

"THROWN BACK ON OURSELVES": JAMES TORRANCE'S CHRISTIAN LIFE AND WORSHIP

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Abstract: *James Torrance's pastoral nature is evidenced by his concern for frail human beings "thrown back on themselves" by theology, liturgy and pastors. Facing impossible demands, they either in pride foolishly believe they succeed or, more likely, despairingly struggle. While the concern is soteriological, it is not anthropologically based. The revelation of Christ who stands in our place as our brother human, renders independent efforts ungrateful and disobedient. This dethrones us from the centre, and reorientates us as drastically as Copernicus or Einstein. Our own worship, faith and repentance can only be a participation in Christ's completed work, mediated through the Spirit. The article ends with a plea for a confessional liturgy that recognises that only Christ can truly and earnestly repent of sins, rather than the burden being thrown back on ourselves.*

"Thrown back on ourselves" is a phrase which is repeated in James Torrance's pithy and concise (yet sadly small) number of writings: it refers to a pattern of human activity occasioned by our encounter with what we perceive as our religious duty, whether in worship or in Christian life.¹ Faced with what we think

1 J. B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ," in *The Incarnation*, ed. T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), 134, 144; and *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 18. "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 us to the gospel of grace . . ." (*ibid.*, 34). It is also used by T. F. Torrance with regard to both ontological and epistemological issues, notably against Bultmann: thus, "Cheap and Costly Grace" in *God and Rationality* (London: OUP, 1971): 58, 61 respectively. In "The Eclipse of God" (*ibid.*, 50), he discusses how a false view of God and so-called human maturity might lead to people wanting to be "flung upon (their) own resources" — not entirely unlike Pelagius.

In this essay, I will use the terminology of Jock Stein in his editing of *Gospel, Church and Ministry* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012) by using "TF" for T. F. Torrance in the footnotes — and either "JB" (as he was familiarly known by students) or "James" for J. B. Torrance. There are as many references to TF as to JB's works in these footnotes simply because he wrote far more in total — but JB *talked* about it more, and it was a key part of what he



we ought to do, we think we have no alternative but to try to dredge up the capacity from within ourselves. As James puts it right at the beginning of his presentation of two ways of worship, this leads to weariness rather than joy;² we try to find from somewhere within ourselves what we know we ought to be like — enthusiastic, peaceful, filled with love for God and our neighbour. However, this is a fruitless activity, for we simply lack the capacity we need.³ And so we

did write. It was his understanding of his own central calling, as the relationship between theology and science perhaps was for TF.

2 Ibid. 128, 130; also J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 7; also, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no.1 (Feb. 1970): 60, where he says it "can become 'a yoke grievous to be borne.'"

3 As I argue below, this is an *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* judgement, based on encounter with God rather than self-analytic anthropology. Pelagianism of course asserted that we can! Pelagius was a British monk who, arriving in Rome in 410 A.D., was appalled by its moral laxity; he saw a prayer of Augustine in his *Confessions*, Book 10: *da quod iubet et iube quod vis* ("give what you command, and order what you will") as implicit justification for this depravity because it suggested that we needed God's aid. For him, God provided for humanity in creation the *posse* (ability), and we should provide the *esse* (being) and *velle* (willing) in response; it was an insult to God to suggest he asked us to do what was beyond us. Pelagius asserted that Scripture told us that Adam, Eve and Cain had sinned, but it did not tell us that Abel had - so he had not! For Pelagius, as in the usual attribution to Kant, "ought implies can." By contrast, Augustine asserted we were unable *not* to sin: *non posse non peccare*. An extensive debate involving many over an extended period of time ended in official condemnation at the Council of Ephesus in 431. For the debate, cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); John Ferguson, *Pelagius* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1951); Robert F. Evans *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968); Theodore de Bruyn, *Pelagius' Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), and — of course — Augustine's own voluminous anti-Pelagian writings. A repeated theme for Augustine was that Pelagius' theology "rendered the Cross of none effect" (*On Nature and Grace*, 7) and showed base ingratitude (*Ep.* 176.2; 175.1). Pelagianism then and now has had many voluble supporters, particularly in the mediating form known as semi-Pelagianism which speaks of human co-operation with God. It has a considerable subsequent life in various medieval and subsequent theological disputes, including those surrounding Luther's debate with Erasmus over the bondage of the will, Jansenism, and (perhaps) Arminianism. The use of the term is in the manner of J. B. Torrance — as theological shorthand — without unwrapping further the various issues arising in these controversies, except implicitly, for example, in remarks about "free will" ("Vicarious Humanity", 128; *Worship*, 7). The concentration of this essay is on content rather than form (insofar as they can be separated), though another approach would be to analyse the way in which James' theology is oriented around issues of order — repentance before forgiveness, indicatives before imperatives, incarnation before atonement, Christology before soteriology, etc. — and oppositions — covenant rather than contract, evangelical repentance rather than legal repentance, worship as Christ's work rather than ours, and so forth.

are faced with the classic dilemma of trying to do that which, deep down, we know we cannot. It is in fact what Paul wrote about: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing" (Romans 7:18-19, NIV).⁴

Now, this of course is also the insight of Martin Luther, which delivered him from personal agony as he sought repeatedly as a monk to live without sin. Yet he found that this did not work because the moment he had finished confessing one round of sins, he thought of some others he had not thought of and so had to return to the confessional.⁵ We can well believe his confessors found this somewhat irritating, and might encourage him to be less scrupulous. Any less conscientious man might well have followed that advice.⁶ But for Luther there were no half measures. One could not simply elide over difficulties. Luther found from his own experience and scrupulous self-examination that he could never attain to the holiness he believed essential to his existence as a monk. Thankfully, Staupitz (the Vicar General of his Augustinian order, and his personal confessor) directed him to the New Testament,⁷ and it is from that attention to Scripture that the Reformation ensued. He discovered in Romans that the righteous shall live by faith, not by works. This was his moment of liberation.

It is with the same degree of logic that James Torrance examines the rationale of Christian worship. Like Luther, he tells us that Christ has done it right, unlike us. Like Luther, he accepts no half-measures, no blurring of the question, no "there's always truth in different points of view." Rather he drives the logic on inexorably to a truth that is simultaneously rigorous and liberating. Like a poet who has found the precise verbal expression for his insights, James tends to use the same formulations, sometimes the same words over and over again.

People encountering James Torrance's writing on this subject frequently find

4 This is also the passage identified by Krister Stendahl as significant in what he regards as a fundamental misreading of Paul, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *Harvard Theological Review* 56, no.3 (Jul., 1963): 199-215. I attempt to deal with what I suspect would be his criticisms of my argument below!

5 *W.A.* 40.ii.15.15, quoted in G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1953), 116.

