

## **EXTENDING THE SACRAMENTS TO CHILDREN: Insights from the Theology of T. F. Torrance**

**Sandra Fach Brower, PhD**  
**Faculty Lecturer, Cliff College**  
**Calver, Derbyshire, UK**  
*s.brower@cliffcollege.ac.uk*

**Abstract:** *This article explores T. F. Torrance's theology of the sacraments as it relates to the ecclesiological question of the inclusion of children in the worshipping community. Part I defines worship dialogically with reference to the person and work of Christ. The sacraments provide the context to discuss humanity's participation in the dialogue in Trinitarian terms. Part II considers the implications with respect to questions regarding a child's faith and knowledge. In conclusion, the article proposes how Torrance might answer the pastoral concerns outlined at the outset, and suggests further questions that might be asked in the desire to be inclusive with integrity.*

### **The Context**

In the present UK context, it is not uncommon to have a full church on the occasion of a christening for a local family. Those who champion the theological soundness of infant baptism may be uneasy with its practice as a cultural phenomenon. Part of the unease rests in the realization that many such families do not come back. Despite the baptismal vows they make on behalf of their children, the parents do not intend to be regularly involved in any church community.<sup>1</sup>

The situation presents some obvious pastoral concerns. Does the church have a responsibility or duty of care to gauge parents' and godparents' commitment to the promises they will be asked to make, promises to pray for their children

---

1 For a recent discussion of this issue, see David F. Wright's Didsbury Lectures 2003, *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism: An Enquiry at the end of Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005).



and draw them by example into the community of faith? In the absence of family involvement, how does a church support and help a family to uphold vows to nurture the child's faith – vows that both the family *and* the church make?

Perhaps less obvious are the questions relating to the relationship between the sacraments, or those pertaining to the nurture of children who *are* regularly involved in their worshipping community. In many churches, young children are not permitted to participate fully in the Eucharist. Is there a disconnect here, in making one sacrament readily available to any child, but withholding another sacrament? Does or should it make a difference if the child is a fully participant member in her or his church community? What role do or should the sacraments play in the nurture of a child's faith? How might a church work through these and other related issues in a way that is both inclusive and integrous?

T. F. Torrance's theology was firmly rooted in his pastoral heart and ministry.<sup>2</sup> This article seeks to find resources in the theology of the Torrances,<sup>3</sup> though particularly from T. F., to begin to answer these concerns. It draws on the Torrances' doctrine of Trinitarian worship to help foster a theologically sound vision of children's participation in worship. And it asks if T. F.'s belief that the Church is the place where all barriers are abolished holds promise for the inclusion of children with respect to the sacraments.<sup>4</sup>

The broader context of this discussion is the theology of worship and the dynamic between God's action and humanity's response. It is written from a Wesleyan perspective that is suspicious of any theology that seems not to have adequate room for human response, yet also wary of worship that – in the phrase often repeated by the Torrances – “throws us back on ourselves”. In the Torrances, one finds a remedy that allays both fears. It is articulated in another oft-used expression: our part is a “response to the Response”.

---

2 As Anderson argues, “despite the often rather obscure syntax and concepts in his writing, the theology of Thomas Torrance was deeply rooted in the church, its ministry and its mission in the world,” Ray S. Anderson, “The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance,” *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, Vol 1 (2009): 49. See also Thomas Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, ed. Jock Stein (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), particularly the first chapter on Torrance's parish ministry where Torrance speaks of the power of the Gospel in the lives of his parishioners.

3 When making reference to “Torrance” throughout this article, I am referring to T. F. Torrance; otherwise I will include first names.

4 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 360.

## **Part I. The Theology Underlying Torrance's Doctrine of the Sacraments**

### **How Shall We Worship?**

In recent years, worship renewal has captured imaginations within and across traditions and denominations. Listening to others has resulted in enriching cross-fertilization. The desire to put worship back in the hands of the people has reclaimed the meaning of liturgy and helped to affirm the dialogical nature of worship.<sup>5</sup> Worship is more than Godward activity in which the people of God extol and praise him. Rather the "work" is a response, one that follows God's initiative and invitation. The pattern of communal worship mirrors the pattern of God's economic activity in his creation: God speaks and creation answers in what becomes a relational song, complete with its dissonance and resolution. We can speak of this dialogue in terms of a humanward (God to humankind) and a Godward (humankind to God) movement.

This affirmation of dialogue is healthy. In any conversation, it is frustrating when one person can never get a word in, or answers without listening to what another has said.<sup>6</sup> If God's eternal purpose is to draw humanity into the communion that he is in his very being, and if worship shapes the community of faith – the *ecclesia* – it makes sense for worship to be relational in its expression. How, then, can we articulate a theology of worship that at once embraces humanity's part in the conversation, yet does not engender a weariness that results from, as the Torrances say, "being thrown back on ourselves"?

The Torrances argue that much worship does engender weariness. In his book, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, James Torrance<sup>7</sup> argues that the most common and widespread view of worship is that it is something that "we" do. Jesus taught us and gave us an example of how to do it. God's grace is needed to help us in our efforts, but it is, essentially, what we do before God:

---

5 See, for example, Robert Webber, *Worship is a Verb: Eight Principles for Transforming Worship* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996). Or David Peterson, *Engaging with God: A Biblical Theology of Worship* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992).

6 It is worth noting that this is different from not liking what someone may have to say to you. Corporate worship is not only the opportunity to praise God and receive assurance; it can also be the time when we are challenged, even to our discomfort. Indeed, if the Psalms are anything to go by, it is also when we may cry out to God in anger or despair.

7 I am referencing James Torrance here because of the clear way he outlines different views and corresponding models of worship in his Didsbury Lectures – particularly the Unitarian view and its corresponding existential model; however, T. F.'s affirmation of Trinitarian worship is equally strong and runs throughout the corpus of his work.

"We go to church, we sing our psalms and hymns to God, we intercede for the world, we listen to the sermon (too often simply an exhortation), we offer our money, time and talents to God."<sup>8</sup> This view, he argues, is Unitarian because it has no doctrine of the mediation of Christ and no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

James Torrance calls this the existential, present-day experience model where faith means contemporary immediacy. While Christians believe that their experience is grounded in what happened two thousand years ago, it is *their* experience that is now central. The fundamental flaw of this model is that it separates Christ's work from his person:

Stressing the work of Christ at the expense of his person, can reduce the gospel to 'events' with no ontology (separate act and being) and make our religious experience of grace central. As Bonhoeffer saw, we are then more interested in the blessings of Christ than Jesus Christ himself. It is a failure not to recognize that salvation is not simply through the work of Christ (*per Christum*) but primarily given to us in his person (*in Christo*).<sup>9</sup>

This model emphasizes *our* faith, *our* decision, and *our* response in a way that "short-circuits the vicarious humanity of Christ and belittles union with Christ."<sup>10</sup> It is, he argues, an exhausting model to inhabit because instead of proclaiming a gospel of grace, it throws Christians back on themselves to make an appropriate response to God.<sup>11</sup>

Speaking in terms of the movements of worship, the problem occurs when what God does is understood solely in terms of the humanward movement, which leaves the Godward movement entirely in our hands to make. God speaks, and we are left to figure out and make the adequate response.

