

FEATURE ARTICLE

INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT: THEIR RELATION AND INTER-RELATION IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE

Robert T. Walker, M.A., B.D., Ph.D.

University of Edinburgh (retired)

Edinburgh, Scotland

bob@hebrides.u-net

The general purpose of this article is to explore the relation between incarnation and atonement in the theology of T. F. Torrance with particular reference to the two volumes of his dogmatics lectures, *Incarnation* and *Atonement*.¹ While outlining the place of the incarnation-atonement relation and of the lectures in the context of his theology, the main purpose of the article will be to explore the inner logic and structure of Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement, and this will be done in terms of what, it will be argued, are its underlying starting point and its direction of movement.

The article is now very different in shape from the one originally envisaged as an examination of Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement with particular reference to his sources. It is now an exploration of his theology of incarnation and atonement in the light of its background, underlying rationale, and theological method as faith seeking understanding. While the first part of the article deals with the general background and underlying rationale of his theology, the second part is an attempt to understand Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement in terms of its inner logic and natural development. As such, part two proceeds along lines parallel to the kind of theological method

1 *Incarnation*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2008; *Atonement*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2009.



Torrance himself used in coming to deeper understanding in faith, and may itself be seen as something of an exercise in theological method.²

The article is very much larger than that originally intended and while the two parts could in some respects stand alone and be read separately (the first more than the second) they belong very much together with each part being illuminated, deepened, and enriched by the other.

PART I

THE BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF TORRANCE'S THEOLOGY

Incarnation and Atonement, dogmatics and the gospel

Torrance's teaching on incarnation and atonement is scattered throughout his works but finds its fullest expression in the recent posthumous publication of his Edinburgh dogmatics lectures on "the doctrine of Jesus Christ." For reasons of size, the lectures have been published in two volumes, *Incarnation* and

2 The importance and nature for Torrance of theological method understood as faith seeking understanding may be illustrated by the way in which he regularly set honors dogmatics students two essays on theological method, one on Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* and one on Kierkegaard's "Interlude" in his *Philosophical Fragments*. For Torrance, Anselm's attempt to prove by reason the necessity for the incarnation by arguing *Christo remoto* (as if Christ was remote) did not mean purely logical reasoning, but a methodological putting to one side one's explicit knowledge of Christ (one's knowledge of him as already conceptualized) in order that step by step one might come to a deeper understanding of him. The whole procedure, as Anselm himself saw and Barth likewise, began and ended in faith. Throughout, one was proceeding in prayer, *theologically* not simply logically, setting one's present knowledge of Christ temporarily to one side (or at least in the background and not arguing explicitly from it) in order that one might discover and allow the steps to a richer and deeper understanding to come to view and be seen to repose on Christ. Throughout, it is actually Christ who is guiding the process, but from a distance, and the method of argumentation is one of faith and prayer. For a fine example in Torrance himself of faith seeking deeper understanding of Christ in this way see his chapter, "Questioning in Christ," T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, 1965, 117-27.

Atonement, but they enshrine one inseparable theology,³ one whole person-and-work-of-Jesus-Christ from his earthly beginnings in the womb of Mary to his resurrection and ascension. If, broadly speaking, *Incarnation* deals in particular with Christology, the doctrine of “the person of Christ,” and *Atonement* with the doctrine of “the work of Christ,” the two are intimately intertwined and inseparable as is made clear by their full titles, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Jesus Christ* and *Atonement: The Person and Work of Jesus Christ*.

The relation between incarnation and atonement lies at the heart of Torrance’s theology, of his dogmatics lectures, and of his life’s work. Although Torrance was in the end unfortunately unable to devote sufficient time to publishing it, it was his lectures to students, as equipment for ministry, which were to have formed the basis for his own projected three volume dogmatics,⁴ and it is they, together with his two great dogmatic monographs,⁵ which represent the kernel of his thought. Throughout the varying phases of his life when different concerns seemed to be at the forefront of his attention, it was Christian dogmatics, the positive articulation of Christian doctrine around its center in Jesus Christ, which remained his “main love”⁶ and ultimate central concern. His central calling, as he felt it, was as a minister of the gospel and to evangelism,⁷ and at the core of the gospel lay the incarnational-atoning love of God to all the world.⁸ In one way or another, his manifold activities

3 Torrance’s own manuscript was entitled *Incarnation and Atonement: Edinburgh Lectures on Christology and Soteriology*, with the chapters of the whole course numbered consecutively. The sheer size of the manuscript, however, particularly with the incorporation of material on the resurrection and ecclesiology, prompted its publication in two volumes.