6 *Ibid.*, 115-17. Rupp argues, "there is a world of difference between the scrupulosity of the saints and a self-centred scrupulosity which denotes moral obtuseness." (117)

7 *Ibid.*, 117. For other treatments of Luther, cf. Graham Tomlin's concise and pithy *Luther and His World* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2012); Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (Yale: Yale U. P., 2006, orig. 1989); Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999); and the lively classic Roland Bainton account, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, orig. 1950).

it astonishingly liberating, as I know both from students and strangers I have encountered. A Pentecostal minister I met once in Australia (and have never seen again) told me how James' lectures on worship had revolutionised his life. James put his finger, he said, on exactly what was the problem with the worship in the church he led. And once he had seen it, he could never un-see it.⁸

It is one thing to see something and another to see and communicate it in its vitality and importance. There is thus both an irenic *and* polemical aspect to James' writings, which seeks to persuade by illumination and a reduction to strikingly expressed essentials. It is necessary not just to indicate that something is right but that something else is *wrong*.⁹ T. F. Torrance could have been speaking of his brother when he wrote that the Gospel should be proclaimed, "with all the clarity and simplicity that is possible, otherwise it will never reach its target, that is, not even begin to offend."¹⁰ Thus James' comments on worship were for some life, but for others death. However, one has to say that, given his own charming and benign personality, when there was offence (which seemed to be rare), it was only that of the Gospel!¹¹

8 I sometimes wonder if this is the same man whom James says told him that for ten years he had been "whipping up" himself and his congregation, and that his encounter with James led to his "conversion" (*Worship*, 22-23). How often we meet ministers (or worship leaders!) who tell us that we have not been enthusiastic enough in our singing!

9 D. Bonhoeffer argues that critical or negative Christology is as necessary as positive Christology, and that the abandonment of the category of heresy is a terrible loss: "There can be no credal confession without saying, 'In the light of Christ, this is true and this is false!'" Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978, E.T. by Edwin H. Robertson, 1968), 75. This was, of course, in the context of the growth of the false religion of Messianic Nazism. As Helmut Thielicke points out, to declare at a 1930s German Berlin Sports Palace assembly (in which the suffering Christ was being mocked) that Christ was the Messiah was theologically correct but safe (because not understood); to cry out that, "Christ is our Leader in time and eternity; those who reject him are seducers" was to formulate his statement in terms of the leader-cult of Nazism, be immediately understood and thus invite martyrdom. It is pointed, and brings about a response. Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, E.T. by G. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 44.

10 T. F. Torrance writes: "Luther was surely right when he declared that no matter how clearly and simply you preach justification, the common people react to it like a cow staring at a new gate. But in the teaching of university students I find that the reaction may also be one of anger and resentment when they understand more than they can accept" ("Cheap and Costly Grace", 71). "Blessed is the one who is not offended in me" (Mt. 11:6, quoted in Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Centre*, 109, 111). Cf. also S. Kierkegaard, "The Paradox and the Offended Consciousness" in *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967, E.T. by David F. Swenson, 1936), 61-68.

11 I personally experienced great kindness from T. F. Torrance, but it has to be acknowledged that not everyone saw it that way; Jock Stein acknowledges in *Gospel, Church and Ministry* (18, n27) that this towering intellectual figure did not suffer fools

James' method is often by the presentation of differing models, between which the reader is invited to choose. It is Socratic in the sense that the approved direction of thought is wholly clear, yet honest in that the different models are described fairly, in their strongest form (for example, regarding Harnack).¹² Thus the reader can tell that she is not being manipulated deceitfully and has room to argue. Yet the explanatory power of such models is that for the most part they are utterly convincing; they are described without any fudging and with ruthless attention to the key points, being reduced to the most cogent form possible. In fact, they (along with their attendant diagrams) bear the hallmark of scientific modelling.¹³

It makes perfect sense to see Jesus as the mediator of our worship. However, is it not astonishing that so few have made this connection before the Torrances? Not just our default human viewpoint but theology also has assumed that worship is "our work," our response to what God has done. Even when the alternative position has been refuted, the alternative has rarely been thought through for Christian life and worship.¹⁴ This is one of the great achievements we are

gladly. It was a joke at New College in the early 1970s that the Dogmatics Department had its own Trinity: TF (utterly incomprehensible and ineffable), JB (who ministered the things of TF to common mortals) and Alasdair Heron (who transmitted the Torrantian vision at a practical level to students with regard to issues like essays)! Whilst largely unfair, it has to be admitted that there were elements of truth in this caricature. On one occasion, an Honours Calvin class with Alasdair Heron was interrupted by an unexpected visit by TF, of whom we all stood in awe. We had been discussing a knotty problem (about why science had not developed under Eastern Orthodoxy if its theology was so much better than the West's!). Alasdair said, "You can now ask the horse's mouth!" I think TF was approachable, but JB always *felt* approachable.

12 Graduates were treated at Aberdeen to a series of detailed lectures on 19th Century theology, which sadly remain unpublished but some of it had a clear parallel in his Edinburgh colleague Alasdair Heron's *Protestant Theology in the 20th Century* (London: Lutterworth, 1980), 32-36. James regaled us with the tale of Harnack delivering the lectures that became *Das Wesen des Christentums* (trans. as *What is Christianity?*) to a huge adoring crowd in Berlin at what some of us would regard as a most ungodly hour!

13 It is therefore ironic that, according to members of the family, James' brother, Thomas — the great pioneer of the relation of theology and science — looked rather disparagingly at such diagrams, surely misconstruing here the meaning of "imageless thinking" (e.g. *The Mediation of Christ*, Exeter: Paternoster, 1983, 30).

14 As James explains, this has much to do with the Arian struggle in which the divinity of Christ was affirmed with such difficulty, distracting attention from the equal necessity to affirm the true humanity of Christ and his vicarious worship on our behalf: thus J. Jungmann, *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer* (London: Chapman, 1965); J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 54-55; T. F. Torrance, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: the Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy" in *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Chapman, 1975), 142. A "golden thread" of recognition of Jesus' vicarious humanity runs through the history of theology. The

honouring, something so essential, so simple, so easy to grasp once it has been grasped, it is a way of seeing as radical a change as Einstein's theory of Relativity is in the scientific sphere.¹⁵ What we had previously thought unalterable, like Newton's absolute reference of the space-time container within which everything happens, is utterly relativized by this new insight. As TF argues, if it is the speed of created light which is absolute in our world, it is Uncreated Light to which everything is relative spiritually.¹⁶

This also has a parallel in the Copernican revolution, for the centre of the universe changes: it is Christ, rather than the individual self, around whom all revolves. I wrote above that it makes perfect sense for many to see Jesus as the one who stands in our place to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, but it also requires *metanoia*, a change of mind to see that the centre of gravity has changed, that Jesus is the centre.¹⁷ *Christ the Centre* is indeed the title of the English translation of Bonhoeffer's Christology lectures. He replaces our multiplicity of individual selves, all caught up in ourselves and our own importance. Christ both dethrones us from our hubristic illusion, and re-enthrones us in himself, replacing our alienation, competition and anxious self-seeking with his love and self-giving. We find ourselves in him. Our warring individualistic pursuit of our own goals is replaced by harmony in him. It is here too that the Gospel calls us to look beyond the conflict of capitalism and communism to an economic system that is not predicated on "To the devil with the hindmost!"¹⁸ There is a

acknowledgement of his assumption of our *fallen* humanity is less common (T. F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 49-50; J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 43), and was even denied — to my shock — by George Dragas, a friend of the Torrances, in a public lecture at Aberdeen in the early 1980s.