### **The Sacraments: What *We* Do or What *God* Does?**

How does this relate to the sacraments? Different sacramental practices often indicate a belief as to who is central in the conversation. Advocating infant baptism often indicates a belief that baptism is primarily about what God is doing in initiating someone into the community of faith. Favoring believer's baptism<sup>12</sup>

---

8 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 7.

9 Ibid., 16.

10 Ibid., 18.

11 Ibid., 7, 18.

12 Here I am thinking particularly of those who advocate believer's baptism *in opposition*

usually indicates the view that baptism is primarily an affirmation of faith; that is, a response to what God has already done, or a personal testimony of one's faith.

Torrance strongly affirms that the sacraments are about what *God* is doing, not what we are doing. He distances himself from any understanding of baptism as a subjective affirmation of faith. In this, he could not be clearer. He makes the point both with reference to the Church, who baptizes, and the one being baptized:

While baptism is both the act of Christ and the act of the Church in his Name, it is to be understood finally not in terms of what the Church does but in terms of what God in Christ has done, does, and will do for us in the Spirit. Its meaning does not lie in the rite itself and its performance, *nor in the attitude of the baptized and his obedience of faith*.<sup>13</sup>

As an ordinance, then, baptism sets forth not what we do, nor primarily what the Church does to us, but what God has already done in Christ, and through His Spirit continues to do in and to us. . . . Our part is only to receive it.<sup>14</sup>

Baptism is thus not a sacrament of what we do but of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, in whom he has bound himself to us and bound us to himself, *before we could respond to him*.<sup>15</sup>

The same emphasis is clear in Torrance's theology of the Eucharist. It is both the act of Christ and the act of the Church in his name, but the latter serves the former:<sup>16</sup> "The Eucharist is not to be regarded as [an] independent act on our part in response to what God has already done for us in Christ."<sup>17</sup>

How does this relate to the movements of worship? It may seem that infant baptism corresponds primarily to the humanward movement and believer's baptism corresponds primarily to the Godward movement. Framed that way, it looks like an option of one movement or the other. It may, therefore, seem

---

to infant baptism. It is possible to affirm both. For example, someone who affirms the soundness of infant baptism must nevertheless allow for and affirm the baptism of adults for whom there was no opportunity to be baptized as infants.

13 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 84. Emphasis mine.

14 Ibid., 87-8.

15 Ibid., 103. Emphasis mine. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, Volume II* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), 123. (Hereafter referred to as C&A, II.)

16 Torrance, *Reconciliation*, 107.

17 Ibid., 109.

that in arguing that the sacraments are about what *God* is doing, Torrance is not interested in articulating them in the context of worship that is dialogical in nature. Yet when his understanding of the sacraments is viewed in the context of his larger theological program, we see that framing the issue in this way is too simplistic – particularly as it relates to what God is doing.

### **A Mediated Response – Christ, the Objective Ground**

It would be a mistake to read Torrance’s argument as a rejection of dialogue. Far from it. The belief that the sacraments are primarily about what *God* does is not one that excludes the necessity of human response – the musical answer to the melody. Torrance is *not* arguing for a humanward action without its Godward counterpart. When Torrance speaks about what God is doing, he is referring to his *saving* action. In the context of a discussion on the Eucharist, he states:

But this saving work is not simply a mighty act of God done upon us. In order to fulfil its end in restoring human being to proper sonship in the image of God it has to be translated into terms of human life and activity. Hence the Son of God came not simply to act *in* a man but *as man*. . . . Both this manward and this Godward movement in the saving work of Christ are essential, for neither is what it is without the other. . . . The saving reality with which we are concerned here is the two-fold but indivisible activity of God, of God as God upon man and of God as man towards himself, the movement of saving love which is at once from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, and to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

The Godward response of faith *is* therefore essential. But it is one that *Christ* makes, in which *our* part is articulated as participation. Torrance’s theology of the sacraments is firmly rooted in their *objective* ground – Christ.<sup>19</sup>

In his discussion of Torrance’s doctrine of the Church, Kye Won Lee states: “What is of primary importance [for Torrance] is not ecclesiology, but Christology.”<sup>20</sup> The objective ground of Christ is the central recurring theme in Torrance’s oeuvre. It undergirds every argument and ensures that we do not separate Christ’s work from his person. This prevents us from conceiving a “benefit of Christ” that

---

18 Ibid., 117-18.

19 As Alexis Torrance notes, “all subjective readings [of baptism] are viewed, it appears, with the utmost suspicion.” See “The Theology of Baptism in T. F. Torrance and its Ascetic Correlate in St. Mark the Monk,” *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship* Vol 4 (2013): 152.

20 Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 227.

can be abstracted from him.<sup>21</sup> For Torrance, discussions about the Church focus not on the *Church* itself, but Christ. Discussions about union with Christ focus not on the *union* itself, but Christ. And likewise with the sacraments. In both baptism and the Eucharist, the focus is not the *rite*, but Christ. Why? Because, as Torrance repeatedly argues, none of these things have any meaning or, indeed reality, apart from Christ who objectively grounds them.<sup>22</sup>

Each of these – the Church, union, baptism, Eucharist – has to do with humanity’s relationship with God through Christ by the Spirit. They relate to God’s economy – his interaction with his creation. The key, for Torrance, is that there can be no interaction apart from Christ. This also means that there can never be any meaningful talk about such interaction apart from Christ. Torrance articulates this most thoroughly in the context of the vicarious humanity of Christ, a doctrine that undergirds every other doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Movements of Worship in Christ**

Central in Torrance’s theology as a whole is the theme of the two inseparable movements within the person of Christ the Mediator. These movements relate to the humanward and Godward movements of worship. The key, for Torrance, is that *both movements are fulfilled in Christ*. Because he is both divine and human, he is both the Word of God to humanity and humanity’s response to God. Our understanding of the dialogue at the heart of worship is analogous to our understanding of the hypostatic union. In Christ, we are not confronted by two realities – a divine and a human – joined or combined together but by the “one Reality who confronts us as he who is both God and man”: God *as* man, not God *in* man.<sup>24</sup> So too, then, the movements of worship are distinct, but inseparably one in Christ.

---

21 Essentially, this is the flaw of the existential model of worship – Christians believe heartily in a gospel of grace, but they understand it in terms of an event (cross/resurrection) that took place in the past. It is relevant as a past, finished work to which they can respond in the present.

22 One could substitute “ontologically” for “objectively.” For Torrance, “terms like ‘realist,’ ‘unitary,’ ‘ontological,’ ‘objective,’ ‘rational,’ ‘personal,’ ‘organic’ and ‘scientific’ are nearly synonymous and used interchangeably.” Lee, 296.

23 It even undergirds those doctrines that do not speak of God’s relation with us. Our knowledge of the immanent Trinity is through the economic Trinity. We come to know who God is – not just in relation to us, but in his own self – through Christ, the one who reveals God to us. This does not mean the immanent Trinity is reduced to the economic, but simply that “God is not other than he is in the history of Jesus Christ,” Paul D. Molnar, “The Centrality of the Trinity in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance,” *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, Vol 1 (2009): 87.

24 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 56.

