"RENEWAL THROUGH UNION": THOMAS F. TORRANCE ON THE NEW BASIS OF ETHICS

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Abstract: *Thomas F. Torrance is a rich resource for theological ethics. Over and against those who argue that Torrance's "soteriological suspension of ethics" displaces ethics, I argue that Torrance's theology is ethically rich, locating ethics as a fruit of union with Christ, "the inner content of justification." I discuss the doctrinal promise of such a move, arguing that it lies in its Trinitarian reference. By grounding ethics in the divinity of Jesus Christ, Torrance ensures ethics deliverance from pelagian assumptions to its ultimate ground of order in the being of the Trinity.*

1. Introduction

Thomas F. Torrance is a rich resource for theological ethics. This might well be a seemingly odd thing to say, given that Torrance argues, following Kierkegaard, for "'a soteriological suspension of ethics.'"[1] Is Torrance displacing ethics' importance by arguing for such? I think not. In this article I will take up this phrase, investigating its function so as to see where, doctrinally speaking, Torrance locates ethics. Not surprisingly, ethics is a fruit of union with Christ,

1 I have located two instances of this phrase in Torrance's corpus. First, in *The Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ,* ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 118, wherein Torrance speaks, following Kierkegaard, of a "'teleological suspension of ethics,'" and second in "The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and Moral Order," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1992), 252, wherein he describes "'a soteriological suspension of ethics.'" For Kierkegaard's unfolding of this point, see "Is there a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?" in *Fear and Trembling*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 54ff. Kierkegaard argues that the ethical is not the highest concern; rather, service of God, that is "God's sake" is the highest concern. (59)

what Torrance calls "the inner content of justification."[2] I will discuss the doctrinal promise of such a move, arguing that it lies in its Trinitarian reference. By grounding ethics in the divine being of Jesus Christ, Torrance ensures ethics deliverance from pelagian assumptions to its ultimate ground of order in the being of the Trinity.

2. The New Basis for Ethics

Although Dietrich Bonhoeffer is rarely cited in Torrance's work, a little known essay of Torrance's in *God and Rationality* — "Cheap and Costly Grace" — indicates Torrance's deep sympathy with Bonhoefferian themes, especially when it comes to the ground of the moral life.[3] Torrance's essay helps us to see that he is not indifferent to ethics or neglectful of ethics. Quite the opposite: Torrance is only indifferent when ethics eclipses its foundation, namely Jesus who in the very depths of his person is our justification and sanctification.[4] Torrance writes, "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 centre of human existence and all things are mediated through His grace."[5] To think truthfully about ethics is to recognize that it involves a revolution that issues from justification. Jesus Christ is not only the subject of justification but also the agent of justification. He is our justification and brings about our justification. Following Bonhoeffer's language of "centre," Torrance reminds us that Christ is "the objective centre of human existence," including our ethical existence. This is a centre which is far from inert. Indeed, this centre — Jesus Christ — "sets all our ethical relations on a new basis."[6] It is this new basis that Torrance would have us take absolutely seriously.

The doctrinal locus with respect to thinking theologically about ethics is, for Torrance, justification. Does justification denote the declaration of righteousness or does it in some other sense denote the making righteous or perhaps both? It is

2 Thomas F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

3 Ibid.

4 See 1 Corinthians 1:30.

5 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality*, 63. For Bonhoeffer's discussion of the "centre," see Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, "Lectures on Christology," in *Berlin: 1932–1933* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

6 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality*, 63.

a matter of both, for in justifying us by his grace, we are renewed "through union with Christ [which] belongs to the inner content of justification."[7] Justification by grace involves renewal by grace. The moral life issues from Christ "who came to make Himself responsible for us."[8] The justification that he is, is the basis for our renewal. Christ frees *from* sin and "for spontaneous ethical decisions toward God and toward men."[9] That spontaneity, however, does not ever float free of Jesus Christ. Ethics, as with Christ's saving work, is grounded in his person. A strict asymmetry must be maintained. The rooting of ethics in Christ's person, in his filial relationship with God the Father, means that we are never forced back upon ourselves but rather only Christ — the only begotten Son of the Father — and "His active obedience."[10]