4 I. John Hesselink, “A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ — An Interview with T.F. Torrance,” in *Reformed Review*, Vol. 38, 1984, 61.

5 T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996.

6 Hesselink, 63.

7 Hesselink, 49, 52.

8 T.F. Torrance, “*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* T.F. Torrance — My Theological Development,” 3 (unpublished manuscript covering from upbringing to education at Edinburgh University, Torrance Archives, Princeton).

and publications were all geared to the same end, so that his work on science and theology, for example, is not to be seen as a deflection from his primary calling but as part of it, as an attempt to help “evangelize the foundations...of scientific culture” so that the gospel and a positive dogmatics might be better able to take root in it.⁹

Factors underlying and informing Torrance’s dogmatics

In preparation for tackling the key topic of the relation between incarnation and atonement, it is useful to outline some of the central factors underlying and informing Torrance’s thought, as an awareness of these is significant for developing a deeper understanding of his theology and of his lectures in dogmatics:

- (a) the importance of scripture, knowledge of God, and theological judgment;
- (b) discovering and articulating an understanding of the gospel adequate to its ontological foundations in God himself;
- (c) an awareness of the epistemological significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ;
- (d) a sense of the inherent rationality of faith and the difference between converted and unconverted reason.

An awareness of the above factors illuminates much in Torrance and his dogmatics which might otherwise be passed over without fuller understanding. It brings to light more of the rationale for what, why, and how he says what he does, and therefore enables a greater appreciation of a good deal of the content and shape of the lectures and of *Incarnation* and *Atonement*. Although interconnected and overlapping, the different factors are sufficiently distinct to warrant separate consideration.

(a) Scripture, inner logic, and theological judgment

For Torrance there are three fundamental and primary elements in all theology: an intimate indwelling of the scriptures,¹⁰ careful and thorough exegesis, and a

9 Hesselink, 60.

10 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, 83.

knowledge of the living God.¹¹ Then through all of these there emerges a critical fourth element: discernment of the “inner logic” of the bible and the formation of a trained theological judgment, instinctively adapted to biblical habits of thought and speech.

The inner logic of the bible and of theology

The phrase “inner logic” represents a concept which is central to Torrance’s theology and which he uses at key points to denote the essential structure and inherent significance of something.¹² The word “inner” refers to its intrinsic nature, underlying fundamental pattern, and the precise relations embedded within and constitutive of it, while “logic” refers to its meaning and significance, the rationale and intelligibility inherent in it and its internal structural relations. Torrance uses “inner logic” or “interior logic” with reference to the bible, Christology, and theological knowledge,¹³ and sometimes simply “logic” to speak of “the logic of grace” and “the logic of Christ.”¹⁴

The inner logic of the bible is the inner meaning of the bible, its intrinsic intention and purpose to lead to Jesus Christ and one which is fulfilled in him. He is the *skopos*, the goal of the bible, and it is he in his person, in the structure of his person and work, who is the “inner” or “interior logic” of the bible, of grace, of Christology, and of theology.

11 Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

12 See for example the sentence in *Incarnation* where, in a comment on procedure (as he turns to “offer a theological account of the doctrine of Christ” faithful to the New Testament) Torrance says, “We try to do this by penetrating into its inner logic...by seeking to lay bare the precise relations embedded in the intrinsic nature of the subject matter,” *Incarnation*, 182. Cf. Torrance’s comment on the use of “‘*anhypostasia* and *enhyposstasia*’ as a sort of ‘theological algebra’ to help us work out the ‘inner logic’ in christology more consistently and purely,” *op. cit.* 233.

13 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, OUP, London, 1969, 217, “it is here then in the inner life and being of Jesus Christ, in the hypostatic union, that we discern the interior logic of theological thinking, the logic of Christ, the logic that is in Christ before it is in our knowledge of Him, the logic that inheres ontologically and personally in Him...”

