009). There is likewise a critical edition of his writings: Marc le Moine, *Traité*s, ed. G. de Durand, 2 vols. (SC 445, 455; Paris: Cerf, 1999-2000). Translations here are my own.

Lutherans were particularly drawn by his treatise, *On those who think they are justified by works*.²⁴ But imposing such an anachronistic bifurcation on the fourth century ascetic debates would be misguided. The gratuitous nature of the divine grace conferred in baptism is never conceived by Mark as a substitute for struggle, but rather as the *enabling and sustaining* factor of the Christian (read "ascetic") life, a life that is fulfilled in the keeping of Christ's commandments. The value of asceticism (or the active Christian life) on the path of salvation, in other words, is never in question: what is at stake is the placing of asceticism within a correct dogmatic framework, which for Mark must revolve around, and be grounded in, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The treatise *On Baptism* takes the popular form of a question-and-answer dialogue (*erotapokriseis*). It opens with a question regarding the nature of baptism: does baptism bring perfection of itself, obliterating original/"ancestral" sin, or must this be achieved through struggle after baptism? The rest of the treatise is essentially made up of a series of back-and-forth questions and answers stemming from this initial question. St. Mark's position has already been summarized: baptism does indeed freely convey perfection, clothing us with Christ, the perfect God and perfect man. Crucially, however, this imputed perfection from Christ to the faithful is never dissociated, logically or otherwise, from the active Christian life. Early on Mark writes: "Holy baptism is perfect, but it does not render perfect the one who does not keep the commandments."²⁵ He goes on: "For faith is not only to be baptized into Christ, but to keep his commandments."²⁶ The concept of the commandments (particularly Christ's New Testament commandments) lies at the heart of Mark's theory of the Christian life. Just as baptism is "of Christ," so are his commandments, and to set them aside or relegate their significance is to insult Christ. Conceptualizing Christian salvation apart from the keeping of Christ's commandments is also an affront to baptism itself, since baptism provides all the means (or grace) necessary to keep the commandments. This understanding of the grace of baptism allows Mark to insist on the importance of the ascetic life without considering that life a "work" of salvation in itself (and indeed, he repeatedly shuns such a notion as a "lie"). As he puts it in one place, the commandments themselves can only be fulfilled "by the mercies of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁷

24 For a summary of how the works of St. Mark were brought into Protestant and Roman Catholic debates from 1531 onwards (with Protestants being generally favorable and Roman Catholics generally cautious), see T. Vivian and A. Casiday, *Counsels on the Spiritual Life*, 32–3.

25 *On Baptism* 2 (SC 445:298).

26 *On Baptism* 2 (SC 445:298-300).

27 *On the Spiritual Law* 30 (SC 445:82).

But that there is a *need* for every Christian to strive to keep the commandments is without question in Mark's mind. Christ's vicarious work, imputed in its perfection to the Christian in baptism, introduces and equips the Christian for "the law of liberty," which is the path of the commandments.²⁸ This point is worthy of note, as it touches on the nature of the human will. Contrary to the popular perception of Eastern Christian thought on this matter, namely that human beings have an inherently free will from birth, Mark is a little more nuanced. Before baptism, there is a definite "bondage of the will" in human beings that cannot be freed by human effort. It is bondage, however, of *inclination*, not of *necessity*: the will inclines more easily to evil, but does not necessarily commit evil. What it cannot do of itself is properly keep the commandments of Christ. Part of the gift of baptism is to free the will and give it the opportunity and strength to walk in the statutes of the Lord. To turn away from the commandments is to submit the will to bondage once again, and thus to slight the gift of baptism.²⁹

Baptism, then, conveys the fullness of grace, the fullness of Christ's salvific work, and yet this fullness is only experienced or lived out through the keeping of the commandments. To reconcile such a tension, Mark introduces a distinction between the full and true incorporation into Christ at baptism, which occurs *μυστικῶς* (mystically or secretly), and the experience of that incorporation *ἐνεργῶς* (actively) through keeping to the "law of liberty."³⁰ In one sense, a parallel can legitimately be drawn between the *μυστικῶς-ἐνεργῶς* distinction in Mark and the "stereo-understanding" of baptism seen in Torrance. Both are, after all, attempting to keep the work of Christ (our adoption as sons of God through him in the Spirit) front and center within the sacramental act of baptism, although the emphasis falls rather differently in each case. For Mark, the revelation (*ἀποκάλυψις*) of the baptismal gift through the active Christian life is of paramount

28 On the "law of liberty" in Mark, see especially *On Baptism* 2 (SC 445:300-304); also *On the Spiritual Law* 28, 30 (SC 445:82); and *On those who think they are made righteous by works* 16 (SC 445:134).