It is from this that Torrance argues vehemently against any doctrine that separates being (person) and act (event). The movements of worship do not just take place in the action of Christ, but in his very being. Or, to put it more strongly, they take place in the action of Christ *because* they take place in Christ himself. Christ's saving action is the working out of his person in the context of the Incarnation: "What he does is not separate from his personal Being and what he is in his own incarnate Person *is* the mighty Act of God's love for our salvation."<sup>25</sup> The hypostatic union that occurs in the Incarnation is, at once, a reconciling union because Christ assumes fallen humanity. For Torrance, then, incarnation and atonement are inseparably related: "This is a union which is projected, as it were, into the actual conditions of our estranged humanity where we are in conflict with God, so that the hypostatic union operates as a reconciling union in which estrangement is bridged, conflict eradicated, and human nature taken from us is brought into perfect sanctifying union with divine nature in Jesus Christ."<sup>26</sup>

The life that Christ lives in the Spirit is a sanctifying life which perfects human life in and through living it. Because he sanctifies the life that he assumes, his life is one of continuous reconciliation worked out through daily obedience to the Father. For Torrance, this is about both person and act: the one who is consubstantial with the Father lives out this unity *as a human*. This unity is revealed as obedience through the power of the Spirit, the same Spirit who makes the Father and Son one in being *and* will.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this union does not come to an end; Jesus – in his bodily, human ascension – takes our perfected humanity to the right hand of the Father where he continues to be our Intercessor and Advocate.<sup>28</sup>

This Godward movement of obedience is a "yes" to the will of the Father. Because it is worked out in the context of humanity that has said "no," the atonement has both a retrospective and a prospective side. It at once saves humanity *from* sin (retrospective) and also saves humanity *to* life (prospective).

---

25 Ibid., 63.

26 Ibid., 65.

27 For Torrance's indebtedness to Irenaeus of Lyons, see Matthew Baker, "The Place of St. Irenaeus of Lyons in Historical and Dogmatic Theology According to Thomas F. Torrance," *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, Vol 2 (2010): 21ff. Baker states: "Torrance's notion of the vicarious humanity of Christ [...] must be regarded as a major restatement of the Irenaeian doctrine of recapitulation," 42. Particularly interesting is Baker's reference to Irenaeus' emphasis on the fact that Christ sanctified "every age," 31-2.

28 Torrance, *Mediation*, 73.

This is life in all its fullness, or the “yes” which is life in communion with God.<sup>29</sup>

The doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ, therefore, informs Torrance’s theology of worship, and particularly, the sacraments. As Anderson states, “the whole of Christ’s life of obedience, prayer and worship thus becomes the objective and ontological basis for the Christian’s life of faith. The church, as the body of Christ, participates in Christ’s on-going ministry of revelation and reconciliation.”<sup>30</sup> When we speak of the dialogue of worship, we understand that the Godward movement of response has already been given in and made by Christ. *Our* part is therefore a response to *the* Response, or – as Torrance often frames it – our “liturgical Amen” to what God has done for us in Christ through the Spirit. He states: “As the real text of God’s Word addressed to us, Jesus is also the real text of our address to God. We have no speech or language with which to address God but the speech and language called Jesus Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Against Dualism: Mediated Movement in the Context of the Sacraments**

Those familiar with Torrance know that he dedicates much of his theological program to undoing the damage done by dualistic thinking. There is a proper duality when thinking of God and creation – they are distinct; one is not the other.<sup>32</sup> Dualism, however, is the view that because of this proper distinction, there can be no direct relation between them. Dualism holds that because God *qua* God cannot engage directly with creation, and creation *qua* creation cannot engage directly with God, the Incarnation is an impossibility. Christ can only be human, so the best we can hope for is that he is the ideal human who can be our example. Or Christ can only be divine, so although he may seem a lot like us he does not share our humanity in any real or complete way; the best we can hope for is that he has some answers. In the first, the problem is that we do not have the capacity to follow. In the second, we may have answers, but from someone who does not and indeed *cannot* know the problem.

Only an account of the Incarnation in which Christ is both our substitute and our

---

29 Here Torrance is indebted to John McLeod Campbell’s articulation of the retrospective and prospective aspects of salvation. See, for example, John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, reprint ed. 1996).

30 Anderson, 58.

31 Torrance, *Mediation*, 78-9.

32 Torrance is as clear in his affirmation of a proper duality as he is in his rejection of radical dualism. See Robert J. Stamps, *The Sacrament of the Word Made Flesh: The Eucharistic Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2007), 30ff.

representative – neither to the exclusion of the other – can counteract a dualistic framework.<sup>33</sup> If the atonement is a pure act of God without our incorporation, Christ is only our substitute; the atonement remains external to us. If, in Christ, *God* is not acting, then Christ can only be a representative, giving us an example to follow. Torrance considers the hypotheticals. If Jesus is not Mediator but only a created intermediary, then he cannot forgive sins. His words of forgiveness would simply be “a kindly sentiment.” And any answer to the question, “Is God really like Jesus?” would only be a guess. Furthermore, if the love of God falls short of becoming one with us, “we are left with a dark inscrutable Deity behind the back of Jesus Christ of whom we can only be terrified.”<sup>34</sup> In the final analysis, Jesus’ relationship with God can only be defined in moral terms, and as followers of his example, the Church is nothing more than a group gathering to engage with socio-ethical issues.<sup>35</sup>

In the context of the sacraments, Torrance discusses this in terms of the relationship between the Gift and the Giver, or the Offering and the Offerer. Dualism results in the Gift being detached from the Giver; there can be no *self-giving* of God in Jesus. Likewise, the Offering is detached from the Offerer; there can be no *unique* or *vicarious* offering, but only an exemplary form of our own. In both cases we are “thrown back upon ourselves” as both “receivers over against the Giver” or as effectors of our own “Pelagian” mediation.<sup>36</sup>

It is, Torrance argues, a dualistic understanding of the relation between God and the world that has deeply affected the understanding of the sacraments in the Western Church. This is evident, for example, in traditions where:

. . . the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice are essentially symbolic and spiritual pointing to heavenly realities beyond, which demand of us liturgical response on earth, and of interpretations of the real presence and the eucharistic sacrifice in terms of the once for all self-offering of Christ on the Cross and in the Ascension calling mainly for *ethical acts on our part as the appropriate mode of response here and now*.<sup>37</sup>

Torrance sums it up thus: “Whenever the Eucharist has been set within a dualist context, whether that be Augustinian-Neoplatonic, Augustinian-Aristotelian or Augustinian-Newtonian, its meaning tends to be found either in the *rite itself and*

---

33 Ibid., 105ff.

34 Torrance, *Mediation*, 57-9.

35 Ibid., 61-2. See also 71.

36 Torrance, *Reconciliation*, 131-4.

37 Ibid., 129.

*its performance or the inward and moral experience of the participant.*"<sup>38</sup>

Particularly interesting is the historical development in the Church's worship in reaction to Arianism. In an effort to reaffirm Christ's divinity, the emphasis on his humanity was lost. The Church's liturgy reflected the development, which Graham Redding helpfully summarizes:<sup>39</sup>

While these liturgical changes were perfectly understandable under the circumstances, they had a most unfortunate and unforeseen effect...As the mediatorship and humanity of Christ faded into the background and Christ was thrust up into the majesty and grandeur of the Godhead, a gap emerged and came to yawn large in Christian thinking between the eternal God and sinful humanity. The worshipper was confronted immediately with the overwhelming majesty of the triune God. 'Stress was now placed not on what unites us to God (Christ as one of us in his human nature, Christ as our brother), but on what separates us from God (God's infinite majesty).'<sup>40</sup>

The point of interest is that whichever nature – either humanity or divinity – a Christology marginalizes or excludes because of an underlying dualism, worshippers end up in a similar place: having to make their own response.

