

SHEEP OR PERSONS? WHAT LUKE 15 HAS TO SAY ABOUT AGENCY AND PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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Abstract: *James Torrance was a man of love. He loved God and he loved people. One of the greatest gifts his son Alan could have given me was an open invitation to call upon James in Edinburgh while I was studying at St. Andrews. Of all the things James taught me during my visits, the most memorable recurrent theme was: "we must give people their humanity." In other words, from the outset we must graciously grant people their truest humanity as defined by their Brother and High Priest, the Son of God and Son of Man, Jesus Christ.*

People with cognitive disabilities are perhaps the most marginalized sub group in society. Reality Ministries in Durham, NC was spawned in part by the scriptural/theological principles so passionately communicated by James Torrance regarding the ongoing high priestly ministry and vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ. Sharing life's challenges and joys alongside of our friends with intellectual developmental disabilities continues to teach all of us at Reality Ministries invaluable lessons about real personhood. In the spirit of James Torrance, this essay is about learning to relish and repose in the unconditional freeness of the gospel; more than that, it is an urge to consider flipping the conventional model of evangelical gospel proclamation.

My friend Mark chafes when I talk about Jesus doing everything for us. "Jesus doesn't get me out of bed in the morning; that's something I do," he says.

To which I retort, "You get out of bed by yourself about as much as the branch does anything without the vine!"

"Well, maybe I don't do it all," Mark says, "but what about the word *cooperation*? I cooperate with Jesus in what he's doing. Isn't that a better way of describing things?"



Mark is worried that my kind of comprehensive grace is depersonalizing. In his mind, the word *cooperation* gives more room for human agency, because persons are not so thoroughly dominated by God's activity. One of his favorite parables is that of the prodigal son. The son, he reminds me, turns and comes home. The father goes out to meet the son in the field. The son's repentance and the father's unchanging acceptance and forgiveness meet in the middle; is not that a picture of cooperation? I ask Mark about the earlier parables of Luke 15, which seem to put all of the emphasis on the one who is searching. In those stories, the lost coin and even the lost sheep are unable to make a move to cooperate. And interestingly, it is expressly in the story of the sheep that Jesus says he is teaching about repentance. Yet where is the repentance in that story? Where is the cooperation? What does the sheep do besides get lost? In contrast to the typical evangelical emphasis on our actively doing something to repent, it appears that Jesus is teaching here about that celebratory and humbling *metanoia* that occurs when we have eyes to see ourselves as helpless sheep who have gotten lost and then been found by the Good Shepherd. How *does* the objective emphasis in the sheep story relate to human agency and cooperation? Isn't my friend Mark right — doesn't the prodigal son story send a different message?

When it comes to comparing the apparently different messages of the sheep and son parables in Luke 15 (I'll leave the coin for another day), the popular exegetical answer is something along these lines: The sheep and son parables are meant to complement each other. The one emphasizes God's objective activity, and the other, in the prodigal son's returning home, the activity of the human subject. These are the two poles in a complementary tension. But is there really not any interpretive framework where the two passages can function in a less "complementary" and more congruent way? The exegetically neutral "somehow both poles are true" approach has not in practice worked very well. Unavoidably, Christians through the centuries have chosen sides, taking one of the poles — divine agency or human agency — as the *real* reference point, and giving only a polite nod to the other. Hence the age-old debate, Calvinism versus Arminianism. There is a bit of irony, though, when it comes to evangelism. In this critically important matter, Calvinists and Arminians find themselves on a small patch of "cooperative" common ground. Both would teach converts that they have been found and rescued by the Good Shepherd, but neither is eager to do so until the converts have actually *become* converts by making the appropriate cooperative response.

We should be wary of the notion of cooperation, especially in evangelism. The traditional two-pole approach to Luke 15 is meant to provide balance and to

protect humanity from divine domination, but instead it works against us. The cooperative, human agency pole of the two-pole approach in fact depersonalizes us — all of us, but most egregiously the intellectually disabled.

Inadequate Solutions

When it comes to salvation experience, the idea of cooperation appeals to able-minded people. They are able to turn and come home like the prodigal son, to walk the aisle, raise the hand, make an informed decision to give their lives to God, confess their sins, grasp the points of the gospel, and so on. All of these action steps are used to validate salvation experience. But what if a person cannot do any of these things? People with cognitive disabilities often cannot operate within the conventional agency criteria unto salvation. They are simply not able to jump through the hoops.