29 Among the main passages relating to this point regarding the human will in Mark are: *On Baptism* 2 (SC 445:302), 3 (SC 445:306), 9 (SC 445:358), and 13 (SC 445:374); in this context see also *On those who think they are made righteous by works* 178 (SC 445:186).

30 Mark gives the most direct and comprehensive summary of his *μυστικῶς-ἐνεργῶς* teaching on baptism at *On Baptism* 5 (SC 445:324-348); for his teaching in a nutshell, see *On those who think they are made righteous by works* 85 (SC 445:156): "all that have been baptized in an orthodox manner have received the whole of grace mystically, but they afterwards receive full assurance through the keeping of the commandments." The distinction is discussed at greater length in Ware, "The Ascetic Writings of Mark the Hermit," 227-40.

importance, without which Christians effectively cheat the great gift given them, whereas for Torrance, it is mainly a proper understanding of the grandeur of Christ's baptism in itself that is the focus.³¹

We have spoken much of Mark's insistence on linking baptism with the keeping of the commandments without elaborating on which commandments he means in particular. This is not the place to explore the matter in detail, but one or two points should be made.³² Firstly, he does not frequently elaborate on which commandments he is referring to, but in one passage of *On Baptism* he demonstrates that he means primarily the directives of the New Testament.³³ The one treatise where the "content" of the commandments is the center of attention is his work *On Repentance*. The opening words (and the opening commandment) of Christ's public ministry, to "repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," is understood by Mark to be the supreme commandment in which all other commandments are summed up and contained. In a manner not altogether dissimilar from the opening sentences of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses*, Mark associates repentance with the Christian life in its totality, a continuous conforming of the Christian mind to the mind of Christ. Repentance refers, as Luther puts it, "to the whole life of believers."³⁴

Given the status of repentance as the commandment of Christ *par excellence*, the intimate link between baptism and the commandments for Mark inevitably implies a similar link between baptism and repentance. And indeed, Mark is explicit that "in all our activity, there is but one foundation of repentance – and that is the one baptism in Christ."³⁵ This is a crucial statement for the current discussion. Instead of being based in the concept of sin, repentance is grounded instead in the work of Christ. Baptism inaugurates a life of lived repentance, a repentance linked with Christ's own life. Linking repentance with Christ is

31 For a more detailed analysis of the active revelation of baptism in the Christian life according to Mark, in terms of purification (καθαρισμός), freedom (ἐλευθερία), and indwelling (ἐνοίκησις), see Ware, "The Sacrament of Baptism."

32 For more on the concept of the commandments in Mark's theology, see Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity*, 95-102.

33 The commandments he refers to (as examples, not as an exhaustive list), are prayer, fasting, watchfulness, sharing, renouncing oneself, suppression of thoughts (Paul's λογισμῶν καθαίρεσιν, usually translated "destroying arguments"), dying, being crucified, acting with virtue in any circumstance, and struggling without turning back: *On Baptism* 3 (SC 445:308).

34 Martin Luther, *The Ninety-Five Theses*, Thesis 1 in *Works of Martin Luther*, trans. and ed. A. Spaeth, L. D. Reed, H. E. Jacobs et al (Philadelphia, PA: A. J. Holman Company), 1:29.

35 *On Repentance* 7 (SC 445:238).

obviously a delicate matter, since Christ “committed no sin” (1 Peter 2:22) and “knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). But Mark capitalizes on the fact that Christ was “made sin for us,” taking upon himself the sins of the world. Christ is thus the vicarious penitent for all humanity. In a beautiful elaboration of this concept, Mark writes (in question-and-answer form):

“Tell me, those who fall into debt because of their own borrowing, are they alone debtors or are their guarantors (ἐγγυώμενοι) also?”