15 "As in every great scientific advance we have to engage in a desperate struggle with ourselves in order to make the radical change in meaning that it involves... By its very nature (the Gospel) cannot be apprehended without a profound change in our natural habits of mind, without a desperate struggle with ourselves and our aversion for change" (T. F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace", 72).

16 *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Belfast: Christian Journals, 1980), 73-104, especially 74-5.

17 Thus T. F. Torrance refers to justification as "at once the most easy thing and yet the most difficult thing to understand, for it is the most easy and yet the most difficult to accept . . . Justification by grace alone is equally difficult for the man in the parish and the man in the university" ("Cheap and Costly Grace", 70-71). It, "calls for a radical self-renunciation, a displacement of the self by Jesus Christ... in which you do not think out of your own self-centredness but out of a centre in the Incarnate Word who summons you to leave all and follow Him" (70).

18 It is to be noted that James Torrance was politically more left-wing than T. F. Torrance, though both regarded apartheid as an abomination (personal conversations with members of the family).

vast difference between “to be is to be in relationship” and “to be is to be in competition.”¹⁹

This application too is an example of the way in which theological apprehension is akin to genuine scientific discovery in being both fruitful and challenging; as time goes on one perceives the implications piercing further and further.²⁰

With James’ third theological model, Christ is at the centre; we are at the periphery. Our life is a sharing in the life of Christ, of the new Adam who has fulfilled both sides of the covenant (‘the God-humanward’ and ‘the human-Godward’ movements).

The whole comparison is extraordinarily illuminating in revealing exactly what is at stake. It becomes clear that even in the evangelical-seeming “existential” second model God is on the periphery, acting as the solution to our self-diagnosed problems. It is for this same reason that Karl Barth refused the Tillichian analysis of the human predicament: that humanity works out what the questions are and the Gospel provides the answers! As Barth argues, the Gospel reveals the questions as well. (This statement also makes a fundamental methodological point to which we will return.) Just so, James spoke with scorn of the 1960s dictum that “the world sets the agenda!” The issue of the proper starting point in theology is crucial, and so often resolves into the question: are we dealing with theology or anthropology?

Anthropology and subjectivism

I have drawn an analogy with Luther, but Luther’s (or *Lutheranism’s!*) understanding of justification has been interpreted by some as purely forensic: God, by virtue of Christ’s death, looks at us not as we are but as we are in Christ. *Simul iustus et peccator*, unless interpreted as a continuous and dynamic relationship, can make our justification “an empty legal fiction.”²¹ Whilst

19 Cf., for example, the clash of communities between the diabolic N.I.C.E. and the heavenly St. Anne’s in C.S. Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength* (London: Pan, 1956). One chapter uses George Macdonald’s saying, “Real Life is Meeting” (181).

20 Cf. the implications of a perception of what it means to be a human person grounded on the doctrine of the Trinity: J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, and — among many other works — Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

21 T. F. Torrance, “Cheap and Costly Grace”, 83-84; also 59-60. Cf. also “Justification in Doctrine and Life” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 156, 160; “The Roman Doctrine of Grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology” (*ibid.*), 186; *Mediation*, 50. A thorough treatment of the doctrine of justification is needed to respond to Douglas Campbell’s criticisms in *The Deliverance of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

concurring that what we have is an *aliena iustitia* — salvation achieved *extra nos* — for James Torrance this comes by participation in the person of Christ. We are not simply viewers of a transaction enacted over our heads. Everything we have is not just *per Christum* or *propter Christum* but *in Christo*.²² Luther's emphasis on faith, even though it is really grace perceived by faith (Ephesians 2:8), can lead to the subjectivist concentration on the act of faith and the required need then for a "personal decision for Christ" which is decisive for the salvation of the individual.²³ This can turn faith itself into a "work", an act of co-redemption.²⁴ James spoke of how this is putting the emphasis in the wrong place: rather faith arises as we perceive that Christ has done everything for us.²⁵ Thus Paul writes, "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." (I Corinthians 1:30, KJV)

When one perceives this, one is having faith, not something one tries to whip up oneself from within one's own resources, but as the subjective correlate of an objective concentration on what God has done on our behalf in Christ.²⁶ As Karl Barth puts it,

. . . the fact that we believe can only be, *a priori*, a secondary matter, becoming small and unimportant in face of the outstanding and real thing involved in

2013), which argues that the whole notion is contractual and opposed to an emphasis on participation. McLeod Campbell viewed justification as, "not just a non-imputation of sin in which we believe; that would be some kind of justification by *our* faith. On the contrary, justification is bound up with a feeding upon Christ, a participation in his human righteousness." T. F. Torrance, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: the Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," 141. Gal. 2:20 - translated as "the life I now live I live by the faith *of* the Son of God" (rather than "faith *in*") was as much a favourite of that Campbell as it is of the newer version! Cf. also T. F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 107-8.

22 Similarly, our worship is not just *dia Christon*, because of the work and merits of Christ, but *dia Christou*, through Christ. J. B. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ", 136.

23 T.F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 102-4; "Cheap and Costly Grace", 58.

24 T. F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace", 57, 58.

25 He told the story of a man who once told him of his conversion in a South Wales coal mine in great detail, but who was taken aback when James responded by telling him of *his* conversion two thousand years ago when Christ was born, lived, died and rose again! T. F. Torrance tells a similar tale (*Mediation*, 95-6). Both seem to have drawn from Barth's story about Kohlbrügge who, when asked about when he was converted, replied, "On Golgotha!" Arthur C. Cochrane in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 16. The story is told slightly differently by J. B. Torrance, *Worship*, 64.

26 Although the subjective reality and possibility of revelation is the Holy Spirit for Karl Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, chapter 16).

the Christian proclamation — *what* the Christian believes . . . It is noteworthy that, apart from this first expression, “I believe,” the Confession is silent upon the subjective fact of faith. Nor was it a good time when this relationship was reversed, when Christians grew eloquent over their action, over the uplift and emotion of the experience of this thing, which took place in man — and when they became speechless as to *what* they may believe.²⁷

In other words, if one tries to have the subjective (faith) without the objective (what God has done in Christ), then one has neither; if one concentrates on the objective, one has the subjective as well.²⁸

It is noteworthy that the modern age finds itself unable to think except in subjectivist categories that emphasise the voluntarist character of faith: thus the pivotal song “When you believe” in the (otherwise quite good) animated biblical epic, *Prince of Egypt* (1998),²⁹ or the typical debate between Pastor Book and Malcolm Reynolds in the film *Serenity* (2005): “When I talk about belief, why do you always assume I’m talking about God?” The repeated notion of “the leap of faith” into the void (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, 1989, and just about *passim*) lays the basis for accusations of irrationality. Denuded of its cognitive content, faith is repeatedly contrasted with a science construed in a positivist manner with supposed factual certainties and a bogus value — and hypothesis-free “scientific method” (thus Dawkins *et al*).³⁰

James Torrance, as a good reformed theologian, is of course in debt more to Calvin than Luther. Luther, for all his profound insights into the nature of Christian life has a distinctly anthropological emphasis, as James would point out. That is to say, he approached the question of God from the viewpoint of humanity, from the issue of “what can God do for us?” The central question becomes, “where

27 *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. by G. T. Thomson (London: SCM, 1966, orig. 1949), 15-16.