One solution is simply to ignore the intellectually disabled population when it comes to evangelism. This is an approach not unlike the argument put forth in the missionary world about the “noble savages:” Just leave them alone; ignorance is bliss. But more often, a presumably more inclusive solution is advanced. Instead of ignoring those with special needs, this view accommodates them by ignoring instead the troublesome human agency pole of the “tension” described in Luke 15. One of the parables there — that of the prodigal son — is set aside as non-applicable, because the action steps involved don’t fit the existential situation of our special needs friends. Instead, the focus is conveniently fixed on the sheep parable, which doesn’t involve any hoop jumping.¹ This is seen as a loving solution — and unfortunately, many who minister in the special needs community have bought into it.² But this “inclusive” solution is not really inclusive; there is a kind of reverse segregation at play. It may seem to be making the sheepfold more expansive, but it actually serves only to marginalize those with special needs even more. Consider the reasoning: what is otherwise upheld as exceedingly important, human agency, is somehow deemed expendable when it comes to those with intellectual disabilities. And so those who purport to safeguard the integrity of human response, and who think “cooperation” is good language because it

1 Another reason often given for this solution is that the cognitively disabled, no matter how old in years, have not reached the so-called “age of accountability.”

2 I do not want to be too hard on the advocates for the intellectually disabled who go with this kind of inclusionary approach. I would like to think that they do so because they do not know of a better alternative.

protects us from depersonalizing humanity, are saying in effect that when it comes to people with disabilities, depersonalizing is okay.

This “exception” clause stipulates that while the overwhelming majority of people will be held accountable to the standard of human agency illustrated by the prodigal son returning home, those with disabilities will not. They have been declared free without any human response, carried home on the shoulders of the Shepherd. That may sound loving and kind. But here’s the problem: if I have corralled all persons with cognitive disabilities into the sheep story and barred them from the story of the prodigal son, I have called into question their humanity. I may have developed the exception clause as a way of being kind, but by ignoring human agency, I have dehumanized them. In a sense, I have made my friends with disabilities more like sheep than people. Dismissing human agency in regard to our special needs friends is not the solution to the problem. How can saying that human agency doesn’t apply to these friends not relegate them to a status that is less than human? We must stand against any attempt to “include” the intellectually disabled by dismissing the importance of human response. Human response is part and parcel of what it means to be human. What is needed is not a dismissal of human agency but rather a better understanding of what human agency is.

When we make the wrong move to solve the perceived tension between the sheep story and the prodigal son story in Luke 15, a wedge is introduced that splits Scripture from Scripture, divine agency from human agency, humans from humanity, and people from each other. Are we to have two gospels, one for the able-minded and one for those with intellectual disabilities? Surely not. So what is the right move? In the remainder of this article, I will show how we can move forward into a healthy biblical understanding of how human agency (and thus the prodigal son story) *does* apply to those with disabilities, and to all of us, in the area of conversion.

A Christological Basis for Agency

To begin with, we must establish how the sheep story and the son story of Luke 15 are not just complementary but are congruent. The theory of a polar “tension” between divine and human agency does not suffice. Indeed, it can only collapse into an objective-subjective morass, and, I would argue, an accompanying loss of objective truth altogether.³ As I have suggested, when it comes to evangelism

3 Objective truth, by its very nature, precedes subjective experience. Anytime we “hold back” objective truth until a subjective decision has been made, we plant in people’s

to the able-minded, both Calvinists and Arminians might start with the prodigal son story and then move to the sheep story when they see a valid marker of conversion. That is, once a marker of conversion is in evidence, they might tell our new convert the sheep story — that he was actually rescued before he did anything by the pure grace of the Good Shepherd, who pursued and found him. But if we are to achieve an understanding of human agency that applies to our friends with disabilities, we must interpret Scripture in a way that neither five-point Calvinists nor Arminians would do: we must start by making an objective truth claim about the actual redemption of all human beings.

The gospel is a proclamation before it is an invitation: “[Jesus Christ] is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe” (1 Tim 4:10). Whereas we decried using the sheep story to characterize one population (the intellectually disabled) in contrast to another (everyone else), applying it equally to all human beings is another thing entirely. The objective and universal truth is that the Good Shepherd has come looking for the lost — all of us — and though we were thoroughly helpless, he has brought us home on his broad shoulders at great cost to himself. Now, if we use the sheep story as the backdrop to the subsequent prodigal son story, we will get closer to seeing the congruence between the two. Both stories have a going out and a coming back. And the key is to see that Jesus is the primary one who goes out and comes back in *both* stories. It is obvious in the first story that the shepherd is analogous to Jesus. But in the second story, Jesus is hidden. We may theologially posit that he is present because of hints the text gives us (especially the dead-and-alive motif) and through what we find elsewhere in the scriptural witness. Jesus, the only righteous human being, has gathered up in his humanity all of the unrighteous, from the most wicked and rebellious (the younger son) to the most smug and self-righteous (the older son), and every person in between. He has absorbed the consequences of our sinful rebellion and made us right with God, bringing us home to the Father through his death and resurrection.