The language of "active obedience" demands explanation.[11] It is a matter of taking "the power of the cross of Christ and his substitutionary role seriously."[12] It is Jesus Christ who obeys in our place, who is faithful where we were and are faithless. He renews all of us. He "became what we are in order to make us what he is."[13] His whole life, to say nothing of his passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session, make us over in his image and redeem. This is the basis from which ethical relations, "the whole moral order," proceeds.[14] In all things, Jesus Christ *is* what we *ought* to be but cannot be because of our alienation from him. Thus our relationship with Christ is no longer governed by what Torrance calls an "external legal relation."[15] Rather, it is a matter of Gospel all the way down. No more are we "governed by the imperatives of the law."[16] Instead, we are governed by "the indicatives of God's love."[17]

One can begin to see how Torrance's re-casting of the relationship between the "is" and the "ought" mirrors his recasting of the "Law" and "Gospel" relationship. The Gospel is a matter of what is — the indicative. The Law is a matter of what

7 Ibid., 64.

8 Ibid., 72.

9 Ibid., 62.

10 Ibid., 78.

11 Ibid., 78.

12 Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 37.

13 Torrance, "The Atonement," in *Universalism*, 238.

14 Ibid., 249.

15 Ibid., 252.

16 Ibid., 253.

17 Ibid., 253.

ought to be — the imperative. In Christ are they one. Christ who in his very person atones for sin "transforms the fundamental moral framework of thought and constitutes the very parameters within which it is rightly to be understood."[18] The moral order only makes sense within this framework. Put again, the Christ who is Gospel includes Law. But the Law he is, is a form of the Gospel, for he enables us to become who we are in him. "You are the light of the world."[19] To anticipate the ground we will traverse in the third section of this paper, this is a matter of "the translation of the Son/Father relation in Christ into the daily life of the children of God."[20] It is a matter of his Gospel being established in us. Expressed differently, the Gospel does not abolish the Law but re-establishes it, thus setting it on a new foundation.

The atonement, following Torrance, generates a new moral order. That order is not independent of Christ. Rather, it is intelligible only in relation to his person. Because Christ is our substitute, the one who takes our place, in and through him are we "radically transformed . . . we become truly human and really free to believe, love, and serve him."[21] Human acts and relations are in him placed upon new ground. In him are we able to act in accordance with who and what we are declared in him to be — his children. No longer is there a gulf between what ought to be and what is the case, for "Christ in you, the hope of glory" reigns (Col 1:27). Sin has been put to death in his person, and therefore are we free to act in accord with who we are in him, that is as those justified by his grace.

If we follow Torrance, we learn the extent to which justification by grace is applicable to our ethical relations too. As Paul Molnar notes, "he [Christ] displaces us from the center in order that we may have our rightful place as those who act not in our own names but solely in his name and on the basis of what he has done for us."[22] "This," Molnar avers, "is the practical sense of justification for T. F. Torrance."[23] Molnar could have just as well said "the ethical sense" of justification. Only when this point is appreciated, can one begin to make sense of Torrance's appeal to Kierkegaard regarding the suspension of ethics. Torrance does not champion the abolition of ethics — by no means. He does abolish, however, the notion that our ethical relations, indeed the moral order, can be

18 Ibid., 254.

19 Matthew 5:13.

20 Torrance, "The Atonement," in *Universalism*, 254.

21 Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 37.

22 Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 185.

23 Molnar, *Torrance*, 186.

established independently of the justification, forgiveness, and renewing grace of Jesus Christ. The moral life must not be detached from Christ. Rather, it is derivative of his grace, overcoming and overtaking us as "a *fait accompli*."[24] Having said that, Torrance does not think that justification reaches us with a kind of thud. Jesus Christ always acts from our side, bringing his faithfulness and obedience to life in us, from our side. But that he can and does so is because he is God. Torrance only thinks that ethics needs to be suspended in order that we might learn its true origin in Jesus Christ, our righteousness.

It is his divine being that qualifies him to act as our substitute. Torrance puts it this way: it is a matter "of God's providing a righteousness from the side of humanity which perfectly and obediently acquiesces in the fulfillment of God's righteous judgment against sin."[25] That righteousness is provided in and by Jesus Christ. He is the substance of our justification, and he achieves his new humanity in us through the powerful working of his Spirit. If such is the case, then, Torrance's point about the "suspension" of ethics is a fairly simple and straightforward one. Ethics is to be suspended until it can be placed within Jesus Christ. In being placed in him, our sin and unbelief is conquered from within. We are given, moreover, "a new human righteousness."[26] That righteousness is the forward-looking dimension of justification. Accordingly, it is not merely a pardon but rather a matter of being born into the true human, the one whose resurrection is the first fruits of the new humanity.

