

EPISTEMOLOGY, FREEDOM AND THE FAITHFUL STEWARD

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Abstract: *James Torrance's Trinitarian, incarnational theological framework had a profound effect on my development of a theology of the faithful steward. James' influence on my work is rooted in his concept of a Christocentric epistemology that I have built upon to establish the life of the steward as the proper starting point for a steward theology. My work was further shaped by James' affirmation of a Trinitarian creator who intended us to be relationally-wired as we bear his image in the world. The capstone of his influence is his Trinitarian Incarnational Model that reminds us that in the incarnation Christ bore vicariously the fullness of our humanity. As a result, Jesus Christ is the Faithful Steward, and our work of stewardship is a participation in his one great work accomplished for us. I conclude with a look at how the theology of the faithful steward produces worship and doxology as we are transformed into one-kingdom followers of Christ. This is my tribute to James' formative influence and an acknowledgement of how his theology lives on in and through my life and work.*

In 1988 I sat in my first Systematic Theology I course, unsure of what to expect from the visiting professor from the northeast of Scotland. Professor James Torrance began our class by drawing a diagram on the board that looked like a cross between an electrical circuit board and an American football pass play. Lines connected the words Yahweh and Israel, Father and Jesus, Church and We. Other lines were labeled R1 and R2, covenant and Spirit. An array of lines ran between the word "one" and "all nations," "one" and "Jews," "Gentiles," "male and female," and others.

We would soon learn that this was what Professor Torrance called the *Trinitarian Incarnational Model of Theology*. As he unpacked this model over the weeks that followed, he introduced me to a world of theological thought



I had never known. Thinking back now over the past 25 years, that model continues to give shape and depth to my writing, teaching and personal faith journey. This has been most pronounced in my work on the theology of the faithful steward, which I developed in *Stewards in the Kingdom*, *The Sower*, and *the Third Conversion*, and the theology of the steward leader, which I presented in *The Steward Leader*. This body of work is built on five pillars, all of which rest on the bedrock of Torrance's Trinitarian Incarnational Model.

1. The Centrality of the "Who Question"

Perhaps the greatest gift I received sitting under the teaching from James Torrance was the discovery of how a Christo-centric epistemology was central to all theological thought. What was commonly referred to as the "who question" became the lens through which theology, and its ethical implications were to be viewed. This focus provided my theology not only its center, but also its direction. Theological inquiry became what Anselm called *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking after understanding.

The first major implication for my work on a theology of the steward was to propose that we stop talking about stewardship and focus instead on the journey of the faithful steward. In the Christian not-for-profit world in North America we are obsessed with techniques, tactics, and checklists. We like to be told how to accomplish complex tasks in simple steps. The church and the para-church world have obliged by preaching and teaching about what it means to practice faithful stewardship, with precious little discussion about who we are in Christ and what that means for the work of the Holy Spirit in us, transforming us into faithful stewards. This error can be traced back to similar missteps where the church has talked about discipleship apart from the transformed heart of a disciple, the works of Christ apart from the person of Christ, the attributes of God apart from the nature of God, and so on. Torrance refers to this in his *Existential, Present-day Experience Model* of worship:

"He [Bonhoeffer] pleaded for following the biblical pattern of giving priority to the question of *who* over *what* and *how* — that we interpret the atonement and personal faith in terms of the incarnation (the triune God of grace) and not the other way round. The pragmatic, problem centered preoccupation with the question of *how* in our Western culture can so readily reduce the gospel to the category of means and ends."¹

1 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downer's Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 28-29.

Nowhere does Torrance state this more succinctly and powerfully than in his oft-quoted phrase, "more important than our experience of Christ is the Christ of our experience."²

By reclaiming our Christo-centric epistemology, and the rich Trinitarian theology that follows, we are invited to rediscover the heart of God, his intentions toward us and, as a result, our own nature, purpose, and vocation.

The basis of the theology of the faithful steward is found in knowing who God is through his self-revelation to us in Jesus Christ, the triune movement of God toward us. If we are God's stewards, called according to his command and empowered for his service, then we must seek knowledge of God only through a participation in the life of the Son's revelation of the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the foundational methodology from which the rest of the theology of the faithful steward was developed.