minds the mistaken notion that they *created* the objective truth with their personal decision (i.e. “It wasn’t true for me until I believed it”). I am convinced that our way of preaching the gospel has gotten twisted over time and has become altogether backward. The only rationale I can imagine for “holding back” objective truth would be if we weren’t sure whether it really applied to all people. But then, how could that be objective truth? Philippians 2:10–11 provides all the basis we need for clinging to the unpopular idea that there is one universal, objective truth: “*At the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” (Except where otherwise identified, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV [2011])

The so-called tension between divine agency and human agency is resolved once we recognize that the divine agent and the primary human agent are the same person — Jesus! In the sheep story the accent is on Jesus as the rescuer in his divine nature (in solidarity with God, different from us), and in the son story the accent is on him as the rescuer in his human nature (in solidarity with us).

Our Brother and High Priest

Some may be dubious about my theological claim of the unseen Jesus in the story of the prodigal son. Of course, I am confident that Jesus himself knew he was the backdrop! But at times I've wondered whether any of the original hearers understood. Thankfully, we are provided the context of salvation history and Holy Scripture to help us along. First, there are hints in the Luke 15 text itself. Some of these hints are by point of contrast. The father's attitude throughout the story is certainly compatible with what we know about the heavenly Father's heart, yet his humble act of running to meet the son is a sort of incarnational move, although it comes a little late in the narrative to do justice to the fullness of Jesus' pursuit of us in the far country. (This is where Jesus as storyteller leaves beautiful space for a later trinitarian interpretation of the story, which of course includes the unseen Jesus we are drawing out.) Similarly, the younger son's return home is to some degree compatible with repentance (and seems even more so when we confuse phrases in the story like "came to his senses" and "going back home" as describing repentance). Yet the son's return home is at bottom because of desperation, and his comments to his father about being a slave betray the fact that he does not understand his father's economy of grace. It is only by conjecture that we can imagine the younger son really "getting it." Playing along with the parable, in my mind's eye I see his moment of repentance and belief occurring somewhere between his father's exclamation to prepare the party and the party itself.

We have been discussing how two stories in Luke 15 encapsulate what James Torrance called the double movement of grace in Christ, the God-humanward movement and the human-Godward movement. The shepherd in the sheep story represents the incarnational direction, or God-humanward movement.⁴

4 Some might say that both movements are represented within the sheep story itself, in that the shepherd became a lamb to lead the other lambs home. While having some theological merit (thinking of the Christ-convergence of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life and the Lamb who was slain), this idea is insufficient because, while the death of the Lamb purchases us a ticket home, it does not really supply the human agency piece in Christ that actually carries us home in his response. It is therefore an interpretation that

And I have asserted that the corresponding human-Godward movement is best evident as the subtext of the following story, when Jesus as an unseen third son brings back the other two. The human-Godward movement of grace means that the mediation of Christ for us includes all of the aspects of appropriate response to God, including faith. The book of Hebrews supplies ample substantiation for the premise of Jesus as our true older brother in whose agency all are included. Here we find that Jesus, after tasting death for everyone, has the responsibility of "bringing many sons and daughters to glory." (Heb 2:9-10) He returns home to the Father as the high priest of our humanity, saying, "Here am I, and the children [you have] given me." (Heb 2:13) We are also told in Hebrews that Jesus does what no other human can do: he makes a perfect response to the Father. He is the only person who can truly say, "I will be one whose trust reposes in God." (Heb 2:13 Weymouth) Indeed, Jesus is "the pioneer and perfecter of faith," (Heb 12:2) apart from whom no one has ever had faith. This is a reality that transcends chronology, for we are told that all the heroes in the "Hall of Faith" (Hebrews 11) were actually participating, whether they knew it or not, in the faith of Jesus on their behalf.

