

JAMES B. TORRANCE AND THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION

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Abstract: *James B. Torrance’s understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ has significant implications for the doctrine of sanctification. Torrance’s presentation of salvation in intimate, ontological and filial terms challenges any understanding of sanctification as a detached, legalistic, anthropocentric endeavour. This article extends the implications of Torrance’s soteriology to the outworking of sanctification and conceives of it as the free and joyful participation by the Holy Spirit in what Christ has already accomplished for us so that we might enjoy intimate communion with the triune God of grace.*

Introduction

James B. Torrance has a profound understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ, which he explores most notably with regard to our understanding of worship.¹ The purpose of this article is to examine the implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ for the outworking of our sanctification.² Torrance gives little attention to this subject, perhaps characteristic of his reformed tradition’s sensitivity to works-righteousness which led to a focus on the objective work of God. However, the objectivity of Torrance’s account of our salvation in Christ offers a valuable foundation for a liberating understanding of the outworking of sanctification.³

1 See James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994). Although Torrance only had this one monograph published, it continues to be reprinted and a considerable number of copies are being sold.

2 A broader exploration of this subject is undertaken in my Ph.D. thesis. Alexandra Radcliff, “The Claim of Humanity in Christ: Salvation and Sanctification in the Theology of T. F. and J. B. Torrance.” Ph.D. Thesis, University of St Andrews, 2014.

3 Use of the word “liberating” is not to be associated with a political theology; rather it expresses how we are set free from the burden of trying to earn what has already been definitely achieved for us in Christ so that we can freely grow into that reality.



Torrance was acutely troubled in his time by preaching and teaching that placed its focus on works that the believer must do.⁴ His presentation of salvation in intimate, ontological, and filial terms challenges any understanding of sanctification as a detached, legalistic, anthropocentric endeavour. Extending the implications of Torrance's soteriology to the doctrine of sanctification, human activity is affirmed in its proper place, that is, as the free and joyful participation by the Spirit in what Christ has already accomplished for us so that we might enjoy intimate communion with the triune God of grace.

The Vicarious Humanity of Christ

Torrance conceives of salvation and sanctification in terms of Christ vicariously assuming our humanity and ontologically transforming it in the depths of his very being. For Torrance, the incarnation is the beginning of the atonement. In the very act of the divine assuming fallen human flesh, it cannot but be transformed. He asserts, "We are not just healed 'through Christ' because of the work of Christ but 'in and through Christ.'"⁵ Jesus' whole life is of atoning significance. As both God and man, Jesus fulfils both sides of the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus lives a life of perfect faithfulness to the Father, in our place, turning our humanity back to a right relationship with God: "In our name, on our behalf, in a human body, Jesus lived a life of prayer, a life in the Spirit in communion with the Father, to sanctify our humanity."⁶

Everything that Jesus does in his humanity affects all humanity. Torrance believes that this is expressed by Jesus' assertion, "For them I sanctify myself that they too may be truly sanctified" (Jn. 17:19).⁷ Christ's death is the death of sinful humanity.⁸ Torrance points to Paul's assertion, "One died for all and therefore all died" (2 Cor. 5:14).⁹ Christ's resurrection is the raising of humanity as a whole new creation. His ascension raises humanity to the right hand of the Father.¹⁰

4 James B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. Alasdair Heron, (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1982), 44–45.

5 James B. Torrance, "Christ in our Place," Gerrit Scott Dawson and Jock Stein ed., *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 47.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, 45.

8 Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 71.

9 James B. Torrance, "The Priesthood of Jesus: A Study in the Doctrine of Atonement," T.H.L. Parker ed., *Essays in Christology for Karl Barth* (Plymouth: Latimer, Trend and Co., 1956), 172.

10 James B. Torrance, "Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ," *A Passion for Christ*, ed.

The Son of God takes our humanity, sanctifies it by his vicarious life in the Spirit (John 17:17-18), carries it to the grave to be crucified and buried in him, and in his resurrection and ascension carries it into the holy presence of God. "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:10).¹¹

Whilst there is a strong appreciation in Torrance's evangelical tradition of the God-humanward movement in Christ and his work of atonement on the cross, there can be a failure to recognise this human-Godward movement in Christ and the far-reaching nature of his substitution which encompasses his whole life. In focusing upon what God has done for us, without an account of Christ's vicarious humanity, the human response falls upon us and demands our own efforts. Torrance presents a radically objective account of salvation and sanctification whereby Jesus offers the perfect human response in our place and on our behalf. We are saved and made holy in Christ prior to any contribution that we could offer. Our sanctification is a definite reality in Christ. We are truly changed in the depths of our being, not simply forgiven and given a second chance to be good. Our own actions do not make us any more holy than we already are; rather, they are a manifestation of the holiness which we already definitively possess in Christ. To many today who believe that, having been justified by faith, it is now the Christian's task to work out his own sanctification, this is a vital message of life and liberation.