The subordinate answered saying: “their guarantors also of course.” The old man went on:

Know it well that in becoming our guarantor, Christ constituted (καθίστημι) himself a debtor according to the Holy Scriptures: ‘the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29), ‘the one who became a curse for us’ (Galatians 3:3), ‘the one who took upon himself the death of all and died on behalf of all’ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:14).³⁶

Christ is here the guarantor of humanity, the one who stands as debtor in our place, and heals the debt. This vicarious understanding of Christ’s work, and its implications for Mark’s theology of baptism, are significant, and bring us to the most striking, fruitful, but also potentially distancing element in the comparison with Torrance. For as with all of Mark’s theology of Christ’s work for us, the vicarious repentance of Christ is at once salvific and *actively participable* among the faithful by virtue of their baptism. In other words, the baptized Christian is called, as a corollary of keeping the commandments, to share in the vicarious work of Christ, standing surety for others just as Christ stands surety for all. The repentance of the faithful, then, includes not simply repentance for oneself, but among those who live in concert with the perfection of grace imputed to them in baptism, it includes repentance for one’s neighbor as well.³⁷

What binds Mark the Monk and T. F. Torrance here is the insistence on the vicariousness of Christ’s work, of his baptism, which is the sole basis for salvation. The “vicarious humanity” and “vicarious obedience” of Christ described by Torrance sits very comfortably within Mark’s framework. Their common Christocentrism, however, reveals a common tension, to which I would like to turn.

36 *Causid* 15.12-23 (SC 455.70).

37 On this concept of “Christ-like repentance” in Mark, see Torrance, *Repentance in Late Antiquity*, 109-12. The key relevant passages in Mark’s writings include *On Repentance* 11 (SC 445:250) and *Discussion with a Lawyer* 18-20 (SC 455:78-88).

III. Two Theologians Divided by a Common Christocentrism

The theology of baptism in Mark, it has been argued, is thoroughly Christocentric. From the Reformed perspective, however, one might be tempted to view the tendency in Mark to move imperceptibly from the gift of Christ conferred in baptism to the keeping of Christ's commandments as simply a dressed-up version of works-righteousness. How far Reformed theology in general can ultimately countenance the position of Mark remains to be seen, but a key common element must be acknowledged: the primacy of the work of Christ in the affair of salvation. As we have seen, however, a common element such as this, crucial though it is, does not necessarily yield an identical result. The chief question that must be asked, then, is whether or not the differences between T. F. Torrance and Mark the Monk reflect an insurmountable theological divide, or whether the differences, rather than being substantial, reflect more the dissimilarity of the theological debates being engaged with in each case.

To this reader, despite the similarities between the two thinkers, there is a feature of Torrance's theology of baptism that may betray more than just a superficial difference of emphasis. I have in mind what Torrance sees as the wholly passive nature of the baptism of Christ received by the Church *as opposed to* an active understanding of that baptism. Mark, and the Eastern Christian tradition in general, would agree with the basic point being made, namely that Christ is the active giver of baptism, but that would not be grounds in his mind to absolutize the passivity of the faithful. In fact, to separate the gift of baptism from any "activity" on the part of the Christian, or to "objectify" the reality of baptism *at the expense of* the subjective or mystical experience of (or communion with) that reality through the keeping of the commandments would in Mark's mind be tantamount to insulting and even undoing the objective value of baptism itself. We saw that Torrance could concede that baptism properly understood includes both objective and subjective categories, but his priorities lead him to diminish any place for a "subjective" understanding to such an extent that one wonders if his theology can really accommodate it. To find the beginnings of a solution, one needs to look elsewhere in Torrance's *oeuvre*, particularly his elaboration of the notion of knowledge and the knowledge of God in *Theological Science*, where the concept of the active Christian life is developed with depth and elegance.³⁸

38 T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: Continuum, 1996). On one occasion, Torrance even spoke positively of a need for "ascetic theology," but the idea is left undeveloped: see T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 26. I am grateful to Matthew Baker for this reference.

We have seen that in his theology of baptism proper, Torrance is reluctant to afford any place to the Christian's active participation in the gift of Christ given in baptism. But when we turn to *Theological Science* in which he provides an analysis of the knowledge of God and the role of the human subject in that knowledge, Torrance speaks in terms strikingly reminiscent of St. Mark and the Greek ascetic tradition. In the original preface to that book, he writes with intimacy about encountering God: "His presence presses unrelentingly upon me through the disorder of my mind, for He will not let Himself be thwarted by it, challenging and repairing it, and *requiring of me on my part to yield my thoughts to His healing and controlling revelation.*"³⁹ The action of God in our knowledge of him is rightly prioritized, and yet in this process of knowledge space is likewise given to the active yielding of one's thoughts to the Almighty.