2. Rediscovering a Doctrine of Creation

The second component of the theology of the faithful steward comes from a rediscovery of a doctrine of creation that now emerges with greater clarity from Torrance's Trinitarian Incarnational model. At the heart of this doctrine are the concepts of certainty and freedom. In my book, *Stewards in the Kingdom* the essence of James' theology comes through clearly:

What we know in Jesus Christ and what we believe in the power of the Holy Spirit is that this God is a God of grace our God who is for us! We know and believe that Christ came to establish his kingdom and that through the spirit we have been called as people of that kingdom therefore we also know and believe that our God has a purpose for us and a future for us. All this we know for certain because the word was made flesh and dwelt among us. All this we believe with confidence because the sun has revealed to the heart of God to us and that revelation is revealed and confirmed to us by the spirit.³

Knowing our Creator with such great certainty allows us to know ourselves with equal certainty; who we are, why we were created, our vocation and our future. Jesus Christ revealed God's gracious and loving intent in our creation. He created us as an act of his love, and he did it in complete freedom:

2 Torrance, *Worship* p. 34

3 R. Scott Rodin, *Stewards in the Kingdom* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 59.

In his love he commits himself to be our God, to be for us, to become subject to limitation, to suffer and to bear our sin. Yet he chose this freely in accordance with his divine nature. He is the God who loves in freedom and who is free to love.⁴

From this certainty of God's nature and this understanding of creation as the outpouring of both the freedom and love of God we can better understand his creative intent. The theology of the faithful steward is built on the understanding that God created us for whole, rich and meaningful relationship in four spheres of our created reality. These spheres represent the full picture of how we bear the image of a triune God. We were "relationally wired" from the beginning. We were created for relationship with God, our self, our neighbor and the creation itself. In each of these spheres God creates us in freedom for our free and joyous response. We bear God's image as caretakers of our relationships in all four spheres. They were given to us as gifts that we might tend and nurture each to God's glory. This gives shape and direction to our vocation. Everything we do in this life takes place in and through these four spheres of relationship. When we view them as gifts we can embrace our calling as stewards.

3. The Pervasiveness of the Fall

From this relational understanding of our creation we gain a proper perspective of the all-encompassing effect of sin. The fall brought brokenness at all four spheres — our relationship with God, with our self, with our neighbor, and with creation.

Evil had its three moments in the history of humankind: rebellion against God, and enmity toward neighbor (and creation), and sin against self. Both that which defined our essence and that gave meaning to our existence were destroyed in our great act of unfaithfulness.⁵

If we do not understand this pervasive view of the effect of sin, we will miss entirely the great story of redemption and its impact on us in our calling as faithful stewards. An incomplete doctrine of creation has led to a meager doctrine of the fall, which has robbed the cross of its full significance. Here again Torrance's Trinitarian Incarnational Model serves us well by reminding us that in the incarnation Christ bore vicariously the fullness of our humanity. That included our brokenness at all four relational levels. His atoning sacrifice was

4 Rodin, *Stewards*, 61.

5 Rodin, *Stewards*, 93.

not just a cure for our loss of relationship with God, but a victorious triumph over all brokenness, to which the entirety of the Old Testament bears clear witness. Thus Torrance loved to quote Gregory of Nazianzus, “the unassumed is the unredeemed.”⁶ Bearing our full humanity, Christ became the great high priest, providing once and for all the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Torrance’s understanding of Christ as the “one on behalf of the many” was built on this understanding of the all-pervasive nature of the fall of humanity.

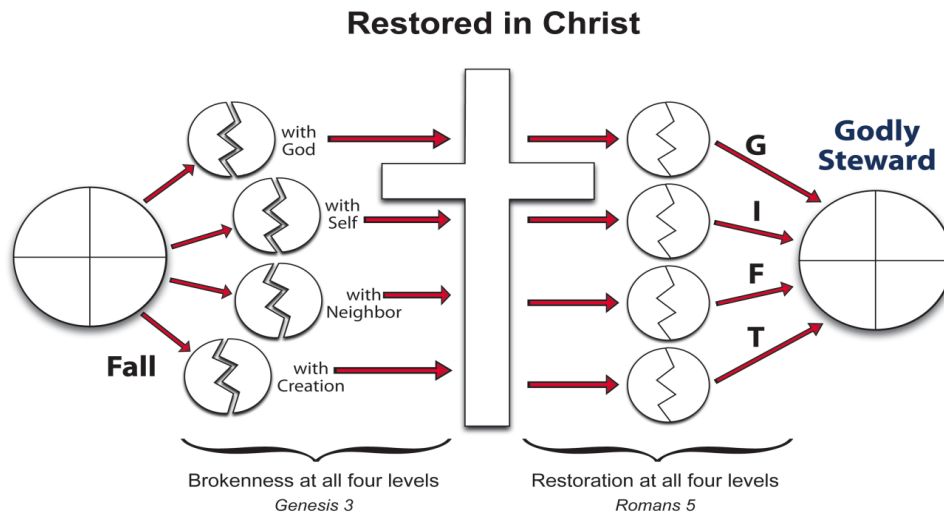
This is critical for our theology of the faithful steward. Until we embrace the magnitude of our sin and understand that every aspect of God’s created intent was tarnished, twisted and broken by our sinful rebelliousness, we cannot embrace with joy the full implication of what was won for us on the cross. Further, unless we see in Christ the representative of the fullness of our sin, we will be left to try to practice good acts of stewardship instead of understanding our calling as a participation in the life and work of the one true Steward.