The view that the sacraments are primarily about what *we* do may affirm a role for humanity in the dialogue of worship. Nevertheless, it is misguided because its underlying theology does not, in fact, *allow* engagement. The converse of God not coming near to us in Christ (the effect of dualism) means that he remains *distant* and we cannot come near to him. Worship, then, is not about relationship; it is reduced to subjective morality or experience, or worship in *fear*, not in the Spirit.

### **Trinitarian Worship: "How Shall We Worship?" Revisited**

This brings us back to the heart of the issue. Torrance's articulation of the vicarious humanity of Christ lays the groundwork for a meaningful understanding of worship as participation. It is not unusual to read Torrance and ask, "what then of the *response* to the Response?" One will search in vain for an articulation

---

38 Ibid., 131. Emphasis mine.

39 The change in the liturgy is charted extensively by Joseph Jungmann in his influential work, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, trans. A. Peeler, Second English ed. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989). Torrance is indebted to this work in his essay, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," in *Reconciliation*, 139-214.

40 Graham Redding, *Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ in the Reformed Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 20. Cf. Jungmann, 251.

of the small "r" response that is not ontologically rooted in Christ.<sup>41</sup> Regarding the two-way movement of worship, Lee states: "This whole movement has been finally accomplished in Jesus Christ. *If we misunderstand this, all will collapse in Torrance's theology.*"<sup>42</sup> Lee believes the "I-yet-not-I-but-Christ" of Galatians 2:20 captures the essence of Torrance's theology; it is his "linchpin."<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, Torrance *does* speak of the "subjective actualization" of the upward movement in humanity which he locates in the gift of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup> Torrance always articulates both movements of worship in a Trinitarian way: from the Father to us through Christ by the Spirit, and to the Father from us through Christ by the Spirit. Against those who criticize him for an overemphasis on Christology to the neglect of pneumatology, Lee states: "The Spirit is the hero behind the curtain of Torrance's theological stage."<sup>45</sup> The Spirit "actualizes" our union with Christ; without the Spirit, there would be no Christ *for* us:

The 'objective' union which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself is 'subjectively' actualized in us through his indwelling Spirit, 'we in Christ' and 'Christ in us' thus complementing and interpenetrating each other. In other words, there takes place a relation of mutual indwelling between Christ and the Church which derives from and is grounded in the mutual indwelling of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Holy Trinity.<sup>46</sup>

The key for Torrance is that the small "r" response, or our "Amen" to the worship of Christ, does not *add* anything; it is not something "new."<sup>47</sup> Union with Christ

---

41 One could indeed describe Torrance's theological program as a project dedicated to rooting out any hint or whisper of Pelagianism.

42 Lee, 308. Emphasis mine.

43 Ibid., 218, 301.

44 Torrance, *Atonement*, 368. It is important to note here that Christ, in his vicarious humanity, *also* receives the gift of the Spirit. The means of our participation (by the Spirit) is such because it is first the way for Christ. Here also is an example of how the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity. See Torrance, *Mediation*, 54ff.

45 Lee, 316. See also Stamps: "The interjection of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit at any point in Torrance's theology always introduces with it the idea of participation," 116.

46 Torrance, *Mediation*, 66-7.

47 Torrance articulates this in his ecclesiology by arguing that the Church is not an extension of the Incarnation; it never substitutes for Christ. See Torrance, *C&A, II*, 83; *Atonement*, 369; Lee, 227ff. Torrance states: "Incorporation into Christ can be regarded on the one hand as the subjective actualization in us through the Spirit of the objective revelation and reconciliation fulfilled in the incarnation and the atonement. *Yet this is not something in addition to the finished work of Christ*, but rather that same work effectively operative in the church," *Atonement*, 368 (emphasis mine). He reiterates this in terms

is never articulated in terms of “identity,” but “sharing,” or being drawn up into something that has already and is already taking place.<sup>48</sup> Stamps summarizes it well:

The Eucharist [as] a ‘response to the Response’ of Christ can . . . be more deeply understood, not just as our response to something spiritually observed or overheard, not merely as our liturgical attempt to reply to Christ’s worship, but rather as a response in the form of actual participation by the Spirit in Christ’s response for us, or ‘a response *within* a response’. Gathered by the Spirit within that perfect response of Christ, then, the Church is given to share in a worship which transcends all her natural capacities.<sup>49</sup>

This is a vision of Trinitarian worship. James Torrance articulates it in contrast to the bankrupt Unitarian view and its corresponding existential/experiential model of worship. Trinitarian worship offers an understanding of our response in terms of *participation* in what has already been done and is being done on our behalf:

[Trinitarian] worship is . . . our participation through the Spirit in the Son’s communion with the Father, in *his* vicarious life of worship and intercession. It is our response to our Father for all that he has done for us in Christ. . . . The real *agent* in all true worship is Jesus Christ. He is our great High Priest and ascended Lord, *the one true worshipper* who unites us to himself by the Spirit in an act of memory and in a life of communion, as he lifts us up by word and sacrament into the very triune life of God.<sup>50</sup>

For the Torrances, worship is a gift: “God our Father in the gift of his Son and the gift of the Spirit, gives us what he demands – the worship of our hearts and minds. He lifts us up out of ourselves to participate in the very life and communion of the Godhead, that life of communion for which we were created.”<sup>51</sup> Worship, then, is not just an expression of that relationship but is, itself, ontological.

---

of regeneration, which is the effect of Christ’s birth and resurrection upon us, “yet not effect in the sense of a different and subsequent event. Our regeneration has already taken place and is fully enclosed in the birth and resurrection of Christ, and proceeds from them more by way of manifestation of what has already happened than a new effect resulting from them.” This is sacramentally enacted in baptism, which is the sign and seal of regeneration. See Torrance, *C&A, II*, 131.

48 Lee, 206. Note, also, that this sharing is never articulated as synergy.

49 Stamps, 129.

50 James Torrance, *Worship*, 3, 5. Emphasis mine.

51 *Ibid.*, 9.