28 To adapt Christ’s saying, one has to die to one’s faith in order to have it. “Here too it is true that whoso would keep his life shall lose it; but whoso shall lose it for My sake shall gain his life.” (ibid., 16) It is only by concentrating on something greater that we have the lesser. This is a frequently repeated theme in the writings of C.S. Lewis which we might call it the “law of inattention.” Thus Lewis argues that it is only by putting our minds on heavenly things that we have earthly things; it is only by wanting something other than friends that we do have friends. “First and Second Things,” in *First and Second Things: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. W. Hooper, (London: Fount, 1971), 22.

29 The words, “Who knows what miracle you can achieve when you believe?” subsume faith under the category of the American dream; perhaps it is no surprise this song won an Oscar!

30 *Contra*: M. Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (London: RKP, 1958) and T. F. Torrance, *passim*.

do I find a gracious God?"³¹ This, James argued, is the anthropological thrust of Western Christianity, proceeding from before Augustine, and contrasting with the Eastern emphasis on the being of God. It finds its climax in the theology of Albrecht Ritschl in the 19th Century, as James showed in his detailed lectures in the topic.³² For Ritschl, this was the core of Christianity, to follow the clue in Luther's colleague and successor, Philip Melancthon: "To know Christ means to know his benefits and not to reflect on his natures and modes of incarnation." This is fundamentally an instrumental approach to Christ, not who he is *in himself* but rather *what he can do for me*.³³

Yet, as James Torrance showed in his lectures, the "turn to the subject" that was so obvious in Ritschl had also taken place in the theology of Schleiermacher and Hegel. All manifested aspects of the human subject as the new centre for theology whether it be the cognitive (Hegel, the intellect), cognitive (Ritschl, the will) or affective (Schleiermacher, the emotions). Barth too identified the same problem in Schleiermacher, of whom he writes that "he made the Christianly pious person into the criterion and content of his theology."³⁴

However, this turn was scarcely restricted to the 19th Century. Perhaps ever since the Renaissance and certainly with Descartes and the Enlightenment, attention had been subtly shifting from "our apprehension of *God*" to "*our apprehension of God*." Barth concurred with Feuerbach's criticism of religion as

31 Thus T. F. Torrance, "Justification", 160.

32 As James pointed out in his lectures on Albrecht Ritschl, his model of Christian existence as a series of ellipses with two foci — Jesus as one focus and the Church as the other — gives the whole game away. Christ ceases to be the sole focus and centre, and ultimately it is the self who truly becomes the centre. Jesus is only a means to an end, effectively a tool for human self-realisation. Herbert Butterfield believed that Christianity had betrayed its mission when drawn into various power systems and concluded his *Christianity and History* with the words, "Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted" (London: Collins Fontana, 1957, orig. 1949, 189). The notion that "Christianity And" was a betrayal was echoed by C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fount, 1982, orig. 1942), 35-7, 101, 106. "And", remarks Karl Barth, always turns into the other focus becoming the *only* focus. *Church Dogmatics, Vol. II. 1*, ed. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker and others, (E.T. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 175. For Barth, the copulative particle "and" was "a trojan horse within which the superior enemy was already drawn into the city" (*ibid.*, 173). In a similar manner, James Torrance identified the phenomenon of "civil religion" in Northern Ireland, South Africa and the United States, a blend of nationalism, political or economic identity and religious affiliation.

33 *Worship*, 17; "Vicarious Humanity," 134-35; also T.F. Torrance, "Cheap and Costly Grace", 63-4.

34 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript on Schleiermacher* 1968, in Clifford Green, *Karl Barth, Theologian of Freedom*, (London: Collins, 1989), 66-90, here 80. With all these, theology had become anthropology (89).

projected self-concern, thus clearing the ground for a thunderous concentration on revelation “vertically from above” by the “wholly other;” a rediscovery of the “Godness of God.”³⁵

As much as Luther, Calvin thought our Christian existence depended on what Jesus had done for us, but was more concerned with ontological issues. To use scholastic terminology also employed by James, he moved on from the *ordo cognoscendi* (order of knowing) to think more about the *ordo essendi* (order of being). James identified that it was essential to make the latter the true theological and methodological starting point.³⁶ Otherwise (as with Tillich above) the starting point determines the ending. The answer will be shaped by the question in a restrictive manner so that you never learn more than you began with.

James’ son, Alan has made much use of the analogy of the Procrustean bed.³⁷ It is a powerful metaphor which ably describes how questions have to be “open” to the reality they seek to investigate. James himself frequently used the “Have you stopped beating your wife?” question to illustrate how questions can be closed and unjustly determine the possible answers in advance.³⁸

The point here is not just that questions must be open (though they must) but that whilst we inevitably start “from where we are,” we should not stay there.³⁹

35 Heron, 76-77; K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. C. T. Deans (London: Collins, 1967), 41.

36 Or, as he called it, the dogmatic starting point (*Worship*, 58). It was critical for the distinction between the “who” and “how” questions which he saw key to Bonhoeffer’s Christology (17), and the dangers of pragmatism (59).

37 Procrustes in Greek myth was a brigand who preyed on travellers and tied his victims to a bed. However, any who were too small were stretched till they “fitted” whilst those too large had the relevant parts of their bodies removed.

38 T. F. Torrance showed how Christ frequently responded to questions by “questioning the questioners” — right up to the roots of their being, revealing how their questions showed who they really were. “Questioning in Christ” in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 117-27.

39 In John 2:35-51, the disciples follow Jesus not because they fully know who he is but because (selfishly, if you like) they see him as the answer to a “felt need.” He is “Lamb of God”, “Rabbi”, “Messiah” and so forth to them as they first encounter him. That is inevitable — the epistemological starting point (the *ordo cognoscendi*) — but the important point is that they need to go beyond that, to go beyond Jesus as existing on the periphery of their being to his being instead at their centre and thus illuminating them and their being — the ontological starting point (the *ordo essendi*). Jesus as they come to know him is much greater than what they originally looked for in him, and so their vision changes.

Soteriology and pastoral issues

At this point, it is necessary to return to our opening discussion, but with an altered perspective. Our sin or incapacity cannot be known introspectively (as part of the Western *ordo salutis*) but only in relationship to God and above all to Christ. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, it is only thus that we know who we are.⁴⁰ Similarly, Calvin links self-knowledge together with knowledge of God.⁴¹

However, this would only be an aching burden — creating a cloud of guilt over us, whether rejected or accepted by us — did we not also know that it was forgiven. Thus we can only properly know sin in the light of forgiveness.⁴² As Ezekiel puts it, when God will restore Israel:

Then you shall remember your evil ways, and your dealings that were not good; and you shall loathe yourselves for your iniquities, and your abominable deeds. (Ezekiel 36:31)

I have already discussed the dangers of a self-diagnosed anthropology setting the criteria for theology: does this then mean that a pastoral or soteriological approach is wrong? Certainly Bonhoeffer and others assert that a discussion of the person of Christ should not start with soteriology!⁴³ However, the witness of the church is that soteriological concerns are nonetheless vital. Thus, quite apart from Luther's experience in the cloisters, there is the fact that the formation of Christological dogma was grounded soteriologically.⁴⁴

That this is true is supported by the fact that the key debates on Christology resolved down to two fundamental statements:

40 *Christ the Centre*, 31.