Drawn to Participate by the Holy Spirit

For Torrance, the far-reaching nature of Jesus' vicarious ministry continues today, as he intercedes for us as our ascended High Priest.¹²

That life of worship and communion with the Father which Jesus fulfilled in our humanity, did not end in death. Having offered for us a life of perfect obedience to the Father, culminating in the one perfect self-offering for all people and all nations, Jesus rose from the dead and returned to the Father to intercede for us (Rom. 8:34) as our great High Priest (Heb. 4:14). As the eternal Mediator of an eternal covenant, he now appears on our behalf in the presence of God that we might be accepted as sons and daughters (Eph. 2:13ff., 1 Tim. 2:1-6, Heb. 4:14; 9:24; 7:25).¹³

Dawson and Stein, 62.

11 Torrance, "Christ in our Place," 62.

12 Ibid., 45.

13 Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 72.

When Christ's ascension is only understood in terms of his withdrawal from humanity, we can be made dependent upon our own endeavours to work out our sanctification. The believer can feel under a tremendous burden to appropriate in his life the sanctification which Christ has definitely achieved. According to this perspective, God did his part in Christ; now we must do our part to apply the benefits of Christ with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

However, the Holy Spirit does not enable the autonomous believer to work out his own sanctification; the Holy Spirit enables the believer to participate in Christ's definitive sanctification. Sanctification is a reality in which we participate, rather than a potentiality to be actualized. Torrance's understanding of Christ's continuing ascended ministry means not only that Jesus has already definitely sanctified us, but that we are drawn up by the Spirit to freely share in that reality, and in the Son's intimate communion with the Father. Torrance writes:

Therefore we have to hold two things together. First, he has *already* taken our humanity into the Holy of Holies, the presence of the Father in his own person. Second, he comes to us *today* by the Holy Spirit to take us with him into the Holiest of All, to present us "without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish" to the Father (Eph. 5:27).¹⁴

Communion with the Father

According to Torrance's understanding of salvation, the descent of Christ in the incarnation leads to the ascension of humanity to participate by the Spirit in the life of God. We are not only saved but given to share in the intimate communion of the triune life. At Pentecost, Jesus pours out his Spirit so that by the Spirit we might share in this communion.¹⁵

It is as if the whole purpose of the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, is in order that we might receive the Holy Spirit, that the Triune God of grace might bring to fulfilment the purposes of creation in sanctifying our humanity in Christ, that we might be brought into a life of holy communion, a life of prayer.¹⁶

Torrance believes that a pastor's first and foremost mission is not to direct people with what is the right or wrong action to take, but to direct people to Christ so that we might share by the Spirit in his intimate relationship with the Father:

14 Torrance, "Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ," 58.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., 59.

It seems to me that in a pastoral situation, our first task is not to throw people back on themselves with exhortations and instructions as to what to do and how to do it, but to direct people to the gospel of grace – to Jesus Christ, that they might look to him to lead them, open their hearts in faith and in prayer, and draw them by the Spirit into his eternal life of communion with the Father.¹⁷

Torrance deeply regretted the way in which some preachers sought to inspire people to holiness through the law and fear of the consequences of disobedience.¹⁸ He does not do away with the law; he believes that although God makes the covenant for us, it demands a response from us.¹⁹ However, Torrance seeks to uphold our human activity in its proper place. He repeatedly insists that “the Indicatives of grace are always prior to the obligations of law and human obedience.”²⁰ If the imperative to lead a holy life is preached prior to, or in detachment from, the indicative truth that we are sanctified in Christ, we are thrown back upon ourselves to attempt to accomplish it for ourselves. However, Torrance perceives that the imperative is preceded by God’s indicative act of grace in Christ’s vicarious humanity whereby we have been made holy. Therefore, we are liberated to follow the imperative, not by relying upon our own resources, but by relying upon the vicarious humanity of Christ, in whom we may participate by the Spirit.