### **The Place of the Sacraments in "Subjective Actualization"**

In Jesus we have the "final response of man toward God" and the "covenanted way of vicarious response to God which avails for all of us and in which we may all share through the Spirit of Jesus Christ which he freely gives us."<sup>52</sup> The sacraments are about incorporation into this reality.<sup>53</sup> The sacraments are signs, but only if by "sign" we mean "essentially event," for the sacraments are "the worldly form which the Christ-event assumes in action, the point at which Revelation embodies itself actively in history."<sup>54</sup>

Baptism incorporates us into the once-for-all nature of the Christ-event; in the Eucharist, we are upheld by the continual, enduring nature of this event. Torrance is adamant that these are inseparably related. In this way they are analogous to the two-way movement of the hypostatic union. He speaks of "two essential 'moments' in the one whole relation of the Church to Christ, one 'moment' speaking of the once and for all participation in what Christ has once and for all done, and the other 'moment' speaking of our continual renewal in that perfected reality in Christ Jesus."<sup>55</sup>

Torrance locates the reason for two sacraments in his doctrine of eschatology. The time between the ascension and Christ's final advent creates an "eschatological suspension," a time for decision, faith, and repentance: "That is why we have two Sacraments; one which seals His once-and-for-all work of salvation, and one which continually seals our renewal in that finished work and gives us to participate in its effective operation until He comes again in power and glory."<sup>56</sup> The in-between time is the age of grace – time allowing for *all* to respond to the Gospel.<sup>57</sup>

Just as the Church is not an extension of the Incarnation and does not add anything to Christ, there are not many baptisms but *one* baptism, "wrought out in Christ alone" and "bestowed upon the Church as it is yoked together with Him through the Baptism of the Spirit."<sup>58</sup> As Baker states, quoting Torrance, "baptism and the Christian life are . . . an active participation in the baptism and obedience of Christ, in whose humanity 'all the promises of God are Yes and Amen' – a vicarious Amen which, *as infant baptism especially testifies,*

52 Torrance, *Mediation*, 78.

53 See Stamps, 27 and – for a comprehensive treatment – 111ff and 143ff.

54 Torrance, *C&A, II*, 161.

55 *Ibid.*, 92. See also 156, 164.

56 *Ibid.*, 146. See also 155ff.

57 *Ibid.*, 160.

58 *Ibid.*, 115.

precedes and enfolds our own."<sup>59</sup> But just as Christ's obedience was worked out in the context of his life – in daily conformity of his will to the will of the Father, so it is in the life of the Christian. Torrance relates this to the Eucharist: "At Holy Communion we think of [new life in Christ] not only as a *datum* once and for all, but as a *dandum* which must be given anew, day by day, in the condition of our fallen world."<sup>60</sup>

Torrance's doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ shows that the once-for-all into which we are incorporated in baptism is the act of God towards us that includes our response. Therefore, baptism must be aligned to the two movements inseparably related. Where we are concerned, however, the Eucharist does align most directly with the upward movement of response. Christ, of course, is Gift and Giver, Offerer and Offering. In the Eucharist the humanward movement is reflected in the "broken for you" and "shed for you".<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless:

In so far as we are concerned with the Eucharist in which we 'do this in *anamnesis*' of Christ, it is the Godward aspect that is prominent in it, that is, our participation through the Spirit in the self-consecration and self-offering of the whole Christ, body, soul and mind, to the Father in atoning reconciliation for our sakes.<sup>62</sup>

This section has attempted to articulate Torrance's theology of the sacraments in the wider context of his overall theology. With particular reference to the vicarious humanity of Christ, it has sought to articulate the two movements of worship defined at the outset – the humanward movement of God towards humanity, and the Godward movement of humanity towards God. This has supported a Trinitarian understanding of worship, where humanity's role is understood as *participation*, a participation rooted in the Church's sacraments.<sup>63</sup> We turn now to the implications of this for the question of the inclusion of children in the worshipping community.

---

59 Baker, 32-3. Emphasis mine.

60 Torrance, *C&A, II*, 164.

61 *Ibid.*, 145.

62 Torrance, *Reconciliation*, 117-8.

63 It should be noted that there is both a sacramental and a *non*-sacramental participation envisioned in the Christian life. As Stamps argues, sacramental union is understood as an expression of a "more comprehensive faith relation, as part of it, *but not a part that can ever be separated from it*," 130. Emphasis mine.

## **Part II. Implications for Issues Related to the Inclusion of Children in the Sacraments**

### **The Cruc: Accountability**

There are a number of voiced concerns regarding the inclusion of children in the sacraments, two of which are considered here. First, is it possible for a child to profess faith? Second, is it possible for a child to have an adequate understanding or to know what is going on? Even when allowance is made for maturing in faith, there remains a desire for children to have a faith or understanding that can genuinely be articulated as their own.<sup>64</sup>

The crux is *accountability*. An infant – it is argued – cannot profess her/his own faith because s/he has not reached the age of accountability. Infant baptism is therefore problematic if faith is a pre-requisite. Similarly with participation in the Eucharist: in many traditions children must be prepared before they can receive their First Communion. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, Canon Law states that a child must first participate in sacramental confession

---

64 It should be noted that there is not always consistency within traditions or denominations in applying this rationale to both sacraments. There are traditions where infant baptism is practiced but participation in the Eucharist is delayed. And there are those where infant baptism is discouraged or not practiced and yet participation in the Eucharist is allowed. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss in depth the various practices of particular traditions or denominations, except to offer a few brief observations.

First, in some cases where infant baptism is practiced but Eucharist delayed, the aforementioned concern is still present in the sense that participation in the Eucharist can mark the affirmation of one's personal faith. That is to say, those who are baptized as infants can – in preparing for and taking First Communion – give witness to the fact that the faith in which they were baptized is now their own. (This is made explicit in traditions that have Confirmation as the usual step before participation in the Eucharist. Arguably, believer's baptism serves the function of Confirmation in those traditions who do not have the latter.)

Second, many who allow participation in the Eucharist before baptism (at least in theory, if not always in practice) tend to be within low church traditions with a corresponding low view of the sacraments. Such practice is arguably an expression or outworking of ecclesiology: membership within the body is neither a sacramental nor an ontological question. Or, to put it in another way, because the sacraments are not about ontology, they are not intrinsic to membership within the community. Because of this, there are no grounds – ontologically – to bar children from the Eucharist, or 'communion' as it is often referred to in such traditions. Baptism is not a pre-requisite. In other words, *because* neither is ontological in nature, there is no inconsistency in offering communion to those not already baptized. Interestingly, those churches who do not advocate infant baptism will often allow for infant dedication because the latter is about the parents' faith and intention to bring up the child as a Christian, allowing for a subsequent event – believer's baptism – which can be an expression of the child's own faith.

before receiving Holy Communion: "The administration of the Most Holy Eucharist to children requires that they have *sufficient knowledge and careful preparation so that they understand* the mystery of Christ according to their capacity and *are able to receive the body of Christ with faith and devotion.*"<sup>65</sup> And:

It is primarily the duty of parents and those who take the place of parents, as well as the duty of pastors, to take care that children *who have reached the use of reason* are prepared properly and, *after they have made sacramental confession*, are refreshed with this divine food as soon as possible. It is for the pastor to exercise vigilance so that children who have not attained the use of reason or whom he judges are not sufficiently disposed do not approach Holy Communion.<sup>66</sup>

This appears to allow for various levels of maturity. Nevertheless, there remains a belief that there is not sufficient capacity before the "use of reason." Generally, the age of accountability is seven. It can be later, but those under seven are not bound by merely ecclesiastical laws.<sup>67</sup>

In the Church of England, there is now dispensation to offer children communion before Confirmation, with agreed guidelines issued by the House of Bishops. The fourth guideline reads:

There is a question of regarding the age at which children may be admitted to Holy Communion. In general the time of the first receiving should be determined not so much by the child's chronological age as by *his or her appreciation of the significance of the sacrament*. Subject to the bishop's direction, it is appropriate for the decision to be made by the parish priest after consultation with the parents of those who are responsible for the child's formation, with the parents' goodwill. *An appropriate and serious pattern of preparation should be followed*. The priest and parents share in continuing to educate the child in the significance of Holy Communion so that (s)he gains in understanding with increasing maturity.<sup>68</sup>

There is no set age, though in general practice the age is eight.