41 *Institutes*, I.1.

42 E. Jüngel, "Living Out of Righteousness: God's Action — Human Agency," in *Theological Essays II*, trans. A. Neussfeld-Fast and J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 242: "The whole weight of human sin and guilt is first known where sin and guilt are moved into the light of forgiveness. By making us whole, God shows us what destroys."

43 *Christ the Centre*, 37-39. Bonhoeffer acknowledges, once he has established the priority of the christological question over the soteriological, that this is to establish a theological method; it would be wrong to conclude that this means the person and work can be separated, and the christological question must be addressed to the one complete Christ, who can never be separated from his work (39).

44 Archibald Robertson writes in his introduction to Newman's translation of Athanasius' works that Athanasius' "theological greatness lies in his firm grasp of *soteriological* principles, in his resolute subordination of everything else, even the formula *homoousios*, to the central fact of Redemption, and to what that fact implied as to the person of the Redeemer." *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, orig. 1891), lxix).

Jesus had to be fully divine so that we were *saved*.⁴⁵

Jesus had to be fully human so that we were saved.⁴⁶ (The unassumed is the unredeemed!)⁴⁷

In other words, soteriology rules! Yet it is soteriology informed by Christology. As James Torrance argues, the incarnation must interpret the atonement and not the other way round.⁴⁸ Then we are dealing not merely with a forensic act which deals with our sin and guilt, but with an ontological one which deals with our sinful nature, one that changes our being.⁴⁹ This changes the nature of repentance too: the problem is not merely bad things we might do that grieve us, but our whole nature, inclined to evil — in C. S. Lewis' word, "bent."⁵⁰

45 T. F. Torrance's powerful argument in his introduction to *The Incarnation*, xi-xxii, esp. xiv-xvii: "What would it mean for mankind if in the last resort . . . there is no real bridge in being or nature between (Jesus) and God?" (xvi).

46 T. F. Torrance, "Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," 139-214, esp. 147-55. It is important to see that *both* the Orthodox and Apollinaris (143-47, 152) were motivated by soteriological concerns, but the Orthodox response was more profound in its realisation of what we need to be saved *from*. It is necessary for salvation not only that the Son of God becomes who we truly are, that is, subject to the same weaknesses and temptations, but that he also *changes* this from within, from the old to the new, sanctifying it. Rather than his taking on of our humanity polluting him — as Apollinaris thought — it is necessary so we can be, sharers through the Holy Spirit in Jesus' new humanity. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with us in our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Cf. also Hebs. 2:14-18 and the whole thrust of the Epistle. Contrast Millard Erickson: "For the humanity of Jesus was not the humanity of sinful human beings, but the humanity possessed by Adam and Eve before their fall." *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 736. Cf. also n14.

47 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101; Cyril of Alexandria, *In Ioannis Evangelium*, MPG, LXXIV, 89CD.

48 "The Doctrine of the Trinity in our Contemporary Situation" in *The Forgotten Trinity* 3, ed. A. Heron (London: BCC, 1991), 13-14; "Introduction" to J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1996, orig. 1856), 1-16.

49 The problem then is guilt rather than the defect in our natures. This is exemplified by the picture in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) of the great burden on Christian's back rolling off when he looks at Golgotha, and disappearing into the sepulchre. (To be fair to Bunyan, this takes place very early in the story.) If the problem is merely one of guilt, then our nature remains unchanged, for sin is external to us. Moreover, those feeling an injustice often concentrate on trying to make others feel guilty, but — if they are successful — the others' main motivation may be therapeutic, in order to feel better rather than because they are full of compassion. By contrast, the Gospel — by announcing the forgiveness of sins — enables action for the right outward-looking reasons. This is James' distinction between legal and evangelical repentance.

50 "Repentance gives no exemption from the consequences of nature, but merely looses sin": Athanasius, *De Inc. Verbi*, 7.11-12, trans. R. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon: 1971).

Jesus' assumption of our humanity is twofold for James: first he carves out a new humanity from within our flesh,⁵¹ performing the righteous demands of the Law (the *dikaionomata*) and sanctifying it as he goes along the lines of Irenaeus' *anakephalaiosis* "recapitulation").⁵² Secondly, he surrenders the old humanity to the righteous verdict of God, the *katakrimata*.⁵³ This means that both resurrection and crucifixion are necessary. Jesus is the "Judge judged in our place" (Barth), the one who — unlike us — accepts the verdict of God's "No" on sin; therefore he bears our suffering as the one who once more stands in our place. There is here no notion of "satisfaction" nor of "penal atonement" (in the commonly accepted use of the term). Nor do we have an angry God needing to be appeased or a contractual theology in which God requires something done before he can forgive us. It is all about human transformation, a change from the old Adam to the new. God acts, as James repeated constantly, because of the covenant, because of his unconditional commitment to humanity which leads him to bear all suffering for our sake simply through love. Here God's holiness cannot be opposed to his love, as if atonement theology was a matter of "squaring the circle," of somehow reconciling the two opposing aspects of God's being, his love and his justice.⁵⁴

51 James' cousin, James B. Walker was fond of suggesting that Luke: 2.52 means that Jesus "boxed his way forward" as he sanctified our nature. The Greek word *prokope* is usually translated as "advanced" (cf. also Phil. 1:12, 25), but literally means a pioneer cutting a way forward. Cf. also T. F. Torrance, "The Logic and Analogic of Biblical and Theological Statements in the Greek Fathers," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 38-39. Roland Walls - James Torrance's friend and colleague at New College, Edinburgh — gave a memorable illustration of this in his Pneumatology lectures. First he held his hand flat and said, "this is how we are"; then he held it vertical and asked, "so what use is it to us if Jesus comes like this?"; finally he held it flat and, shudderingly and with great struggle, brought it slowly upright till he triumphantly attained the vertical; "this is what it means for the Son of God to become human and save us," he ended. Luke clearly indicates that Jesus is recapitulating the history of Israel, but *doing it right where they did it wrong*. Thus after his (Red Sea) baptism, he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted like the Israelites — in his case for 40 days rather than 40 years — but resisting temptation whereas they succumbed to it. Eventually he accomplishes his own "exodus" in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31). In Jamesian fashion (though, to the best of my knowledge, this is not one of his), I have myself repeatedly used the diagram of an extended x, with true Israel being narrowed down eventually to the solitary figure of Jesus on the Cross, abandoned and betrayed even by his friends, before expanding after the resurrection with the new people of God sharing in Christ's humanity through the Spirit.