14 For example, “we must hold together ‘the logic of Grace’ and ‘the logic of Christ,’” *ibid.*; cf. “the essential logic of Grace and logic of Christ,” *op. cit.* 269.

But while the logic of Christ is the interior logic of both scripture and theology, they are related to it (or him) in different ways. Scripture is related by being itself part of the movement of the incarnation. In the Old Testament, it is the “pre-history of the incarnation,” as Torrance refers to it, for it is the Word of God beginning to become incarnate, beginning to mold and shape Israel in language and understanding that it might be a prepared womb for his coming.¹⁵ In the Old Testament, the logic of Christ is seen from afar, adumbrated and sketched out,¹⁶ while in the New Testament it has been fully realized and fulfilled. If the Old Testament is the Word beginning to become flesh in human thought, the New Testament is the fully incarnate Word now become flesh in apostolic word.¹⁷ Both Old and New Testament, in the way they are shaped by the Word to point to him and reveal him through the Spirit, partake of his logic. Scripture partakes of and shares sacramentally in the logic of Christ.¹⁸

The task of dogmatic theology is to so read and study the scriptures as to discern their inner logic and to attempt to articulate for the benefit of the church the logic of Christ and the coherence of all doctrine around him.¹⁹

The inseparability of the different elements

The various elements — knowledge of the bible, rigorous exegesis,²⁰ and openness to God — are necessarily and inseparably interwoven. In the Spirit and

15 *Incarnation*, 37f., 40ff., 44ff.

16 Cf. Isaiah 53; John 5.46, 8.56; Luke 24.27, 44f; 1 Peter 1.10-11.

17 Cf. *Incarnation*, 37f., 44ff., 164ff.

18 Although Torrance does not use the language of “logic” or “inner logic” here, see *Atonement*, 336ff., for a general account of the sacramental relation between the written word of scripture and the living Word of Christ.

19 For a careful summary of Torrance’s views on the relation between biblical theology, dogmatics, and Christology based on his own account in *Theology in Reconstruction*, chap. 8, “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology,” see *Incarnation*, xxiii-xxviii.

20 T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, London, 1965, 141-2, “we have to give the most rigorous attention to the actual text of the Scriptures and to their actual setting in history, that we may stand in the place of the original witnesses and go along with them in all that they suffer under the impact of the Word of the Lord. Arduous exegetical study is the foundation for all theological discipline in the Church.”

through the first two elements, God makes himself known and there emerges the fourth element, a critical instinct for the inner logic and truth of scripture, a trained theological judgment which can only be developed and acquired through participation in the mind of Christ.²¹ It cannot be learned as such, or explicitly spelled out, but is “tacit knowledge.”

The importance of theological judgment

Throughout his life, Torrance laid considerable store on the importance of such theological judgment²² as a primary guiding element, and his dogmatics is to be seen as the outcome of a lifetime of theological judgment based on a great deal of linguistic and exegetical work which now lay in the background and had become mostly tacit. Although Torrance never managed to produce the theological-exegetical biblical commentaries he had planned,²³ that side of his work does come to the fore in his dogmatics lectures more than elsewhere. In *Atonement* several chapters²⁴ open with an outline of the biblical word-study and exegetical commentary on which his theology was grounded. For Torrance, however, the essential thing was not simply the careful exegesis, indispensable and preliminary prerequisite though it was, but the theological judgments to which one is led through study of the bible as a whole in knowledge of the living God.

(b) Articulating the gospel on its ontological foundations

Early on in his career, Torrance became convinced of the need to discover and articulate the ontological grounds for Christian faith. Even while an Arts student studying philosophy at Edinburgh University, he had read Schleiermacher’s *The Christian Faith* and been struck by its christocentrism and the architectonic beauty of its theological system, but had felt it lacked adequate foundations. From then on, discovering and articulating the genuine ontological basis of Christian faith in the objective reality of God himself became one of the defining goals of his own theological career.²⁵

21 Cf. *Karl Barth*, 83; *Atonement*, 444-47, cf. 376ff.

22 *Karl Barth*, 83; cf. again Torrance, *Atonement*, 445ff.

23 Hesselink, 61-62.

24 Chapters 4, 5, 6, 9, while others have word-study within them.

25 *Karl Barth*, 121ff.; cf. Hesselink, 53.