Even with the allowance of "according to their capacity" and the idea that understanding is dynamic ("increasing maturity"), the underlying epistemology

---

65 Code of Canon Law, c. 913 §1 in *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition* (Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983). Emphasis mine. (Further citations referred to as *CIC*.)

66 *CIC*, 914. Emphasis mine.

67 See *CIC*, 11.

68 For the full text follow the link at <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/39890/gs1576.rtf>. Emphasis mine.

that sets the criterion is the ability to in some measure reason or understand what is going on.<sup>69</sup> The aspect of *moral* accountability is certainly central in the RC Church, where preparation includes confession. In both, however, the stress is on the faith of the child, which is a pre-requisite for participation.

In traditions that support infant baptism, this begs the question as to why the age of accountability is required for one sacrament but not another, and why the grounds that would allow for infant baptism do not also extend to participation in the Eucharist.<sup>70</sup> It is a positive step when churches move towards greater inclusion of children. In the Anglican Church, for example, the possibility of giving communion to children prior to Confirmation is one such step.<sup>71</sup> Yet the rationale for setting an age restriction or guideline linked to "accountability" does not have adequate *theological* grounding. In the final analysis, the various rationales are expressions of "throwing us back on ourselves."

Torrance traces this emphasis on the subjective aspect of faith to Tertullian. Together with a modernist understanding of knowledge, this fits closely with the experiential model of worship, particularly the reference to infant baptism:

Tertullian tended to think of salvation as saving discipline in which the healing processes of divine grace and the penitential merit of men cooperate to effect man's cleansing and renewal. Tertullian certainly expounded baptism as concerned with the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and spoke of it in Pauline terms as a new birth, but all this was given a psychological turn. Even when he spoke of the once-for-all objective realities of our faith in Christ, it is the subjective aspect of faith that commanded his main interest. Thus his emphasis came to be laid finally, not on the objective act of God in the Incarnation, but upon the candidate's response, and not upon the divine promise so much as upon the vows of the baptized, i.e., how he interpreted *sacramentum*. The grace of God in baptism completes the preparatory discipline of repentance and seals the *pactum fidei*. Thus the stress is laid by Tertullian on what *man* does and upon the awful responsibility that devolves on him in baptism, the *pondus baptismi*. It was on that ground, of course, that Tertullian once advised postponing the baptism of infants until they were able to *shoulder*

---

69 Torrance *does* affirm an intellectual element of belief, but argues that this aspect of faith in the biblical context "is grounded upon the basic fact of the faithfulness of God and falls with the determination of man's obedient and faithful response to the covenant-mercies of God," *C&A, II, 74*.

70 See above, note 64.

71 Again, there is no set age for this, but the general rule is not before the age of 10. Again the criterion is "if they are old enough to answer responsibly for themselves" with the minimum age usually set by the diocesan bishop. See: <https://www.churchofengland.org/our-faith/confirmation/frequently-asked-questions.aspx#age>.

*the burden* of it and attain the sound faith necessary for salvation. It was surely this anthropocentric tendency that opened up the way for the rise of Donatism.<sup>72</sup>

### **Room for Faith?**

Torrance's strong emphasis on the objective ground of faith and its primacy over its subjective aspect can, admittedly, lead one to ask: "Is there any room for me?"<sup>73</sup> But, as the previous section has sought to show, it is *not* that faith is unimportant to Torrance. He is not a universalist; there is definitely room for the response to the Response: "We are accustomed to think of faith as something we have or as an act in which we engage, and of believing as our activity. *And that of course would be right*, not least in view of the summons of the Gospel to repent and believe, that we may be saved, or of the words of our Lord when he said to people that their faith had saved them or chided others for their lack of faith."<sup>74</sup>

For Torrance, faith includes knowledge and understanding; relationship with God is about and involves all aspects of our creaturehood, including our mind.<sup>75</sup> Yet it is a particular *understanding* of faith that he argues against: "But we would be misconstruing that if we thought of faith or belief as an autonomous, independent act which we do from a base in ourselves, for the biblical conception of faith is rather different."<sup>76</sup> As Lee states:

In the doctrines of salvation and justification through faith, Torrance never lays stress upon mere 'faith' in itself, which means the resolution of salvation and justification into our conditional act of 'believing.' He deplores this notion of conditional redemption and grace and its Pelagian and legalistic manifestations prevalent in Evangelical Protestantism, Lutheran Pietism, Calvinist Federal

---

72 Torrance, *Reconciliation*, 96-7. Last emphasis mine.

73 See Lee, 311-2, and Stamps, 266ff. With specific reference to baptism, see Alexis Torrance who states in his analysis: "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," 158.

74 Torrance, *Mediation*, 81 (emphasis mine). Torrance argues that our worship is not spaceless or timeless and that, indeed, by the very act of his ascension, Christ makes time for us: "He waits for us and makes time for us, in which we can hear the Gospel, time in which we can repent, time for decision and faith, time in which we can preach the Gospel to all nations," *C&A, II*, 22.

75 See, for example, his chapter "The Mind of Christ in Worship: Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," in *Reconciliation*, 139-214.

76 Torrance, *Mediation*, 82.

Theology, and Puritanism. These tend to detach our faith and justification from our union with Christ and his righteousness, due to their excessive emphasis upon our justification through Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the Cross. Our justification does not lie in mere faith, but indeed in Christ himself. What is supremely important is not our faith, decision and conversion, but the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and his objective vicarious work.<sup>77</sup>

Faith detached from objective reality finally yields mere subjectivism. By contrast, Torrance offers an understanding of faith that is objectively grounded in the reality that makes demands on us because it enfolds us. He states:

Faith has to do with the reciprocity, and indeed the community of reciprocity, between God and man, that is, with the polarity between the faithfulness of God and the answering faithfulness of man. Within the covenant relationship of steadfast love and truth, the covenant faithfulness of God *surrounds and upholds the faltering response of his people*.<sup>78</sup>

Torrance quotes Hebert who, in reference to Psalm 36, argues that "the words 'faith' and 'to believe' (*he'emin*) do not properly describe a virtue or quality of man; they describe *man as taking refuge from his own frailty and instability in God who is firm and steadfast*."<sup>79</sup> Torrance articulates this in the context of the New Covenant:

[Jesus] acts . . . from within the depths of our unfaithfulness and provides us freely with a faithfulness in which we may *share* . . . Admittedly, this is a matter which many people, especially in our Western culture with its stress upon the integrity and freedom of the individual person, find it rather difficult to accept at its face value, for they automatically tend to reinterpret it in line with their axiomatic assumptions – for example, in the stress upon what many people call 'believer's baptism'. Many years ago I recall thinking of the marvelous way in which our human faith is implicated in the faith of Jesus Christ and *grasped by his faithfulness*, when I was teaching my little daughter to walk. I can still feel her tiny fingers gripping my hand as tightly as she could. She did not rely upon her feeble grasp of my hand but upon my strong grasp of her hand *which enfolded her grasp of mine within it*. That is surely how God's faithfulness actualized in Jesus Christ has hold of our weak and faltering faith and holds it securely in his hand.<sup>80</sup>

---

77 Lee, 212.

78 Torrance, *Mediation*, 82. See also *Atonement*, 369, where Torrance says that even if the Church becomes unfaithful, God remains faithful and will bring the Church to perfection. Emphasis mine.