These promising moves, doctrinally speaking, rest upon something more primal. That is Jesus' divine being. By the resurrection of his person from the dead, "justification has that new humanity with its new divine-human righteousness as its very substance."[27] Ethics is a matter of forms or patterns of life congruent with how things really are with respect to humanity. Humanity's new substance is this "divine-human righteousness." It is no longer "I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). I am united to and with him "apart from law." My actions no longer establish me, for I am established in Christ. He has "got at my sin and guilt from within."[28] What qualifies the Christian community and me to live righteously, is Christ, the new humanity. He makes this possible because he is God. His divinity, which is of course never abstracted from his humanity, is what enables him to achieve the new humanity. He acts as God because he *is* God,

24 Torrance, *Atonement*, 118.

25 Ibid., 123.

26 Ibid., 133.

27 Ibid., 133.

28 Ibid., 126.

together with the Father and the Spirit. And he acts as man because he is true man. But He exists as true man because he is God. His obedient humanity exists in his divine person.

There is a clear pneumatological dimension to all of this. While often implicit in Torrance's work, he makes it clear that "the Holy Spirit, the very breath of the Father and the Son, is given to the church to breathe into it the breath of the new humanity in Christ."[29] The animating principle of the new humanity in Christ is the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit are we enabled to share in Christ's offering of himself to the Father; by the Spirit is the real and substantial union with Christ realized in us. Moreover, by the Spirit do we share in Christ's mediatorial ministry before the Father. This is not to suggest that we are intrinsic to it. Rather, it is to say that because we are united to him, our life is to be testimony to his ongoing ministry.

Voices otherwise sympathetic to Torrance, such as David Fergusson, understand that "the divine-human relation [in Torrance] tends to be largely a private one. . . . The important relations and movements in Torrance are, as it were, vertical rather than horizontal."[30] I do not think that this is an entirely accurate reading of Torrance. Given Torrance's rich account of grace involving all of humanity, I do not think that the language of "private" hits the mark. There is no longer any private realm, for Jesus Christ has become what all of us are — sinners — "in order to make us what he is."[31] The whole of humanity is the object of this action. Vertical in origin, it takes shape across the horizontal, indeed embraces the whole of the horizontal.

What Torrance offers is, I think, a moral ontology. Although his focus is not on moral particulars per se, he is hardly indifferent to describing the shape of the new moral life that flows from grace.[32] He cannot describe the contours of that life apart from Christ, for Christ is our life, and ever more shall be when he comes again in glory. Torrance's Christology, inclusive as it is of his account of Christ's atoning mediation, is universal and cosmic in nature. It pertains to all peoples, in all places, and in all times. Christ actively obeys once and for all. He is justification — and that is true for all peoples. The ethical relations of humanity are placed on a new basis through him who makes "Himself

29 Ibid., 135.

30 David Fergusson, "The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T.F. Torrance," *Participatio* 3, 106.

31 Torrance, "Singularity of Christ," in *Universalism*, 238.

32 Torrance's piece on "The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child" attests this. Paper presented at the Scottish Order of Christian Unity in Edinburgh 1997.

responsible for us."[33] But that he can and does make himself responsible for us is because he is God. To Torrance's explanation of Christ's divinity as the source and origin of his mission and ministry do we now turn.

3. First Principles

Torrance's moral ontology is alert to Trinitarian first principles. That is where its chief promise lies. Explanation of the work these principles undertake is necessary. Throughout his corpus, Torrance grounds the saving work of Christ "ontologically in His divine being."[34] His divine being is the being he receives from the Father as the Father's only begotten. This is what *qualifies* him to do what he does. His work arises on the ground of his being. Because he is divine, together with the Father and the Spirit, is his obedience on behalf of all people possible. His "inner filial relation to God the Father" not only constitutes his person — he is the being begotten by the Father — but also grounds the reality of our moral life.[35] He by the Spirit accomplishes his inner filial relation to the Father in and among us. In Christ are we those who by the Spirit call "'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6) Herein lies the great strength of Torrance's theological ethics. At no point does he think that Trinitarian metaphysics is irrelevant to the new basis on which we are set through atonement. Atonement's actuality has to do with who the Son is. Its ground and ongoing effectiveness lies in him.