This concept of the high priestly ministry of Jesus gives us an intimate, ontological relationship, a differentiated oneness of being, with our Savior. Just as the high priest, in his person, represented every person before God on the Day of Atonement, so Jesus Christ, in his person, brings every person cleansed before the Father. As our substitute and representative, Jesus acts for us, in our place. In Jesus' ongoing mediation he is sharing his very identity as Son of God with us. In fact, the internal connection is so intimate and complete that whatever Jesus does, we are actually doing it with him.⁵

The subjective dimension of the prodigal son story, then, is not first and foremost related to the lost son's turning and coming home, and it is not first and foremost related to your or my own existential turning or returning; the subjective dimension of the story is Jesus Christ himself. Isn't it strange that in talking about human agency, the one human who is often overlooked is Jesus? My Fuller Theological Seminary mentor, Dr. Gary Deddo, was the first to show

fits better with non-ontological, penal substitutionary theories of the atonement that do not include our human, personal response as a part of grace or internal to the work of Christ.

5 We *really are* obedient, righteous, pure, and blameless in Christ; there is absolutely no disappointment with us in the Father's eyes. This is important, because all of these attributes, which are given to us in Scripture, would apply to Christ but not genuinely to us if we were not united to him. (Oftentimes, we instead depict them as an external coating, using *as if* language. In this way of thinking, the Father looks at us *as if* we were righteous, even though we are not.)

me that there is a prominent place for Jesus himself in the prodigal son story if we read between the lines and in the context of the sheep story, which precedes it. It seems that Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to understand implicitly (and in contradistinction to themselves) that he is the *true* older brother who goes out from the Father to seek and to bring in those who are lost.

I applaud Timothy Keller for drawing our attention to this oft-overlooked aspect of the parable in his book *The Prodigal God*. In exalting Jesus as the true older brother in the story, he gives us a Jesus we can admire and worship, one who has done what we could never do ourselves in filial obedience to the Father. However, in my mind, Keller does not go far enough. His explanation fails to give an ontological connection between Jesus, the true older brother, and every human being. Even if we know that Jesus is the unspoken true and faithful older brother, without a oneness of being — an ontological union — with him, we are still left to connect ourselves into his work for us. Jesus' perfect response doesn't count as *our* personal response until an extra step is made.⁶ But by the grace of God it is literally *in* Jesus himself, the Great High Priest in whom all belong and are represented, that all are brought home to the Holy Father. Grace is Jesus' agency for us; his response is our response; his homecoming is our homecoming.

Do you see the import of this for understanding human agency? Instead of saying that some can respond adequately (the able-minded) and some cannot, or instead of saying in a patronizing fashion that human agency doesn't really matter for our friends with intellectual disabilities, we can say that none of us is adequate to respond to God and that Jesus responds to God on behalf of every human being. Grace, then, is not just an offer or opportunity given to us by God; grace even includes our response! Grace is not grace if we are thrown back on ourselves to provide the last bit. Jesus not only does the divine part; he does the human part for each of us. Jesus does it all!

6 At this point people tend to insert the Holy Spirit, but to do so without a prior incarnational and internal connection with Jesus is to give the Holy Spirit the job of finishing a work that Christ himself has not finished. Existentialism creeps in when theologians use the Holy Spirit to make this last step for us and therefore to create an actual truth out of a mere hypothetical one. I have purposely chosen not to spotlight the Holy Spirit in this article, but I hope it goes without saying that everything that happens in Christ happens by the person and power of the Holy Spirit. While I am applying, with biblical support, the phrase *in Christ* to describe humanity's existence in him, Paul uses the phrase especially to describe the body of believers who enjoy the intimacy of the Spirit and the assurance the Spirit gives them that they are indeed embraced by God and included in trinitarian relations. The Holy Spirit lifts us up, as J. B. Torrance never tired of saying, to live in our true selves, freely sharing the Son's relationship with the Father.

Celebrating Human Agency, Rightly Understood

So far we have seen the danger of dismissing human agency for any person, and we are beginning to apprehend the meaning of Jesus Christ as our great high priest in whom all human agency resides. This view of Jesus protects us from depersonalizing those who may not be as cognitively able as we, but it also protects us from the opposite problem. If it is easy to err by not giving enough human agency to the intellectually disabled, it is just as easy to err by giving too much human agency to the intellectually able. By this I mean locating human agency in the wrong place, primarily in ourselves, instead of in our true older brother. If using only the sheep story for our friends with disabilities is depersonalizing, so also is using (or at least starting with) only the prodigal son story, as traditionally understood, for those who are able-minded. It is depersonalizing because it exalts the cooperation model and an individual subject-self that doesn't actually exist. This cannot help but establish a double standard for the intellectually able and disabled; even worse, we end up with a mythological "person" on the one hand and a non-person on the other.