52 *Adversus Haereses*, II.xxii.4; also III.xvi.6; V.xx.2-xxi.2; III.xviii.1; III.xviii.7; III.xxi.10; III.xxii.3. Irenaeus' insights on this topic are scattered hither and thither rather than being gathered together, showing how unsystematic theology is at this point.

53 *Worship*, 46-47.

54 E. Jünger, "Living Out of Righteousness", 250-56. This is an excellent exposition

Forgiveness and repentance

James' close analysis of Scottish church history since the Reformation revealed several insightful (and relatively lonely) prophetic theologians disputing legalistic, contractual and forensic accounts of the work of Christ and dualistic accounts of God, whose remorseless and (un-Lutheran!) justice was his primary characteristic.⁵⁵ Among these were the Marrowmen and John McLeod Campbell. James' introduction to Campbell is invaluable, as he reveals Campbell's (and his own) pastoral heart:

I came to see that, in reality, whatever I preached, they were only hearing a *demand on them to be* — not hearing the Divine Secret of the Gospel as to how to be — *that which they were called to be*. Of this they themselves had no suspicions; they said, and honestly, that they did not question Christ's power to save, neither did they doubt the freeness of the Gospel or Christ's willingness to save them: *all their doubts were as to themselves*.⁵⁶

In any case, who is able to repent? To be able to do so implies that we are not really *sinful*, but only occasionally sin and are capable of turning back to God from our own resources. Yet Scripture tells us that what we need is a real change of heart — a heart transplant:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then . . . you shall be my people, and I will be your God. (Ezekiel 36: 26-28 NRSV)⁵⁷

of the best aspects of Luther, emphasising his understanding that God's righteousness is his making of us righteous, that God is righteous in his grace (251). Anselm's theological method may well be exemplary in the *Proslogion*, but he also operated with a feudal notion of divine honour that makes God into a prickly sovereign, jealous of his dignity (*Cur Deus Homo*). Some modern "evangelical" hymns still adopt a pre-Lutheran understanding of justice: thus, "My sinful soul is counted free/ For God the just is satisfied" ("Before the throne of God above", Charitie Lees Bancroft and Vikki Cook, 1997) and, quite notoriously in the UK, "till on that cross when Jesus died/ the wrath of God was satisfied" (the otherwise beautiful "In Christ alone", Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, 2001). This line has also been rewritten variously, including, "the love of God was magnified," and "the arms of God were opened wide."

55 J. B. Torrance, "Introduction" to McLeod Campbell, 8-9.

56 J. McLeod Campbell, *Reminiscences and Reflections*, 32, quoted *ibid.*, 3.

57 Cf. also 11.19-20. This is part of a prophecy of returning to the land of Israel. Note the Pneumatology which reminds us of the vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37).

This is associated with radical cleansing (Ezekiel 36:25), and in Jeremiah with a new covenant in a passage much quoted in the New Testament:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31: 31-34)

What we see here prophesied is the new covenant, in which God comes himself to fulfil our side of the covenant, and to enable us to fulfil the *dikaionomata* of God by sharing in the new humanity of Christ through the Spirit. This means that we will know God *internally*, in the depths of our being and we will live with transformed hearts and minds. This will be by participation in what he has done for us.

As James argued constantly, then, there is no need for that particular impossibility — our own independent repentance — for Christ, as McLeod Campbell argued, has repented for us. There is nothing we can add to what Christ has done in order to make it ours; nor is there any way we can separate ourselves from it. There is no distance between Christ's work and ourselves.⁵⁸ Indeed, as Jüngel argues, it is closer to us than we are to ourselves.⁵⁹ We are invited to share in it.

58 However, for T. F. Torrance, this does not exclude the possibility of Hell (*Mediation*, 104). When TF was asked about this by students, he said it was like two millstones going in opposite directions and thus grinding upon one another: the top one says, "I love you; I love you: I love you," but the bottom repeats constantly "I don't want you: I want myself. I don't want you: I want myself." Surely this is the dreadful "impossible possibility" for the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. Cf. also C. S. Lewis — e.g. the fate of the dwarves in *The Last Battle* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964, orig. 1956), and those living in hell and refusing heaven in *The Great Divorce* (London: Fontana, 1983, orig. 1946).

59 E. Jüngel, "Living Out of Righteousness", 245-46. "Faith is in the strongest sense an exclusion of every kind of human self-realization. For the believer trusts in the work of God" (254). We might also say that Jesus, through the Spirit, is closer to us than our own breath (*pneuma*).

For James it was pivotal that forgiveness was logically prior to repentance.⁶⁰ He picked up a distinction he attributed to Calvin between legal and evangelical repentance, and built on it considerably.⁶¹ Along with these fundamental distinctions was one repeated continuously between covenant and contract, and the relationships between indicatives and imperatives⁶² and incarnation and atonement.⁶³ In all these, alongside McLeod Campbell, pastoral considerations were vital, though always theologically grounded. This clarification of issues is one of our primary debts to him. They provide key resources for ministry.⁶⁴

Of course, we can always refuse to be forgiven and cling to our own sense of self-righteousness. Barth is unimpressed by those who speak of being “unable to forgive themselves.”

By this we shall be judged, about this the Judge will one day put the question, Did you live by grace, or did you set up gods for yourself and possibly want to be one yourself? Have you been a faithful servant, who has nothing to boast of?⁶⁵

60 “Vicarious Humanity”, 142-44; *Worship*, 44-46; “Introduction” to *The Nature of Atonement*, 12-13.

61 *Ibid.*, 11-12. Calvin does not *exactly* affirm this. In *Institutes* III.3.4 Calvin indeed explains the distinction between legal and evangelical repentance, but attributes it to “others.” He begins the following section (III.3.5) with the words, “Although all these things are true, yet the word ‘repentance’ itself, as far as I can learn from Scripture, is to be understood otherwise.” This is because Calvin distinguishes between faith and repentance. Therefore the order becomes: proclamation of the Gospel, to faith in what God has done, to repentance (turning to the merciful God). (Calvin as a true humanist quotes both the Hebrew and Greek senses of the word “repent.”) It is clear, however, that James and Calvin are at one on the heart of the matter, the unconditionality of grace. Thus *Institutes* III.4.3 reads: “We have said in some place that forgiveness of sins can never come to anyone without repentance . . . but we added, at the same time, that repentance is not the cause of the forgiveness of sins . . . We have taught that the sinner does not dwell upon his own compunction or tears, but fixes both eyes on the Lord’s mercy alone” (ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. Battles, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

62 *Worship*, 59.

63 *Forgotten Trinity*, 13-14.

64 For example, in the preaching of wedding sermons (covenant, not contract)!

65 *Dogmatics in Outline*, 152. “I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God’s righteousness” (Romans 10:2-3). Quoted by Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 1. The trouble is that some people are *not* “ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God” and still prefer their own!

Thus Kierkegaard remarks of some supposedly mighty-souled person: "He can never forgive himself for it — but now in case God would forgive him for it?"⁶⁶ These are the ethics of gratitude.