Torrance's dogmatics lectures are therefore not simply an extended account of the essential content of the gospel, but a nuanced and careful delineation of the way human faith in Christ is grounded objectively in Christ himself and through him in God.²⁶ Put in a nutshell, the knowledge of God which God has of God in God became earthed in incarnation, incarnated in the human mind and knowing of Jesus, then lived out in his human life and brought to completion in him through atonement, resurrection, and ascension. That same knowledge of God then became earthed in the apostolic mind through union with Christ and participation in his mind by the Spirit and has now been similarly earthed in us through our own union to him by the Spirit and by Christ's own self-witness to us in apostolic word and witness.

Unfolding all the links in the epistemic chain between God and man

In this regard the whole of Torrance's lectures can be seen as a careful spelling out in an integrated whole of all the links in the epistemic chain between God and man, and man and God in Jesus Christ, tracing the continuous connections between God in his revelation of himself to us in our humanity, and between us and the ontological termination of our faith on God himself. It is because Christ is the very Word and image of God eternally in God himself, that his incarnation as God and man in one person means that in his humanity we have communicated to us in human form, in human language and act, knowledge of God himself in his eternal being as Trinity. The identity in being between Christ and God, between Christ as man and us, and the fact that both of these identities of being are now eternally locked together in the *one person of Christ* united to us through incarnation and the Spirit, means that God has come all the way to us in his revelation, and that conversely we, human as we are, are given union and participation through word and Spirit in the mind of Christ in the heart of God. Jesus Christ's identity with God in divine being, identity with us in human being, and the essential identity of his self-proclamation in word and deed with the apostolic word and witness to him through the Spirit, means that we in the frailty of human flesh are yet given to participate in the mind of Christ and know God in his eternal being.

26 For an overview here see the editorial introductions to his lectures, *Incarnation*, xxxff., especially xxxvii-xli, and on the nature of faith, xliiiff.; *Atonement*, lxxixff.

(c) The epistemological significance of the humanity of Christ

A key factor in Torrance's theology here is his awareness of the significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ, but with his philosophical awareness and search for the ontological grounds of faith he is acutely aware also of the full *noetic* significance of the humanity of Christ and of its importance in revelation as much as in reconciliation. It is in the resurrection of Jesus, in the *noetic* significance of his risen mind, that the full significance of his vicarious humanity comes to light, for it is in the risen Christ's *human knowing* of God and fellowship with him that the final fruits of revelation and reconciliation are to be seen.²⁷

Throughout his theology Torrance sees that reconciliation is impossible without revelation, and revelation equally impossible without reconciliation.²⁸ The two are critically and mutually interdependent in all soteriology. Torrance also sees that in soteriology, as in Christology, the person and work of Christ are to be understood as the work of God and of man,²⁹ of God acting not only as God but of God acting *as man* in the one person of Christ.³⁰ Throughout the person and work of Christ, there is an essential duality of *divine* and *human*, of real act of God and real act of man, of God and of God as man in Christ.

The epistemic significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus

Revelation here, like reconciliation, is thus always two-sided, involving the act of God and the act of man in Christ, and so revelation means not only God's revealing of himself, but *from the human side man's active receiving and knowing* of his revelation.³¹ Similarly, just as reconciliation means the restoration of man to full fellowship with God, so revelation means the restoration of man to full human *knowledge* of God, and atonement means not simply the covering and annulment of sin, but the positive reinstatement and

27 *Atonement*, 231ff.

28 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 132f; cf. *Incarnation* 184ff., 187ff., 190ff., 194ff.

29 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 130f; *Incarnation*, 184ff.

30 *Op. cit.* 195.

31 *Theology in Reconstruction*, 130ff.

affirmation of genuine human *knowing* of God. The resurrection of Jesus is then not simply the actualization of forgiveness, but the permanent establishment *in him* of *our* human knowledge of God. The risen man Jesus Christ, the second Adam, is the one man who knows God, who embodies in himself knowledge of God in reality and truth. Torrance is at pains therefore to emphasize the epistemic significance of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. It means that here in his risen vicarious humanity, in his risen embodied mind, we have the guarantee of genuine objective knowledge of God, the guarantee that in this man's risen human knowing of God all disjunction between the human mind and the reality of God has been finally and fully overcome.³² In the risen Jesus *our* knowing of God has been permanently established.