I hope it has been clear that the way to avoid the double standard is *not* by re-instituting the "hoop" version of the gospel when speaking of those with disabilities. No, the idea is to get rid of any hoop version of the gospel altogether; the good news is that the gospel has no hoops! We can celebrate the human agency of all human beings when we know that Jesus Christ is the human agent, the true Subject-self, who acts on behalf of us all. It wouldn't do for us to be rigorously Christ-centered about agency merely up to the point where we finally give humanity its own sliver of ground apart from Christ. We cannot achieve as created persons an ability to stand outside our Creator and to presumptively make detached judgments about him. When we give ourselves a mythological individualism outside of Christ, it is unavoidable that we will fill the intervening space by manufacturing hoops we can jump through, thereby giving ourselves credit for creating the truth of our inclusion in Christ.⁷ Against this mind-set, we must insist that the logic of our creation and redemption by Jesus Christ dictates that all decisions *about* Christ must begin, literally, *in Christ!* Another way to say it would be that human response-*ability* resides in

7 This sort of semi-Pelagianism is very subtle indeed. It makes religion the most insidious form of sin. T. F. Torrance used to say that the chain of our salvation is only as strong as the weakest link, and if that link belongs to us (to whom religion is prone to give it), deep down we know that we are in trouble. To use another analogy, once we allow even the smallest cooperationist, co-redemptive, self-justifying bugs in the sheets, they endlessly plague us with restlessness and a lack of hope and assurance.

the one true Human Being who is always sharing his true humanity and faithful response to God with us.

As we have seen, the answer to leveling the playing field for all persons is not to promote human beings to primary subject-self status, nor is it to leave out the subjective dimension altogether; the answer is to make the subjective part of the objective. This leaves us in a place of humble dependence, not with a primary subjectivity for ourselves but with a secondary subjectivity that always acknowledges that it is powerless to create the truth. Keeping agency intact for all people equally can be done by understanding agency primarily *in Christ, for us*, and then secondarily *by us, in Christ*. The latter describes true participation in and with Christ. This participation takes many forms, as we shall see, but at this point a warning is appropriate: even participation can become a hoop. How easy it is for participation to devolve into being the new individualism, where humans get the last say. No, it is always true that "in him we live and move and have our being." (Acts 17:28) This means that even participation is participatory: I believe that Jesus Christ does it all, even my believing, and also my believing that Jesus does it all, even my believing, and also my believing in my believing that Jesus does it all, even my believing, and so on, *ad infinitum!*

This exhaustive Christ provision is enough to drive us Western individualists batty. If human agency is first and foremost about Jesus' agency for each of us, and that he has made and is making a perfect subjective response to the Father for all of us, doesn't that smack of being dominated by Jesus in a way that threatens my own free and personal response to God? This is where my friend Mark is coming from, but as I told him, it is actually just the opposite. This Christ-bracketed way of response is *more* personal, because it takes place inside the dynamic of Christ's humanity, the person in whose image we are made, the person who gives us our personhood and an opportunity to share in his eternal relationship with the trinitarian persons. Inside Jesus' ongoing response for us is where true freedom lies: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." (John 8:36) The human-Godward direction of grace has already been established: from the Son, to the Father, by the Holy Spirit. We don't get to decide the direction of the wind; we can only ride it or resist it.

Toward Participation: Unlearning Cooperation Language

It is difficult for someone who has long operated by the cooperation model, the idea that I do some and Christ does some, to catch the import of the participation model (where the only "some" we do is in Someone). In order to value the

integrity of secondary subjectivity, we must get to the watershed point where we can acknowledge that Jesus' responding and deciding for us is *more personal* than our responding and deciding for ourselves! A proper framework of grace helps us let go of our counterfeit agency as cooperative individuals in order to find our true agency as persons. Jesus said it like this: When you lose your life, you find it. So what do I do, if Jesus does it all? The best answer is still, "Believe!" When asked by the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?" thankfully, Paul did not say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will *become* saved." (cf. Acts 16:30–31) One cannot *be* saved unless one *is* saved. Additionally, "What do I do?" is not always a helpful question, because it often reawakens what needs to go away — our deep desire to be in control or to clinch the deal. The Pharisees were quite fond of "what do we do" questions. After Jesus' amazing deed of feeding the five thousand, they asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus' answer: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:28–29) It seems that Jesus wants us to grow in belief toward the idea that he does it all, to the tipping point where active participation takes care of itself; this can displace the misdirected hustle that often characterizes "godly" activity, not to mention the lethargy that results in license or slothfulness.