The divine being of the Son has further implications downstream. Just as what Christ does is anchored in his being, so too is the Law grounded in Gospel. The relations are irreversible. This is worth thinking about. Many are seemingly happy to talk about what Christ does — his benefits — without adequate attention to who he is in relation to the Father and the Spirit. Similarly, many are happy to talk about what Christians ought to do but far more reticent to talk about who Christians are in relation to the Father, Son, and Spirit. Torrance reminds us that the "profound moral revolution" that is justification has a source, and that source is the being of the one who justifies — his being as the Father's only begotten.[36] The filial relation that the Lord Jesus enjoys with the Father from eternity structures and gives shape to what he does among us. In fact, what he does among us expresses his procession. Put differently, his mission as the

33 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality*, 72.

34 Ibid., 78.

35 Torrance, "Singularity of Christ," in *Universalism*, 252.

36 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality*, 63.

reiteration of his origin in time is Gospel. Gospel happens because of who he is. And as Gospel it includes Law. But Gospel and Law coinhere in him. The Law — the command of God — is good news — is gift. Just so, it conforms us to the law of our being, Jesus Christ and his cross.[37]

There is no disjunction between who he is and what he does, whereas with us, of course, there is. This warrants explanation. Christ's being and act inhere, whereas ours do not, at least not until he comes again in glory. But Christ's being and act are not conflated with one another. Christ reveals himself as sovereign over his actions. His being — who he is with the Father and the Spirit from eternity — is revealed in his acts; but this is not to say that he does not have "life in himself."[38] In coming among us, the Lord Jesus acts as he is, the Son of the Father. His filial relation with the Father has a term among us. His person not only guarantees his acts but is their principle of intelligibility. The goal of theological ethics — indeed of the Christian life — is that what is true of him becomes true of us, namely that in him we become those in whom being and act cohere. In other words, we learn to act in harmony with who we are — his children. Just so, being and act are no longer externally legally related in us but rather "replaced by inner filial relation to God the Father."[39] If such is the case, then, it is not a matter of us making ourselves Christian, of us making our acts correspond to our being. That is far too pelagian a way of thinking. Instead, it is a matter of us submitting to Christ's atoning mediation wherein our acts become derivative of our being in him. Just as is the case with God, so too with us: acts derive from being.

With respect to the old man, the old Adam, we try to secure our being and identity through our acts. Therefore, we distort our being. We cannot make our lives or ourselves. Instead, we must freely receive in relation to Christ. Christocentric existence means that we too receive our being just as does the Son from the Father and the Father from the Son, insofar as the Father is never Father without the Son (or Spirit). The promise of Torrance's efforts lies in his recalibration of the being and act relationship, not only with respect to God but also with respect to ourselves. Such a re-casting has profound implications for the Gospel and Law relationship. Let me explain. The good news of the atonement transforms all that humans say and do. It is profoundly generative,

37 In this connection, Bonhoeffer writes, "Discipleship as allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ places the follower under the law of Christ, that is, under the cross." Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr, vol. 4, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001). 85.

38 See John 5:26.

39 Torrance, "Singularity of Christ," in *Universalism*, 252.

establishing a new moral order out of nothing. And this is the case because of the Son/Father relationship. The moral revolution entailed in justification is the translation of that relationship "into the daily life of the children of God."[40] Atonement, and the fundamental moral framework that arises from it, derives from the Trinitarian being of God. The Christian community, through the power of the Spirit, is learning to live in communion with God the Father in a relationship of love and delight that attests the Son's eternal love of the Father and the Father for the Son.

The coinherence of being and act entails the coinherence of the is — the indicative — and the ought — the imperative. Just as God's being is inclusive of God's act — God acts as God is — so too with respect to justification is the "split between is and ought" transcended.[41] By being in Christ, by receiving his new righteousness, do we share in his triumph over the split that so bedevils us. Mercifully, the "ought" is arrested from our hands. It is no longer our concern. If it were, our relation with God becomes refracted, taking "the form of ethical or legal relation."[42] In Jesus Christ, however, we become who we ought to be. We are made new in him. Nomistic forms of existence are no more. "The reality of the new man" begins to shine through the old.[43]

The is and the ought begin to cohere, but again only because of Jesus Christ. Involved as we are "in his vicarious self-sanctification, it still waits for the full actualization of redemption in its physical existence."[44] The full actualization is of course his business; it is not in our hands. We cannot reconcile the is and the ought. In fact, left to ourselves, we will only promote their estrangement. But in Christ's new righteousness are they one.