(d) The inherent rationality of faith and the nature of reason

One of the salient, constitutive features of Torrance's theology is his understanding of the nature of reason and of the rationality of faith. It is important, however, to understand what he means by reason.

Reason as the capacity for objectivity

Reason, for Torrance, is to be understood not substantively as a settled power, but functionally as the infinitely flexible capacity to adapt and respond to "the other" (the object or subject of encounter or investigation) in terms of the other's own nature. Reason is the capacity to respond to another in terms appropriate to what or who the other is. It does not demand that the object or subject conforms to what reason thinks it is or ought to be, but accepts the reality of the other and attempts to understand it as it is and to find appropriate ways of response or methods of investigation.

Reason is thus the capacity to respond to (understand, behave towards, investigate) the other as it is, or in other words, "reason is the capacity for objectivity."³³ Reason in Torrance means simply openness to the object (or subject), understanding of it as it is, obedience to its nature. It is to

32 *Atonement*, 233f.

33 See *Theological Science*, 11f., for Torrance's understanding of reason and his reference to Macmurray's definition of it as the "capacity for objectivity."

be understood not as an innate power that we have, but as an infinitely adaptable capacity, and is to be measured by the degree to which it can respond appropriately to and understand the nature of the object. It follows that rationality should be regarded less as something fixed that we are born with, than as something we can grow into and develop in proportion as we become attuned to the nature of the object. The more we tune into the “inherent intelligibility” of the object (or subject) and resonate with it, the more we become rational.

The meaning and nature of inherent intelligibility

For Torrance it is only because there is an inherent intelligibility in God and the world he has made that they can be thought and apprehended, but it is important that by “inherent intelligibility”³⁴ Torrance does not mean that the object (or subject) can be made intelligible or reduced to understanding, far less that it can be completely understood. (The intelligibility of God or of the universe far outstretches our ability to understand them.) What he means is that the intelligibility of the object is something inherent within it: the object, in other words, is not disorderly, chaotic, opaque, and completely unintelligible in itself. Its intelligibility is embodied within it, and it is because of this that we can penetrate into it and grasp something of its inherent nature. If the object or subject of knowledge were not intelligible in itself, we could not even begin in any sense to understand it. To say that God or the universe is inherently intelligible is not to say anything about the *extent* to which we can grasp them, but simply that they have an intrinsic and profound order such that we can penetrate into it to grasp something of what it is, of who God is in his nature, and what the universe is in its nature.³⁵

34 T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, 20; cf. T.F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, OUP, London, 1971, 155; T.F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 27ff., 63f., 66ff.

35 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, revised edition, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1992, 2-4, for a brief account of the way in which science and theology attempt to understand things in terms of their “own intrinsic intelligibility.”

The distinction between apprehend and comprehend

Torrance here makes an important distinction between “apprehend” and “comprehend.”³⁶ We can grasp something in our hands, such as a large table, and hold it without being able to get our hands around it. Similarly, he argued, we can apprehend something in the sense of taking genuine cognitive hold of it without completely comprehending it or enfolding it in our understanding. In that sense, we can apprehend God (through being given some genuine cognitive hold of him) without ever comprehending him, but the fact that he is forever beyond our complete grasp does not mean that we cannot in a real sense have genuine knowledge of him as he is. Real knowledge of God means that were we indeed to know him fully, we would discover that he was no different from, and not other than, what we have known him to be — we know him in part, “through a glass darkly,” but nevertheless truly as he is in himself.

The inherent intelligibility of God³⁷

The inherent intelligibility of God means that in himself God is not disordered or unintelligible, but ordered, personal, intelligible reality who gives himself to be known in his intelligibility, as rationality, love, and truth. It means that God is knowable in himself, that he is such that when we apprehend him (through his self-revealing accommodation of himself to us, not by any capacity of our own) we apprehend him as he is in himself, as Father, Son, and Spirit, as Word, truth, rationality, covenant love, faithfulness, etc. It means that when we apprehend him, we know that this is how he is in truth, that in his inherent intelligibility he lays holds of us that we might apprehend him as he is. We know that it is his inherent intelligibility which allows us to grasp him and to understand him to actually be in his inner nature what we grasp him to be.