Before we further address the experience of salvation, it might help to take a hard look at how we learn and proclaim the gospel in the first place. A lot of our confusion stems from the way we use language. To begin with, we should recognize our misguided efforts to bottle the Holy Spirit or to formulate with words the mystery of Christ. It is obvious that words are inadequate, because every time we say "lose your life," we realize that even surrender must be participatory, just like every other action step in response to the gospel — "repent" or "give your life to God" or "be baptized." Thankfully, Scripture testifies that we don't have to capture the full depth of participation with words before calling others to participate in what Jesus has done and is doing for us. The problem, of course, is that in my sinful nature I am still screaming, "Don't help me; I can do it for myself!" My "abilities" lure me into thinking I am qualified, adequate, and capable. Even when it comes to responding to the gospel, my humanist bent causes me to lapse into a subversive and insidious mode of "fighting" grace by desiring to do something to earn it or to make it happen. Knowing this, we must make meticulous efforts to avoid the use of words in gospel proclamation that feed the wrong tendencies. Yes, let's use words, but let's train ourselves to use them in the right context.

I have found that my growing sensitivity against using action words or metaphors that do not comport with the situations of my friends with disabilities

actually provides a helpful “check” when it comes to communicating with all populations. In an effort to make room for personal response, we are often tempted to set human beings apart from Jesus with an invitation to then come to him. This might take the form a spatial picture, like Jesus being on the water and us being in the boat. But it’s helpful for me to recognize that if I am separated from Jesus, I am as deficient in spiritual ability to “step over the side of the boat and walk to Jesus” as my friends in wheelchairs are in physical ability.⁸ In the same vein, if I use less-physical phrases, like “give your life to Christ,” I should endeavor to do so without investing them with the capital they have been given in the cooperation model (as if the life I would give fundamentally belonged to me). Instead, I might say, “Give your life to Christ, because he has given you his living relationship with the Father,” or, “No one loves you more, and you belong to him; talk with God now... ‘I love you...I *am* yours...I belong to you...thank you for your forgiveness.’ ” Again, I am urging the hearer to respond in correlation with reality, not as a means of creating it.

Because of our lamentable propensity to the default mode of self-creation or cooperative doing, I increasingly relish describing our response to the gospel of salvation with what I call non-action action words — expressions of what *not* to do or how *not* to resist God’s grace: “don’t fight it,” “rest,” “receive,” “welcome,” “abide,” “repose,” “submit,” “celebrate,” “rejoice.” These are things my friends with cognitive disabilities seem to know and do better than I. Finally, having acknowledged that words can’t “get me there,” I can enjoy a new appreciation of the myriad ways of participatory nonverbal response to the gospel. I can develop an awareness of the nuanced ways the Holy Spirit is moving, especially as I immerse myself in a worshiping community with folks with special needs. Anyone who has experienced this kind of community can tell you that a de-emphasis on words allows for a new revelation of the Word among us. And from the fertile soil of this kind of community often arises the vibrant fruit of nonverbal gospel embodiment: “Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:18)

Community and Self-Isolation

It is possible to participate in Christ when not cognizant of it. But lone individuals who insist that they are participating with Christ in isolation — each “in my own

⁸ It is probably unwise at this point to teach our ontological union with Jesus when telling gospel stories *about* him, but still, against the separation idea, the intimacy between Jesus and sinners in Scripture should always be highlighted. I am thinking here especially of Jesus getting into the boat that belonged to Simon, the “sinful man.”

way” — are fooling themselves. Participation is meant to be done corporately. Those anxious to live transformed lives in Christ and to “grow up . . . into [Christ] our head” (Eph 4:15 NRSV) are called the body of Christ. There is no ontological difference between people in the church and those who are not; it’s just that the former are “encourag[ing] one another and build[ing] each other up” (1 Thess 5:11) through word and sacrament, and “through psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in [their] hearts” (Col 3:16). I hope it is obvious that this outlook on human agency, where Christ is the one who is the primary human agent for all human beings, can only give us an air of anticipation in our worship communities. Grace is happening! If Christ is always and everywhere responding to God for every human being, there is no telling where he is going to “break out” and reveal himself by a validating gust of the Holy Spirit. And as hinted above, our trajectory for evangelism should begin to change dramatically. Instead of taking Christ *to* a community, we begin to understand what it is like to meet Christ *in* the community, whether in the mission field or right under our noses. Instead of a means to an end, evangelism becomes an intrinsic ingredient of worship and communion. Come, taste and see that the Lord is good! (Ps 34:8) I find Karl Barth’s sermons at prison worship services to be wonderful examples of how to preach to both believers and unbelievers. Barth makes a Christ-centered claim of inclusion on his hearers’ lives without ignoring or softening the consequences of self-exclusion.⁹