4. The Faithful Steward

I fear that in American evangelical theology we have lost the understanding that the life of a follower of Jesus Christ is a participation in the work of Christ himself. We seem to have bought in to a post-resurrection deism that separates our work for Christ from his work for us and in us. This is nowhere more apparent than in our teachings on stewardship. Once we have been “saved,” that is, our relationship with God healed and restored because of the historic death and resurrection of Christ, we are now thrown back upon ourselves to figure out how to live differently as a result. When it comes to stewardship, that commonly devolves into discussions of tithing, volunteering for the church and making sure we have a will. The more it becomes “our work for God” the more bereft it is of passion, sacrifice and joy.

Instead we must come to see that all of life, our relationships in all four spheres, were lost in the fall, fully restored in Christ and given back to us as a precious gift. I use the chart on the next page to depict this movement from creation to fall, cross to restoration.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus *Epistles 101*. See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 112, 154, 167.



This chart represents a fundamental re-formation of our understanding of our call to be faithful stewards. If the cross brought restoration of our broken relationships at all four levels, then our vocation as followers of Jesus Christ is to be participants with Christ in his ongoing work of bringing healing and restoration in all four spheres. The key here is that all of life, lived out in every sphere of relationship is a gift made possible through the blood of Christ and given to us by the love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

5. Freedom and Worship

The fruit of this theology is absolute freedom. This life is not our own, but every part of it belongs to God. As his gracious gift to us we are now freed to invest ourselves fully in kingdom life. The marks of that life are our obedience to the true owner of all things, and deep joy in our participation with him in his work.

This diagram reminds us that there is no room in our life for the building of a second kingdom. Yet this is the enemy's agenda, to deceive us into believing that some parts of these relational spheres really do belong to us. This is nothing more than a reenactment of the sin of Eden, questioning the goodness of God and replacing our trust in him with the desire to grab for control and become the lords of our own little kingdoms. We fool ourselves into believing that we can live simultaneously in these two kingdoms, God's and ours. Yet experience tells us that everything we place in our own kingdom will become the source of our anxiety, fear, stress, and dissatisfaction. The theology of the faithful steward continually brings us back to the cross and helps us remember that, just as the incarnation was Christ's vicarious assumption of the fullness

of our humanity, so the cross was his redemption of that same fullness. Any attempt to reclaim back for ourselves a counterfeit sense of ownership is a denial of what was assumed for us in Bethlehem, borne for us on Calvary, and redeemed for us on Easter Sunday.

We were created to be one-kingdom people, and in response to the devastating effect of the fall, the cross of Christ redeemed and restored us to that same status. Now we live out that calling as stewards through our participation in the life of the one Faithful Steward who lived the life we could not live, died in our place for sins he did not commit, rose again to declare victory that was beyond our grasp, and now ministers in us and through us to do the work we are powerless to do on our own. This ministry continues when we are called into positions of leadership. Again drawing from so much of James' theology I wrote:

As we are being transformed into godly stewards, we are freed to fulfill our vocation as steward leaders. It is God's calling, Christ's redemption and the Holy Spirit's transformation that we rely on for our success. In this way, leadership is a work of our triune God in us and through us. And if that is God's work, and we are called to obediently respond, then we are freed to lead courageously and humbly, and to trust God for the increase.⁷

Finally, one of Torrance's greatest contributions to my theology was his view of worship. He helped me appreciate that the life of the faithful steward is a life lived as a sacrament, a holy offering to God. For that reason Torrance's view of worship gives us the fullest expression of his Trinitarian, incarnational theology, and hearing his own words on the subject is a fitting way to end this brief article.

The second view of worship is that it is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father. It means participating in union with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all, in his self-offering to the Father, in his life and death on the cross. It also means participating in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world . . . This view is Trinitarian and incarnational. It takes seriously the New Testament teaching about the soul priesthood and headship of Christ, his self offering for us to the Father and our life in union with Christ through the Spirit, with a vision of the church as the body of Christ. It is fundamentally sacramental, but in a way which enshrines the gospel of grace — that 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.⁸

7 R. Scott Rodin, *The Steward Leader* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 62-63.

8 Torrance, *Worship*, 20-22.