36 *God and Rationality*, 22; *Trinitarian Faith*, 26, 53; cf. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 1996, 26.

37 See *Trinitarian Faith*, 19ff.; cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 150ff.

Faith as the appropriate and therefore "rational" response to God

Faith for Torrance is the mode of our apprehension of God, the mode of our appropriate response to his being,³⁸ a mode which involves personal love and trust because it involves at its heart the prior apprehension of God as covenant love and faithfulness and the perception that as this is his inner being and nature he is inherently to be trusted. Faith is the appropriate, and in that sense the rational, response to God as he makes himself known to us in his nature. Faith here is always dependent on the primary act of God, for it is only God in his personal willingness to make himself known who can make his inherent intelligibility accessible to us.³⁹

Rationality and personal intelligibility integral to the gospel revelation

Torrance's emphasis on the rationality of faith here has nothing to do with any desire to make faith acceptable. It is not a matter of apologetics in the usual sense, an intellectual *apologia* on behalf of faith. It is primarily the nature of the gospel revelation itself. God, for Torrance, is the primary rationality, the personal reality who in his own being is inherently engaging, intelligible reality. To come to know God in Christ is to encounter personal, intelligible truth to which we cannot but assent in recognition without irrationality.⁴⁰ This sense of the fundamental and inherent rationality of faith grounded ontologically on God informs Torrance's thought and writings from the very outset.

The conversion and transformation of reason through the gospel⁴¹

If God is known as he is, without misconception and freed from the presuppositions which hinder apprehension of him, then for Torrance any dissent or disavowal of him can only be an act of ultimate unreason. The revelation of God in Christ is his personal intelligible self-revelation demanding cognitive and personal engagement of the whole person and calling for the

38 *Incarnation*, 7, 25-8.

39 On the nature of faith, see *God and Rationality*, 21-3, 153ff.; cf. 165ff. (chapter 7).

40 Cf. *Theological Science*, ix.

41 See especially *Atonement*, 437-447, "Epilogue: The Reconciliation of Mind."

transformation of human rationality. The ensuing conversion and transformation of reason through conformity to the mind of Christ is part of the essence of the gospel, and for Torrance it is through restoration to knowledge of God that reason becomes rational in the truest sense, that is, genuinely open to and cognizant of the nature of the ultimate reality or realities with whom and with which it is in relation.

The rationality of faith a corollary of the nature of God

The rationality of faith for Torrance is simply a corollary of the nature of God. If God is inherently rational in his inner being, if he is “intrinsically eloquent being” and personal intelligible Word in his very nature,⁴² speaking to us and giving himself to be known as he is in himself, then to the extent that there is any genuine apprehension of him in faith, faith itself must involve elements of understanding, elements of personal, intelligent, rational apprehension of the very nature and personal being of God. Even if still in germ like a grain of mustard seed, faith from the very beginning must involve an “essential conceptuality inherent in our knowledge of Him,” some element of personal understanding and intelligent response based on the nature of God himself.⁴³

The nature of faith as faith seeking understanding

The fact that when we know God such knowledge is apprehension and not comprehension, that God in his being far outstretches our feeble apprehension, but that nevertheless we do know him in himself in his inherent intelligibility as he is, means that faith, as already a genuine apprehension of God, always presses on to deeper understanding. As love and trust, faith knows that its love and trust is grounded on the prior love and faithfulness which God is and which, genuinely apprehended as it is, nevertheless stretches boundlessly beyond its

42 *The Trinitarian Faith*, 72-3; *God and Rationality*, 179ff.

43 *God and Rationality*, 181, 170f; cf. 21f., “Knowledge of God is thus conceptual in its essential root (*fides esse nequit sine conceptione*, as Anselm said [faith cannot exist without some conception]), with a conceptuality that derives from God’s self-revelation in Word . . .”

comprehension. And so faith seeks further understanding, deeper and further understanding of that of which it already has some genuine apprehension. Faith by nature is faith seeking understanding and continually seeking further understanding and apprehension of that which it knows.⁴⁴

The nature of faith seeking understanding in a community of knowers

For Torrance, it is important to remember that theology and faith seeking understanding can only truly be done with others,⁴⁵ within a believing community of knowers, the church imbued with the mind of Christ, reconciled to God and to one another in the communion of the Spirit. It is therefore never simply a thinking by oneself but always with the other. Christian theology thus seeks to understand the faith “with all the saints” and Torrance recognizes with Polanyi⁴⁶ the importance of learning and thinking within a tradition of knowing.⁴⁷ It is only through being schooled in the womb of a fruitful tradition of belief, skill, and knowledge, be it science, theology, or any other discipline, that we can absorb its carefully constructed inherited tacit knowledge and take it further. Faith seeking understanding can advance to further understanding only from and on the basis of the foundations already laid by the shared traditions of faith and understanding bequeathed to it.