Here we must say a word about the older brother in the prodigal son story. It might be suspected that I have avoided him because he doesn’t fit my interpretation. Again, we must go back to the sheep story to get the context. The underlying reality is that Jesus has gone out and gotten the younger brother *and* the older brother to bring them *both* home. But while the younger brother eventually participates in the reality of Christ, the older brother does not. In his pride, he resists the father’s economy of grace. If he were to be told the sheep story, he certainly wouldn’t see himself as the lost lamb. He’s above associating with losers like his younger brother; despite the pleas of his loving father, he

9 I was going to say “without ignoring the possibility of self-exclusion.” But I am sure that Barth would want to unpack that statement in order to do justice to it. For Barth, self-exclusion is in one sense impossible, because it has no ground in reality. At the same time, it is possible, to the extent that we also live in unreality. Upon this basis it should not be difficult to understand how ultimate rejection and the consequence of hell can be described yet not explained. After all, nothing that exists without rooting in reality *is* explainable! These things and evil itself can only be irrational and absurd, albeit deadly and unbearably painful at times. It is unfortunate when pundits project the combination of Barth’s thoroughly christological definition of reality and his healthy incomprehension of evil into being a universalism that Barth himself would never allow.

will not come in! It is important to note that we are not given any indication that the older brother will eventually participate. To me, this is one of the most graphic portrayals of hell in all of Scripture; it is consistent with the fact that Jesus' warnings about hell are overwhelmingly directed toward religious types. The older son is so close, yet so far. We observed how the father stayed back and waited for the younger son, but the fact that the father "went out" (Luke 15:28) to beseech the older son in his own far country is actually an initiative closer to the extent of the incarnation. Theologically, we are cognizant that Jesus, the true older brother, has not only gone out but has even brought this stiff-necked man home, reconciled, to the Father. The father in the parable goes out in a sense to remind him of that reality: "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours." (Luke 15:31)

In this encounter we see poignantly the rub between cooperation and participation. The son is stuck on cooperation — or, in this case, noncooperation. He doesn't see himself as part of the party but as standing on separate turf, with his own independent agency. The father's mentality, however, is incessantly one of participation. The father doesn't give credence to the son's turf outside the house. He doesn't give credence to the son's self-created pity party. Instead, he issues an invitation to join in the only real party that there is (and where the son is in actuality already present, included in the faithful response of the true Son). Yet the father will not force; the son refuses and is left in his bitterness. It is not difficult to imagine the horrible friction of a hell where, while Jesus has responded for you and is continually responding for you, you are rejecting him.

Together at the Center

What if the human agency dynamic we have been describing is what Scripture alludes to as the mystery of Christ? What if the vicarious humanity of Christ and his response on our behalf is not only the background of the prodigal son story but is also the implicit backdrop and context for all of the Epistles and even the Gospels? (Admittedly, in the Gospels, Christ's eternal and spiritual presence as the Subject-self of every person is harder to remember because of Christ's physical presence in the narrative, but it is there nonetheless.) What if, as James Torrance taught us, the whole Bible is fundamentally about the Son's relationship with the Father by the Holy Spirit and only secondarily about Israel's and our participation in that relationship? What if the kingdom of God is shorthand for just this mystery? How does it change our reading of Scripture? How does it fill out our understanding of grace? Some may criticize, "Nobody

else I know thinks this way. This sounds like a secret, private knowledge for the elite academic, almost gnostic in character.” Again, I would say just the contrary. This is the most public and democratic knowledge possible, because it gives every person the same theological anthropology in Christ, where the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Perhaps the problem is that we are so entrenched in the cooperation paradigm that we cannot enjoy the simplicity of the participation one.

An advantage of this participation approach is that it allows me to embrace my brothers and sisters in the body with a unity-with-diversity mind-set instead of a uniformity one. I can get along with everyone, regardless of denomination, because I know that all of us fall short in our efforts to articulate the gospel perfectly, and that it is the Holy Spirit who moves and draws people into faith through all sorts of verbal and nonverbal means. The manner of speaking doesn’t have to be divisive. It’s true, some ministers of the gospel may give more “cooperation capital” to their words than I would prefer, while others may not be as overtly Christ-centered as I would like, but knowing the reality under the rhetoric helps me take myself less seriously and increases my chances of finding good connection points for collaboration with others.¹⁰ Another advantage of celebrating the ongoing vicarious humanity of Christ for all people is that I am able to avoid the pitfalls mentioned earlier, where Scripture is split from Scripture, divine agency from human agency, humans from humanity, and people from each other. Without a Christo-centric way to interpret Scripture, human agency, and theological anthropology, artificial categories and double standards are inevitable. Some Christian organizations have even provided different instructions for how to preach the gospel to the able-minded versus those with cognitive disabilities.