79 Torrance, *C&A, II*, 75. See also, 129.

80 Torrance, *Mediation*, 82-3. Emphasis mine.

Baptism is the sacrament that manifests this. It is not, Torrance argues, the sacrament of a covenant that is made when two parties freely and willingly enter into it. On the contrary, it is the sacrament of the fact that in Jesus Christ "God has bound Himself to us and bound us to Himself, before ever we have bound ourselves to Him."<sup>81</sup> This does not become real when we believe. Only when we understand baptism as "the sign and seal not of something that begins with our human decision . . . can we give faith its full place."<sup>82</sup> Here, it is appropriate to quote Torrance at length to capture the force of his argument:

The Sacrament of Baptism tells us in unmistakable terms that it is not upon our own faith or our own faithfulness that we rely, but upon Christ alone and upon His faithfulness. Baptism is primarily and fundamentally, then, the Sacrament of Christ's obedience on our behalf, and of His faithfulness, and therefore it is the Sacrament which covenants us to a life of faith and obedience to the Father in Him. He who is baptized by that sign and seal relies not upon himself but flees from his own weakness and faithlessness to the everlasting faithfulness of God; but he also attests before men that he renounces reliance upon himself and his own works of obedience or faithfulness to God's Will. That is the faith and faithfulness in which we are baptized, the faith and faithfulness *in which we baptize our children*, for the promise is not only to us *but to them also* in the faithfulness of Christ who commands us to present them to Him. It is when we keep the biblical perspective and refuse to let go as the very essence of the Gospel the fact that God has bound Himself to us and bound us to Himself before ever we bind ourselves to Him, *that we have no difficulty about infant-baptism, for infant-baptism is then seen to be the clearest form of the proclamation of the Gospel* and of a Gospel which covenants us to a life of obedience to the Father.<sup>83</sup>

### **We Know as We are Known**

How do they come to know? The idea that children must reach the age of reason before participating in the sacraments assumes that there should or indeed *can* be knowledge or understanding prior to participation. This arguably assumes a non-theological concept of knowledge that is not commensurate with faith. It would be better to start with a theological articulation of knowledge and discuss the question of the inclusion of children *within that context*.

Molnar says Torrance consistently argued that "we must think from a center

---

81 Torrance, *C&A, II*, 123.

82 *Ibid.*, 129.

83 *Ibid.*, 124-5. Emphasis mine.

in God and not from a center in ourselves – thinking from a center in God meant thinking within faith by acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the divinity of his Holy Spirit as the power enabling theology in the first place.”<sup>84</sup> That does not mean there is no knowledge that is defined in terms of the age of reason. Nor is it saying that such knowledge is not a part of what it might mean to understand something of the sacraments. It *is* saying that such knowledge is not the *primary* kind of knowledge in either chronology or significance. Because of that, it should not be the kind of knowledge that determines whether or not a child should be included in the sacraments.

With respect to theological knowledge, Torrance’s whole program questions the possibility of knowledge prior to participation. As Molnar summarizes it: “We know God as Creator who transcends the world in and through the world as the medium of his self-communication in the Incarnation and outpouring of his Spirit. We thus know God in his internal relations through the Incarnation. . . . Of course for Torrance this meant that knowledge of God could only take place in faith as we allow our concepts to be shaped by the reality of God himself as he meets us in his Word and Spirit.”<sup>85</sup> One cannot know God apart from God.

This epistemology – that we can only know as we are known – has implications for the Christian life. It is why Torrance advocates “evangelical,” as opposed to “legal” repentance.<sup>86</sup> Apart from God’s saving action we do not even know we are in need of help, let alone able to seek help. God’s forgiveness, then, is not conditional on our repentance in the sense that *if* we repent, *then* God will forgive. On the contrary, because God saves us and – by his Holy Spirit – reveals his forgiveness to us, our eyes and ears are opened so that we might see and hear our need and accept it. Only then are we truly free. “All of grace” does not mean “nothing of man”; God’s saving act humanizes and personalizes us

---

84 Molnar, 85. This relates to the “practical answer” to the “practical problem” of evangelism. How, Torrance asks, can we proclaim the Gospel and call for a response in a way that “we do not thereby provoke and indirectly support the self-centred human ego in its claim to an ‘inviolable right’ over its own decisions, or even reinforce the self-will of that ego in its response to God”? In baptism, people are baptized “out of a centre in their own repenting and believing into a centre in Christ.” In the Eucharist Christ has given us “a way of feeding upon him as the life-giving bread so that we may *live continually out of our true centre in him and not out of a centre in ourselves*,” *Mediation*, 96, 97 (emphasis mine). See also Lee, 200, 206.

85 Molnar, 83-4. See also Stamps, 5ff.

86 For a helpful summary on the distinction, see Alan Torrance, “The Theological Vision of James B. Torrance,” in *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour*, ed. Gerrit Scott Dawson (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 111-14.

so that we can make a truly free response to the Response.<sup>87</sup> There is, then, an *active* knowledge, but only because God frees us. He summons us “to decisions and acts of volition *in that communion*, so that knowledge of Him arises and increases out of obedient conformity to Him.”<sup>88</sup>

Legal repentance has to do with a judicial non-imputation of sin. It does nothing in respect of the *prospective* aspect of salvation because it is only about a legal relationship where God is judge. Evangelical repentance, however, is grounded in a *filial* relationship where God is Father. The relationship that is extended to us is not merely legal; it is a sharing in the communion that the Son has with the Father through the Spirit. This is an *ontological* relationship.

This ontological relationship is through union with Christ by the Spirit. It is through union with Christ that we know who we are. Apart from this ontological relationship, we do not have the epistemological resources to understand the significance of that union. Lee states that for Torrance, “the link between coherence-statements and existence-statements is to be bridged by the atonement.”<sup>89</sup> Molnar echoes this: “Our knowledge of and relationship with God the Father almighty takes place only in and through the Spirit uniting us *conceptually and existentially* to the Son and thus to the Father.”<sup>90</sup> Is it right, then, to expect knowledge of the significance of the Eucharist, apart from participation in it?<sup>91</sup>

### **Part of the Community: the Corporate Context**

For Torrance, union with Christ by the Spirit is a corporate matter before it is an individual one.<sup>92</sup> The Church is *not* a collection of individuals whose faith can be articulated outside the context of community and who gather together to form a bigger group. It is founded on the hypostatic union, and so to speak of the Church is to speak of ontology.<sup>93</sup> The faith of particular people finds its

---

87 Torrance, *Mediation*, 67ff; 92ff.

88 Torrance quoted in Alexis Torrance, 160. Emphasis mine.

89 Lee, 185.

90 Molnar, 92, Emphasis mine. Molnar here argues that “proper thinking” about the Trinity is “repentant thinking.” Given the *context* of such thinking (“through faith and in the Spirit”) does this not have implications for the proper context for confession – not as preparation for participation, but *within* communion?