An outstanding biblical scholar who has come to the same conclusion on the order of repentance and forgiveness is Kenneth Bailey. In a series of books beginning with *Poet and Peasant*,⁶⁷ he has returned repeatedly to the parable of the Prodigal Son, showing from his deep knowledge of Palestinian village culture not only the way in which the father repeatedly and publically humiliates himself, but also that the son's repentance does not occur (as is too often assumed) when he "comes to himself" in hunger but when he is met by the running, self-humiliating father. The first, as Bailey ably shows, is simply a moment of prudential and contractual calculation by an unrepentant man who still does not see what it means to be the father's son and simply seeks to worm himself back into some sort of position as a better alternative to starvation.⁶⁸ Whether the elder brother repents from his hardhearted and no less contractual attitude (in which he is no true son either) the parable leaves us to imagine. What is key is the father going out after each of them and not leaving them to stew, or sulk, in their own juice. This is the mystery and wonder of God and which should arouse in us simply gratitude and wonder too.⁶⁹

If we are thrown back on ourselves for repentance, there are two possible responses: pride (I have adequately repented), or despair (I have not, and cannot). We are liberated from both by the news that Christ has done it for us, and invites us to share in his repentance.

66 *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1968, orig. trans. by W. Lowrie, 1941), 242.

67 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 158-206; *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992); *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 through the eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants* (Wheaton: IVP, 2005); *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus retold Israel's Story* (Wheaton: IVP, 2011).

68 Thus, J. B. Torrance sees, he is trying to "buy" himself back into favour (*Worship*, 57). As he says, there is something in us which always wants to bargain with God, whereas all we can do is throw ourselves on his mercy ("Covenant or Contract", 57).

69 During a mission in the early 1970s, I was part of a team in a school re-enacting this parable. It was with horror that I heard one of the mission leaders, playing the part of the father, say to the prodigal (in front of schoolchildren), "Now, are you really sorry for what you have done? Because I can't forgive you if you haven't!" (Cf. "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ", 147, n20.) This replacement of the Gospel with moralism (and/or sentimentality) is common, as in the treatment of Edmund in the disappointing 2005 film version of C. S. Lewis' psychologically profound *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950). Because the approach to sin is so condemnatory and thus damning, the only alternative seems to be to find excuses.

Here we come to the nub of the problem which brings us back to Luther's dilemma, with which I began. Calvin indeed proclaims the same:

If there is anything in the whole of religion which we should most certainly know, we ought most closely to grasp by what reason, with what law, under what condition, with what ease or difficulty, forgiveness of sins may be obtained!⁷⁰

What does one do if one is faced with the demand for the three things in repentance required for the forgiveness of sins — namely contrition, confession and satisfaction (*contritio, confessio, satisfactio*)?⁷¹

Unless this knowledge remains clear and sure, the conscience can have no rest at all, no peace with God, no assurance or security; but it continuously trembles, wavers, tosses, is tormented and vexed, shakes, hates, and flees the sight of God. But if forgiveness of sins depends upon these conditions which they attach to it, nothing is more miserable or deplorable for us.

Yet if we look only at contrition, what *is* sufficient?

. . . when such bitterness of sorrow is demanded as may correspond to the magnitude of the offence, and be weighed in the balance with confidence of pardon, miserable consciences are sadly perplexed and tormented when they see that the contrition due for sin is laid upon them . . . If they say we are to do what in us lies,⁷² we are always brought back to the same point; for when will any man venture to promise himself that he has done his utmost in bewailing sin? . . . If they say that this is a calumny on my part, let them come forward and point out a single individual who, by this doctrine of contrition, has not either been driven to despair, or has not, instead of true, opposed pretended fear to the justice of God.⁷³

What is true of repentance is equally true of conversion, of becoming a Christian. T. F. Torrance shows how unevangelical so-called evangelical preaching often is,⁷⁴ adding "a subtle element of co-redemption."⁷⁵ If people are saved "only if they make the work of Christ real for themselves by their own personal decision . . . this is to make the effectiveness of the work of Christ conditional upon what

70 *Institutes*, III.4.2.

71 J. B. Torrance, "Introduction" to *The Nature of Atonement*, 12.

72 This is a reference to the theology of Gabriel Biel, one of Luther's major influences, shaken off by him with vigour. Tomlin, *Luther*, 28-29.

73 *Institutes*, III.4.2-3 (Florida: Macdonald, translator and date not known: the translation here is more eloquent than McNeill's edition). He proceeds to deal in detail with confession and satisfaction.

74 *Mediation*, 102-3.

75 "Cheap and Costly Grace", 58.

the sinner does, and so at the crucial point it throws the ultimate responsibility for a man's salvation back upon himself."

To preach the Gospel in that conditional or legalist way has the effect of telling poor sinners that in the last resort the responsibility for their salvation is taken off the shoulders of the Lamb of God and placed upon them — but in that case they feel that they will never be saved. They know perfectly well in their own hearts that if the chain that binds them to God in Jesus Christ has as even one of its links, their own feeble act of decision then the whole chain is as weak as that, its weakest link.⁷⁶

As he shows, such a gospel is not really good news.⁷⁷ By contrast, a declaration of forgiveness both calls and simultaneously enables us to repent and believe.⁷⁸ His faithfulness undergirds our own stumbling faith.⁷⁹

The mind of Christ in worship: the problem of Pelagianism in the liturgy

According to the Church of England *Common Worship* (2000), God's forgiveness on us is conditional on our repentance.

In Order One — the more modern one — the priest begins the absolution with the words: "Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent." This informs us then that he does *not* forgive those who do not truly repent.

Previously we worshippers have declared that we, "are heartily sorry and repent of all our sins," before going on to ask that God forgives us "all that is past" — "for the sake of thy Son Jesus Christ, who died for us."

⁷⁶ *Mediation*, 103.

⁷⁷ That TF is not exaggerating, I know from my own experience insofar as I once refused to say the Lord's Prayer in church on the grounds that I did not really mean it. My life at that time (in a hothouse university Christian Union environment) was an oscillation between thinking I had sufficiently given my life to Christ and dark periods of near-despair when I doubted it. It was only a mediated Torrancean emphasis on Christ's faith on my behalf that delivered me from drowning in sand to standing on a rock, from the "swing to and fro between pride and anxiety" that Barth says is human life without (real) faith — that is faith in what God has done for us, rather than faith in faith (*Dogmatics in Outline*, 20.)

⁷⁸ Whilst a curate I had an encounter with an attention-seeking lady in our parish who succeeded, as was her intention, in disrupting a home communion. After some time, when my anger had inevitably abated, she approached me and said, "It's so good to know I'm forgiven." I am afraid I sighed heavily (she was a repeat offender) when what I should have said was, "Of course you're forgiven! So stop doing it!"

⁷⁹ T. F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 108.