For Torrance, we fulfil the law not by adhering to static rules but dynamically through the presence of the Spirit in us and our participation in Christ.²¹ When Torrance writes of God’s filial purpose for humanity in the context of atonement, this might also be applied to the outworking of sanctification in the Christian life: “. . . God’s primary purpose for humanity is ‘filial,’ not just ‘judicial,’ where we have been created in the image of God to find our true being-in-communion, in ‘sonship,’ in the mutual personal relations of love.”²² In the outworking of

17 Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 34.

18 Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses,” 49.

19 James B. Torrance, “Covenant or contract? A study of the theological background of worship in seventeenth-century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), 23; 55.

20 James B. Torrance, “The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), 230.

21 Torrance, “Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ,” 61.

22 James B. Torrance, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in our Contemporary Situation,” in *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (London: British Council of Churches, 1991), 15; Cf. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 26–27; Torrance, “Prayer and the Priesthood of Christ,” 60.

sanctification, God's primary purpose for humanity is not to adhere to external rules and regulations (judicial) but to participate by the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father (filial). As we share by the Spirit in the Son's filial relationship with the Father, the outworking of sanctification is a natural consequence.

Conclusion: Claim and Liberation

John Webster has expressed the recurrent concern that this theology of Christ's vicarious humanity "may dissolve the human action in incarnational grace."²³ If Christ has accomplished everything for us in our place and on our behalf, there seems to be nothing for us to do. However, this is to wholly misunderstand the place of human action. Christ's vicarious humanity rightly diminishes any human response that is merit-based and therefore burdensome, and affirms human action in its proper place, that is, as a free and joyful response of sharing by the Spirit in what God has already accomplished in Christ. We are called to action, but this action comes from a contemporaneous place of rest and satisfaction in what has been definitively accomplished in Christ. Alasdair Heron wrote of Torrance:

James Torrance has the rare gift of enabling the simplest parishioners, the most perplexed theological students to sense that they are fledglings destined and called to fly in the atmosphere of the eternal grace of God. The warm humanity of his personality is not only a natural gift; it is the radiation of conviction, the conviction of one who knows himself to be constrained by the love of Christ and can therefore do none other than express and convey this witness to others as both claim and liberation.²⁴

This article has sought to further explore what compelled Torrance by extending the liberating implications of his soteriology to the doctrine of sanctification. Humanity is wholly claimed in Christ prior to anything that we can contribute. An

23 John Webster, "T.F. Torrance 1913–2007," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10:4 (2008), 371.

24 Alasdair Heron, "James Torrance: An Appreciation," *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to James Torrance*, ed. Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1989), 3. Cf. Alan Torrance: "His life and theology were characterized by a joy borne of knowing the welcoming hospitality of God in Christ and the overwhelming and liberating sense of belonging which that generated. His overwhelming desire in life was that all might know that it applied to them too." Alan J. Torrance, "The Bible as Testimony to Our Belonging: The Theological Vision of James B. Torrance," Dawson ed., *An Introduction to Torrance Theology*, 119.

all-embracing claim is thereby placed upon humanity: the obligations of grace. However, sanctification is not a daunting, arduous endeavour. We are set free to grow into the ontological reality of who we are in Christ as we share by the Holy Spirit in the incarnate Son's intimate communion with the Father.

Torrance has a keen understanding of the prospective aspect of the atonement: we are not only retrospectively forgiven of our sins but also adopted as sons and daughters of God to share by the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father.²⁵ Torrance has an insightful understanding of what Christ by the Spirit has done for us vicariously in human flesh but he does not offer much exposition on what a person's life in Christ by the Spirit might look like. Although Torrance does not spell out the shape of the Christian life, his life is a dynamic testament to the radical ethical and socio-political imperatives of his theology. Torrance boldly challenged apartheid in South Africa and the religious and political conflict in Northern Ireland.²⁶ However, the benefit of not statically spelling out the shape of the Christian life is that he evades the danger of moralistic interpretation. Moreover, whilst his theology might leave us with various questions regarding the Christian life, Torrance directs us to where we can find the ultimate answer: through participating by the Spirit in the Son's intimate communion with the Father.

25 This language of "prospective" and "retrospective" comes from John McLeod Campbell, whose understanding of the atonement Torrance greatly admired and advanced. See John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Hansel, 1996).

26 See James B. Torrance, "Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland," Address to the Congress for the Advancement of Calvin Research, 12–14 August 1980, Pretoria, South Africa; James B. Torrance, "Southern Africa Today: The Kairos Debate: Listening to its Challenge," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 55 (1986): 42–45.