This sentiment is developed more fully in the book's second chapter. Framing a discussion of the place of the human subject's knowledge of God in terms of the Reformed doctrines of accommodation and election, Torrance turns his attention to the same theme that lies at the heart of his theology of baptism: the historic humanity of Christ. Since God himself assumed the fullness of our humanity (excepting sin) through the Incarnation, his humanity has become part of the knowledge of God:

It is because God has become man in Jesus Christ and our knowledge of God is rooted and grounded in Christ and shaped through conformity to Him that the very humanity embedded in our knowledge of God is an essential part of that knowledge, for it belongs to the essential nature of the Truth.⁴⁰

Torrance then turns immediately to our acquisition of this knowledge (my italics): "Thus the *active obedience and conformity of the human mind to the Word of God* is part of the full content of our knowledge of God."⁴¹ He later states (again, my italics): "To know the Truth is thus to be *actively participant* in it."⁴² Of course, throughout this analysis, Torrance places the priority squarely on the God who accommodates, elects, and reconciles, but he never allows this priority to eclipse or deny the definite role of the human subject in knowing God. There is, as he puts it, a "real interplay between human subject and divine Object."⁴³ While it is God who acts upon us to bring us to knowledge of himself,

39 Torrance, *Theological Science*, ix (my italics).

40 Ibid., 86–7.

41 Ibid., 87.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 97.

He acts upon us in such a way that He does not negate but rather posits and fulfills our subjectivity. We are never allowed to impose ourselves with our notions upon Him, but we are freed and lifted up as rational subjects in communion with God, and summoned to decisions and acts of volition in that communion, so that knowledge of Him arises and increases out of obedient conformity to Him and the way He takes [*sic*] with us in revealing Himself to us.⁴⁴

The very fact that Torrance speaks of “obedient conformity to” and “active participation in” God’s Truth freely given strikes an immediate chord with the theology of baptism found in Mark. What brings them closer still is Torrance’s discussion of this conformity of mind and participation in knowledge in terms of *repentance* (μετάνοια):

The subject is given freedom and place before God and yet . . . is summoned into such communion with Him that he can only engage in it with self-criticism and repentance (μετάνοια), that is, through an alteration in the structure of his consciousness, in which he is brought into conformity with the Truth. Nowhere more than in Christian theology does knowledge involve such a profound change in the attitude of man, or such a radical break in the structure of his natural mind, or such a complete reorientation in his life. That is to say theological knowledge takes place only through a critical reconstruction of subjectivity in accordance with the nature of the object.⁴⁵

As we saw, the whole of Mark’s theology of baptism and the Christian life revolves around the concept of repentance, which ultimately is a striving to assimilate and remain faithful to the gift of Christ, the person and work of the Incarnate Lord. Although not in the context of a discussion of baptism, nevertheless Torrance here betrays a near-identical sentiment: we can truly know God only insofar as we submit in repentance to his will and actions for us, his unwavering and faithful presence in our lives.

IV. Conclusion

If we are to take Torrance’s theology of baptism in isolation and compare it with that of St. Mark the Monk, we are confronted with disagreements. They are disagreements, however, which may begin to be worked out and resolved through Torrance’s concept of knowledge. Whether Torrance himself would agree

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 98.

to connect his theory of theological knowledge with his theology of baptism is an open question. Certainly from this writer's perspective Torrance's theology of baptism remains incomplete without a clarification of the meaning and import of its "subjective" sense. In turning to Torrance's most sustained analysis of subject-object relations in theology (found in *Theological Science*), the beginnings of such a clarification can be uncovered, though they are not explicitly brought to bear on the concept of baptism.

In the writings of Mark the Monk we find a means of bridging and retaining the "objective" and "subjective" elements in the theology of baptism more directly through a sustained commitment to the role of Christ's commandments in the Christian life, and the baptismal mode of their fulfillment. Baptism frees, enables, and strengthens the faithful to practice the commandments (summed up in the commandment of repentance), in the practice of which Christ hidden in the baptized heart is found.⁴⁶ The one objective vicarious baptism of Christ remains the focus here, the axis and focal point of all Christian endeavor. Its outworking, however, is not *only* objective, not *only* passive, since the goal of the baptism of Christ is to lead not to a dictated or mechanistic renewal of humanity, but to the "glorious liberty of the children of God" in the keeping of his commandments. It is a theology of baptism that both agrees with and challenges that of Torrance. The agreements, challenges, and possible solutions to those challenges discussed in this paper hopefully serve to bring into sharp relief the wider need for continued constructive and honest ecumenical discussion between Christian theologians.

46 See *On the Spiritual Law* 191 (SC 445:124): "the Lord is hidden in his own commandments, and he is to be found there in the measure that he is sought."