This follows the pattern of the Book of Common Prayer (1549, 1552 and 1662) which is the basis for Order Two "in contemporary language." There is no difference here:

Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
who in his great mercy
has promised forgiveness of sins
to all those who with heartfelt repentance and true faith turn to him:
have mercy on you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins,
confirm and strengthen you in all goodness,
and bring you to everlasting life,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There are many beautiful words here, and the assuring words are reinforced by the Comfortable Words (with four quotations from Scripture) that follow, but they help to obscure the conditionality of the forgiveness that is being offered. In all cases, it depends on our prior repentance, and not just any old repentance either, but one which is "true," "heartly" or "heartfelt." Forgiveness is declared by the priest (acting on God's behalf) on the basis of what God has done: "for the sake of thy Son Jesus Christ, who died for us."⁸⁰

Now, in psychological terms, of course, this can "work."⁸¹ A person, suddenly convicted of sin, may come to church full of contrition. In the absolution he hears God's forgiveness of what he has done wrong and he is enormously comforted. There is no doubt that the words of forgiveness are very powerful, yet here they embody a completely false theology.

One cannot justify these words on the basis of "pastoral" practise (a cover for too many faults and too often used to excuse poor theology)⁸² nor on the basis that people do not realise, or are not really paying attention to, what they are saying — a pretty feeble approach on any terms. Words creep into our way of thinking; they condition our attitudes, assumptions and beliefs.

⁸⁰ It is on the basis of what Christ has done, not in and through him, i.e. *per* and *propter* rather than *in*.

⁸¹ James used to say that the fact that something "works" does not mean it is necessarily true.

⁸² James often spoke of how irritated he was by the ministers who stood up in the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and began their remarks with the words: "I am not a theologian but . . ." As he pointed out, the question is not whether one is a theologian or not (for everyone is), but whether one is a good or poor one! For a similar reaction, cf. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: an introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (London: Collins, 1965, orig. 1963), 42.

What the words of the confession and absolution do is to make us think, subliminally maybe, that God's forgiveness of us is conditional, that the bottom line is how much we have repented and how genuine that is: in other words, it comes down to us. In the end, it is what we do, think and feel that matters in relation to our salvation. We are "thrown back on ourselves."

As a priest of the Church of England, I am required to say these words whenever I celebrate the Eucharist, and I hate it every single time. I think it enshrines a bad theology at the heart of our worship, in a way that may be more influential than a sermon that follows, one that explicitly declares that God has unconditionally forgiven us our sins. To my mind, it is the latter that declares the Gospel, the good news of God. The words of confession and absolution are in fact "bad news": they tell us that our ultimate salvation depends on us. Thus a contradiction is enshrined at the very heart of the communion service, for the Anglican order goes on to the reception of the body and blood of Christ, reminding us ("anamnesis") that Christ died for us "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5.8), that God did not wait before sending his Son for us to repent! Anglicans are repeatedly reminded that we come to communion "with empty hands."⁸³

Yet this means that we do not even bring our repentance with us to the foot of the Cross. As TF used to emphasise, we come with nothing — not our good deeds, not our devotion, not our piety. We come with nothing to receive what the Lord has so generously given to us, not because of any merits on our part, but solely dependent on his grace.

Unfortunately my experience is that many (most?) other denominations are as bad, something that other denominational members I have discussed this with have confirmed. It is not just an Anglican problem; it is a universal problem.⁸⁴ The fact that this is not a burning issue with liturgists seems to suggest that they need to talk to systematic theologians — or good ones anyway like James Torrance!

What are the implications of saying that forgiveness is dependent on our adequately repenting? Clearly the human race (or, at least that part of it which goes to church) is divided into those who sufficiently repent ("truly," "heartily," "heartfeltly") and those who do not. Some are forgiven and some are not on the basis of the adequacy of their repentance.

83 As in the hymn "Rock of Ages", quoted by T. F. Torrance, *Mediation*, 98.

84 However, Anglicans can seem particularly complacent. Thus Samuel Wells writes blithely: "Huge controversies have raged over the correct sequence of repentance, forgiveness, and penance. And yet surely what matters is that they all be treasured and practiced as gifts of God to the church." *God's Companions*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 119. No!

This means that the human race tends to be divided into church-goers (“adequate repenters”) and non-churchgoers (“sinners”). But then we are back with the division between righteous Pharisees and sinful tax-collectors, which Jesus so radically and repeatedly exposed as profoundly false.⁸⁵ Jesus came to save sinners, not the (self-)righteous. I cannot be the only minister who was ever tempted to think that the people who should be in church are the very ones it tends to repel (and vice-versa)!

A second liturgical point is surely also vital. The present setting of the act of confession and absolution is separated by large tracts of the service from the act of communion (participation); yet that is the place where we actually feed on the one who gives us life — where the act of forgiveness (and transformation) is presented symbolically. This separates a *supposed* place of forgiveness from the actual place of forgiveness, and fails to comprehend that in God forgiveness is not just a word, but an action, an action in which we are reconciled with the Father through the mediator Christ.⁸⁶ At the present, the liturgy embodies a terrible theology of forgiveness and repentance, bad news rather than good news. Who knows how many people have been alienated from the Church? Radical action is needed so that our worship embodies explicitly and implicitly the mediatorship of Christ, his vicarious humanity.

An old joke (yes, with many variations) asks, “What is the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist?” The answer, of course, is, “You can negotiate with a terrorist.” It is long past time that liturgists and theologians — of the kind like James Torrance — did some negotiating.⁸⁷

85 Cf. Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 47: “Of all things, Christianity *isn't* supposed to be about gathering up all the good people (shiny! happy! squeaky clean!) and excluding the bad people (frightening! alien! repulsive!) for the very simple reason that there aren't any good people . . . What it's supposed to be is a league of the guilty.”

86 Because, of course, the word that goes out from God's mouth does not return empty without accomplishing that for which it was sent forth (Is. 55:11). In fact, the word of God cannot be separated from act in Scripture, for it refers to the person of Christ.

87 This joke was told to me by a liturgist. I am neither giving a superior position to theologians who — as we know all too well — need constant correction, nor am I implying that all liturgists are theologically-incompetent villains!: just that a debate needs to take place, in which James Torrance's theological perceptions are given full weight. As he pointed out, the sacraments are the ways in which the truth of the Gospel is embodied day after day. It has been suggested that Anglicans will be saved by their liturgy; i.e. even when the sermon is terrible, the Eucharistic liturgy is declaring the truth of the Gospel time after time. If so, it certainly needs improvement here. I am not here prescribing exactly what should be done; just that the work needs to start.

Conclusion

This essay began with the statement that “being thrown back on ourselves” was the epitome of a humanity ignoring “the fact that God has already provided for us that Response which alone is acceptable to him.”⁸⁸ James Torrance offered an alternative — a life of “being lifted up” instead, into that activity of Christ on our behalf, “the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father.”⁸⁹ It is a summary of the Gospel that he embodied in his life as well as throughout his teaching. For him theology was in consequence, in Barth’s phrase, a joyful science.⁹⁰

88 “Vicarious Humanity,” 134.

89 *Worship*, 24. Thus too T.F. Torrance talks of Jesus Christ as, “the one point in our human and historical existence where we may be lifted out of ourselves and escape the self-incarcerating processes of human subjectivism.” “The Eclipse of God,” 55.

90 *Church Dogmatics IV.3/2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 881.