91 Here we are also reminded of Torrance’s indebtedness to Michael Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge.

92 Torrance, *Atonement*, 364. Cf. *Mediation*, 67.

93 Torrance, *C&A, II*, 91; *Mediation*, 67.

context in the corporate body of Christ: "It is *the community in which* Jesus Christ is personally present, meeting and addressing each individual and asking of them the personal response of faith and love."<sup>94</sup>

Torrance's ecclesiology is firmly grounded in his belief that relationships are ontological. Torrance speaks repeatedly of "onto-relations." Here he is referring to the idea that things do not merely exist in relationship to one another. Rather, the relations between things are intrinsic to the being of things. In other words, a thing cannot exist apart from its relations. Torrance talks about this in relation to personhood.<sup>95</sup> If this is how things/persons actually exist, our epistemology is affected. *How* we know something has to be commensurate with the way the thing actually is. We cannot pull something apart in an effort to understand it; it only makes sense within the context which is intrinsic to its being.

The implication for participation in the sacraments is that personal faith cannot be professed or articulated in any meaningful way outside its ontological, corporate context. Ensuring a child has reached a certain stage of faith, defined in terms of the age of reason, *prior* to membership within the community is back-to-front on two levels. First, it demands a meaningful faith outside of the context in which that faith can exist. Second, it presumes that Church is/ can be a collection of individuals whose connection is simply shared belief and practice, both of which have to be adequately articulated outside or apart from the community. But there is a very real sense in which the "vertical" relationship with God – articulated as the "upward movement" from humanity to God – is rooted in and expressed in the "horizontal" relationship within the body of Christ: "The church constitutes the social coefficient of our knowledge of God, for in the nature of the case we are unable to know God in any onto-relational way without knowing him in the togetherness of our personal relations with one another."<sup>96</sup>

Those with concerns about accountability may offer the rejoinder that the community *is* intrinsic to the child professing faith and understanding. They may argue that children, *particularly*, come to an understanding of the Church's traditions and practices and, indeed, come to faith by going to church, learning about Jesus, and being surrounded by other Christians. Nevertheless, as long as their concerns are met in terms of "accountability" defined in relation to the "age of reason," they reveal an underlying epistemology *and* ecclesiology that implies such children cannot be *full* members in this preparatory stage. Their affirmation

---

94 Torrance, *Atonement*, 365. The corporate and private belong inseparably together and are mutually dependent. See his note 117.

95 Torrance, *Mediation*, 48ff. It is often at this point that Torrance makes reference to developments in particle physics by way of illustration. See, for example, *Mediation*, 47-8.

96 Torrance, quoted in Anderson, 60.

of community still rests on an understanding of Church as a mere collection of individuals. And, in the final analysis, it “throws us back on ourselves” because it puts the onus of membership on the individual. If, however, membership is a gift of the Spirit, and the Church is to be understood ontologically, the community is much more than the place that creates a conducive environment for faith.<sup>97</sup>

This section has considered two concerns raised regarding the inclusion of children in the Church’s sacraments: whether or not a child has faith and whether or not s/he has an understanding of what is going on. It has explored the concepts of faith, knowledge, and the corporate community. With reference to Torrance’s theology, it has argued that these should be rooted in ontological union with Christ, not with respect to the age of accountability defined in terms of the “use of reason.”

## **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to find resources in Torrance’s theology to begin to answer questions about extending the sacraments to children. At the outset, it observed the apparent inconsistency of baptizing infants of families who had no intention of being part of the faith community but excluding children who *are* part of the community of faith from receiving communion. The article explored Torrance’s theology of the sacraments, with specific attention to the movements of worship, in an effort to begin to answer some of the questions raised by the seeming contradiction.

Torrance’s theology supports a wholehearted embrace of the full inclusion of children in the worshipping community, and specifically the sacraments. First, his doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ, which pervades every other doctrine, objectively grounds the sacraments in the act of God *for us*, which includes our response; any “pre-requisite” has already been and is being fulfilled. Second, his understanding of faith and knowledge affirm that it is only by the action of God’s Spirit that we know God, and indeed, ourselves. Third, because membership in the community of faith is “onto-relational,” it is not something that can be articulated coherently outside of the community.

Torrance is explicit in his affirmation of infant baptism. And his theology of the Eucharist certainly makes room for children to participate *without delay*.

---

97 See Torrance, *Mediation*, 67, for an articulation of the Church as the Body of Christ, defined with reference to the hypostatic and reconciling union embodied in the person of Christ. See also Lee, 210-11, regarding baptism as the sacrament of regeneration, and the Spirit as “the Agent of our renewal.”

First, for him, the two sacraments are *inseparably* related moments which only make sense together. Second, the Eucharist is intrinsically related to the daily working out of the Christian life. With respect to confession, Torrance articulates this in an “evangelical” way, not as a pre-requisite lest we drink judgement upon ourselves.

In light of Torrance’s theology of the sacraments, what might we say regarding the inconsistencies in practice outlined above?<sup>98</sup> In each case, at least one of the sacraments is linked – in the final analysis – to a person’s *own* faith. Where infant baptism is practiced, but participation in the Eucharist is delayed, Torrance’s theology can help encourage churches to consider that the grounds on which they affirm infant baptism can also support inclusion in the Eucharist without delay. For traditions where the sacramental question *is* an *ontological* question, this is not a huge step to make.<sup>99</sup> Where infant baptism is discouraged or not permitted, Torrance’s theology can encourage churches to understand membership in a way that is firmly rooted in the sacraments and is, indeed, ontological. It can also encourage reflection on the question as to why children might be included in the Eucharist but not baptism, and whether or not that reveals an inconsistency. In every case, Torrance’s theology can encourage discussion about the role of the community of faith and help families (both church and un-church) begin to see what “onto-relational” might look like.

This article has shown that there are resources in Torrance’s theology to help churches talk about becoming increasingly inclusive in all the right ways. Such conversations might invite the parent, who is open to faith matters for the sake of her children because “it’s their right to decide if it’s for them,” to consider another way to think about faith. Or they might help families within the community of faith to see that their proverbial “training up their children in the way they should go” is not really about ensuring accountability defined in terms of the age of reason, but about the parents’ (and children’s) “vertical” *ontological* relationship with God being expressed “horizontally.” And for families who are keen on having their child christened, but who may not understand why there is nothing significant in the *rite*, in and of itself, such conversations might begin to tease open the significance behind the fact that

---

98 Some traditions allowing infant baptism but delaying participation in the Eucharist; some allowing participation in the Eucharist but not infant baptism; or some allowing for participation in the Eucharist before baptism – see note 66.

99 If there is, indeed, a belief that infant baptism is an ontological reality, and that preparation for First Communion is understood in that context, I would argue that they should dispense with language that implies otherwise.

*they, the godparents and the congregation* pledge vows on that special day. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, such conversations could open up *theologically grounded* arguments for why and how our worship should and could be inclusive of *all* children, regardless of ability or aptitude, for example, children with autism or Asperger's Syndrome,<sup>100</sup> so that as a Church, we truly are proclaiming worship as a gift.

---

100 For an example of such a conversation, see Barbara J. Newman, *Accessible Gospel, Inclusive Worship* (Wyoming: CLC Network, 2015).