44 Cf. the discussion on the “open range of faith” and the way in which “through faith theology is engaged in a fathomless inquiry” in *Trinitarian Faith*, 24-26.

45 Cf. *Atonement*, 376f., “Theology is not primarily the function of individuals but of the church, for Christian thinking is essentially joint-thinking, thinking-in-fellowship, in which we share with one another and learn from one another in Christ, and refuse to run off on private byways of our own. Christian thinking is essentially ecumenical thinking in which we submit ourselves to the teaching and criticism of others that we may learn more and more of Christ through them and with them seek to let the one mind that is in Christ be in our mind.”

46 See further T.F. Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*, Handsel Press, Edinburgh, 1980, 21ff.; Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958, chap. 7, “Conviviality,” 203ff., and *The Tacit Dimension*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967, chap. 3, “A Society of Explorers,” 55ff.

47 Cf. *Theology in Reconstruction*, 140f., 143f., 145f.

The light thrown by the four factors on Torrance's theology of incarnation and atonement

While the second section of the article will consider Torrance's theology of atonement and its relation to the incarnation, the present section has outlined four of the primary factors⁴⁸ underlying and shaping all Torrance's theology, but part of its function in so doing is to argue that his theology of incarnation and atonement illustrates and exemplifies the four factors outlined above. Throughout, he is executing exegetical-theological judgment, articulating the ontological foundations for faith in the person of Jesus Christ in the Trinity, bringing the meaning of incarnation and atonement to a head in the epistemic significance of the risen humanity of Christ, and seeking in faith to better apprehend Christ and the gospel through understanding and unfolding the mystery of his person and the cross. Such unfolding is required of us in theology as an essential part of our appropriate response to the gospel, not just in body and in heart, but in mind in "rational worship."⁴⁹

When Torrance's dogmatics lectures and his theology of incarnation and atonement are viewed through the additional lenses of the four factors above, considerable light is thrown on them and on what he is doing in them and their argument. It becomes possible to follow the structure of his argument and to trace the movement and trajectory of his thought with significantly greater insight and clarity.

PART II

INCARNATION AND ATONEMENT: THE RELATION

Torrance can often be read as beginning with the incarnation, and often misread, particularly by students and non-theologians, as emphasizing its importance at

48 (a) the inner logic of scripture and the importance of theological judgement, (b) articulating the ontological foundations of the gospel in God, (c) the epistemological significance of Jesus' vicarious humanity, (d) the rationality of faith and the nature of reason.

49 Cf. *Atonement*, 444ff.

the expense of the atonement and the cross. This article will argue here that the starting point of his theology is the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and that it is from this viewpoint that he sees the link with incarnation and its importance. The article will also argue that it makes better sense of Torrance's theology as a whole to read it as having its *ordo cognoscendi*, or order of knowing, beginning with atonement (understood through resurrection and Pentecost), while its *ordo essendi*, or order of being, and its deeper understanding and order of exposition, is from the incarnation.

Reading Torrance as beginning with the cross and resurrection and working back to the incarnation to understand them in its light, rather than simply beginning with the incarnation and coming forward has a number of reasons in its favor. It is more in line with the historical development of his theology as known and it is also in line with the historical experience of the disciples and the gospels themselves. Although manifestly written from the viewpoint of resurrection and Pentecost, and for all their focus on the cross (as indicated by the preponderance of chapters on the final week of Jesus' life), the gospels too begin with the historical antecedent to the cross in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Assuming the correctness of this reading of Torrance, his teaching on the relation between incarnation and atonement may be seen as the sustained outcome of *faith seeking understanding* of the risen Christ and his atoning forgiveness.