One way to move past the patronizing is to stop borrowing the world’s descriptions of those with disabilities. Yes, in the world’s eyes, they are overlooked and under-served; they are “marginalized.” But in the Father’s view, they are at the center. Indeed, that is where we all are, in union with Christ the center, the beloved Son of God. We are all there, every human being, all races, all nations, rich and poor, those with cognitive disabilities and those without, those of the

¹⁰ It seems unlikely that a time will come on this side of the veil when all parts of the body agree on what the gospel actually is. If we are meant to reach a point where we can all concur on what Paul meant by his definition of the gospel as alluded to in Galatians 1, then I would assert that the foundation of onto-unity with Christ and between brethren is the best place to start. The alternative is to resort to separate claims of doctrine that can only bring hatred and division in the body. If we contend from our splinter groups that we unerringly possess Paul’s gospel, then we actually give ourselves biblical permission to damn those who disagree (1:9).

more Arminian persuasion (like my friend Mark) and my hyper-Calvinist friends, tax collectors and Pharisees, “younger brothers” and “older brothers,” believers and unbelievers, all equally loved as the apple of the Father’s eye. Grace is the greatest antidote to my tendency to be condescending. Together with my friends, at the center of the Father’s affection in Christ, I am humbled. Jesus’ ability exposes my disability. The fact that he has done it all reminds me that I bring nothing to the table. The fact that Jesus has responded faithfully to the Father for me shows me that I did not earn his favor with words. The fact that Jesus has made me whole helps me trust him with my brokenness, and the fact that he has purified me reminds me that I am a sinner in need of him. Yes, we are all sheep and we are all persons. Some of us are called to leadership and shepherding roles, but I am learning the importance of being a sheep before trying to shepherd. I am learning to be carried. I am learning from my friends with disabilities how not to fight God’s economy of grace, how to repose in the dependable love of Jesus, and how to be more attuned to his unfailing presence. As I learn to be carried, I will learn as well how to participate as a shepherd in the name of the Shepherd.

Finally, one of the beautiful aspects of the participation/agency model described here is the fact that the judgment of all of us is truly where it belongs, in the Lord’s hands. Until that “day,” Christ’s love compels us to preach, operating out of what we know to be the comprehensive and objective-subjective reality of Jesus Christ: “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20) — because you *are* reconciled (5:19)! We invite others to join us at the reality party where they belong, worshiping the Lord in Spirit and in truth, giving credit where credit is due. Knowledge of the *ad infinitum* nature of grace is not a prerequisite for participation.

But how much participation is enough? And how long can a person continue to reject reality and live in unreality? Perhaps we have now begun to see that these are the wrong questions.¹¹ They are laced with cooperationist toxins. Is it

11 Robert Capon once described Christians as “eschatology junkie[s].” So true. It is difficult for us to stay away from projections. For instance, how many scenarios have been concocted to describe exactly what Phil 2:10–11 will look like on the other side of the veil (“every knee [will] bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord”)? It seems that one thing all Christians should agree on is a hope that these words will be said by every person with joy and adoration — even if there are too many warnings about hell in Scripture to warrant any amount of certainty in this regard. Some chide that the ontological route I have taken in this article is unavoidably universalist; this because if “unreality” ends, and our true selves are all that remain, how could we avoid going to heaven since our true selves have no rejection in them but only faithfulness? This kind of Nestorian logic must be resisted. The common denominator of “Joe’s” true self and Joe’s

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not enough to know that a demarcation line does exist, and that no one will be in heaven without repentance and belief in the One who has repented and believed on our behalf? Is it not enough to know that when he comes again he will make all things clear? In the meantime, we will continue to share the good news that is truly good news for every human being everywhere and that, if embraced, can only give us a greater appreciation for our brothers and sisters as members of the one category of humanity that matters most — *en Christo*.

false self is Joe. It is Joe who knows and loves God, not simply Joe's true self. It is Joe who is a disabled and broken sinner, not simply Joe's false self. And it is Joe who must freely repent and believe. That's as far as we can go; therefore we preach.