The antecedent condition by which the imperative and the indicative are one is a matter of the Father/Son relation. Because of the surety of that relation, they are and will always be one. In Christ, and by virtue of his self-sanctification, do our acts over time begin to correspond and become transparent to his redemption. Herein we see another strength of Torrance's treatment. The Creator/creature distinction is always left intact. In fact, it is established anew in Christ. We become those who by the Spirit learn to allow Christ's cross and substitutionary

40 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace," in *God and Rationality*, 63; Torrance, "Atonement," in *Universalism*, 254.

41 Torrance, "Atonement," in *Universalism*, 253.

42 Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 97.

43 Ibid., 100.

44 Ibid., 101.

role to determine all of our believing, praying, and worshipping.[45] As the risen one, Christ continues to act as our substitute, generating trust in him, thereby rendering our faith into a form more transparent to his. We do not cease to become creatures, but only really become human in him. He establishes us as humans, indeed humanizes, radically transforming our humanity in such a way that it more nearly corresponds to the new creation. Intrinsic to being a creature is recognition of what Torrance calls "an ultimate ground of order and of a transcendent source of information" that cannot be derived from us.[46] Our humanity as true humanity is set upon the new ground tilled and cared for by Jesus Christ. He is its principle of intelligibility. Only through a ground outside of itself, namely God's Spirit, is the creature able to live in agreement with God's relationship to it.

There is another important dimension to all of this. It pertains to the language of "event."[47] Torrance likes to use this term when describing the justification or atonement of Christ. It is to "be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us."[48] Describing it as an event helps us to grasp something of its uncatchable character. We are, after all, encountered by a living person. Ethics, as with discipleship, is a following *after*. It is a matter of being conformed to what *is*. What is — reality — has to do with a living person. Accordingly, a rich recognition of his liveliness is absolutely crucial to understanding the shape of life before him. We are bound to a living person who has given himself to us "in perfect love and peace" and continues to give himself.[49] Moreover, our response of love to him is what he achieves in us. Ethics is to be suspended, teleologically speaking, because Torrance does not want us to put the cart before the horse. Atonement is "*enhypostatic*."[50] Ethics understood as our response to Christ is a fruit of his saving us, his believing and acting in our place. But even the response does not float free of him, for he acts from our side by the Spirit, displacing our faithlessness in the favour of his faith. Atoning mediation is therefore an ongoing reality. It does not have simply to do with the events of AD 1–33. It is contemporaneous with us. Christ continues by his and the Father's breath to get "at our sin and guilt from within."[51] He

45 Torrance, *Preaching*, 37.

46 Torrance, "Soul and Person," 2.

47 Torrance, *Atonement*, 118.

48 Ibid., 118.

49 Ibid., 119.

50 Ibid., 123.

51 Ibid., 126.

continues to live the Christian life for us, calling us to be reconciled to God in all things.

4. Where does this leave us?

Torrance does not forsake ethics. What he does forsake is the terms on which much discussion of ethics takes place, that is in abstraction from atoning mediation in Jesus Christ. Ethics' intelligibility lies outside itself. Indeed, ethics is to be suspended until it recognizes that the ground on which it traditionally proceeds has been graciously pulled out from under its feet. Justification involves a very serious clearing of the decks. That clearing entails "a profound moral revolution."[52] Intrinsic to that revolution is a "renewal through union with Christ."[53] In him does our moral life proceed on a different basis. That basis is the justification of Christ that sanctifies, what Torrance calls "atoning mediation."[54]

What makes Torrance's treatment of the "moral revolution" entailed in justification so potent is its anchor in the triune life.[55] It is not just Christ's divine being that grounds and is the ongoing principle of his work. More fundamentally, it is a matter of "the translation of the Son/Father relation in Christ into the daily life of the children of God."[56] It is that relationship that grounds and is the spring from which the activity of the Son flows. One of the chief fruits of this move, is that it recasts the relationship of the "is" and the "ought," the Gospel and Law. The latter in both cases is intrinsic to the former. What ought to be — a life of obedience before God's command — is the achievement of the Lamb who by his Spirit establishes his life in us. Accordingly, what is always true for God — the coherence of being and act — becomes in a provisional sense true for us. Although we wait for redemption's full actualization, glimpses come to be of a renewed humanity who allows the whole of its being to be referred to Christ and his substitutionary role.

52 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly," in *God*, 63.

53 Ibid., 64.

54 Torrance, "Atonement," in *Universalism*, 252.

55 Torrance, "Cheap and Costly," in *God*, 63.

56 Torrance, "Atonement," in *Universalism*, 254.