The reality and mystery of Christ and his cross: incarnation and atonement

For Torrance, the relation between incarnation and atonement is central to understanding the reality and mystery of the gospel. We begin from the person who was born at Bethlehem and from the forgiveness identical with and found only in the risen Christ. Jesus Christ in his person and the divine forgiveness of sins in him are at once *reality* and *mystery*. They are the realities we are forced to acknowledge as the primary realities of faith, the fundamental realities from which all theology must begin, which it must recognize as its starting point, of which there can be in advance no *a priori* prediction, and into which we can

have no advance penetration of thought.⁵⁰ They are the incursion of God into our midst in actual space-time happening. In attempting to come to terms with them we are forced, in recognizing their essential nature, to acknowledge them as deeds of God himself done in our midst which we could not have anticipated, even with the benefit of Old Testament prophetic insight.

Incarnation: the reality and mystery of the person of Jesus Christ

The reality of the person of Jesus Christ is that, inconceivable as it seems to us, he is fully and really God and fully and really man and yet just as fully and really one indivisible person. That is at once his reality and his mystery, not mystery in the sense of riddle or insoluble paradox, but mystery in the sense that though his reality is indubitably, unquestionably actual, the mode of its existence is beyond comprehension. It is sheer miracle.⁵¹

Atonement: the reality and mystery of forgiveness in the risen Christ

So it is also with the forgiveness of sins in the risen Christ. In his resurrection out of the death of the cross, Jesus has undone sin and guilt, accomplished our forgiveness and made us righteous. But more than that, his forgiveness is not just something he has accomplished and can now dispense to us, but something

50 Cf. *Incarnation*, Paternoster UK & InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2008, 1ff.

51 See particularly here the chapter on the virgin birth, *Incarnation*, 87f., 94ff., where Torrance emphasizes the importance of the virgin birth as the sign pointing to the mystery of Christ: "The virgin birth is the outward sign, the signitive form in humanity which the creative entry of the Son of God takes, when he assumes our human nature into union with his divine nature. The sign points to the mystery of Christ and bears witness to it, but the sign is not itself the reality...the mystery of the birth has to be understood in the light of the mystery of his person, the sign in the light of the thing signified, not the thing signified in the light of the sign" (ibid., 95-6). For Torrance the virgin birth and the empty tomb are the twin signs pointing to the mystery of the person of Christ. Neither are to be separated from that mystery, or from one another, and it is in the resurrection that the mystery of his person and the meaning of the virgin birth is revealed (ibid., 96-7).

intimately connected with *who he is* and bound up with his *person*.⁵² We have to say that somehow through who he is and what he did and suffered, he is now eternally living forgiveness. The reality of this, of course, and its understanding only emerges with the resurrection and Pentecost, and like the person of Christ himself the reality of forgiveness is mystery. We cannot comprehend how the death of Christ on the cross accomplishes forgiveness or understand any connection of logic between them.⁵³ We simply know forgiveness in the risen person of Christ as a reality, the miracle of God.⁵⁴ In person and work, the whole life of Jesus from birth to resurrection is miracle.

The order of direction between incarnation and atonement

Both incarnation and atonement are at once reality and mystery. What is the connection between them? The suggestion of this article is that, like the gospels, Torrance begins *de facto* from the resurrection side of the cross, from the mystery and yet reality of sins forgiven in Christ through his death and resurrection. He begins from the apostolic confession of Jesus as Lord and God, risen from the dead, the fulfillment of all that was written in the Old Testament concerning him. Jesus the Lord risen from the dead is the primary reality of which faith seeks understanding as it reads and studies the gospels and the Old Testament.

As Torrance through exegetical-theological study of the bible seeks to understand the faith, seeks to discover and lay bare the ontological foundations of its reality, it is possible from autobiographical clues and the development of his publications to put together and trace certain links and natural progressions in his thought. In one sense it does not matter where he started or the details of his actual historical progression of thought, for Christian dogmatics is a living whole in which each part is connected to every other part, so that in one sense one could start anywhere. But from the evidence available, as well as from the natural *theologic* of the inter-connections in Christian doctrine,

52 *Atonement*, Paternoster UK and InterVarsity Press USA, Milton Keynes and Downers Grove, 2009, 222ff.

53 *Atonement*, 4.

54 *Atonement*, 235f.

the outline offered in this article of the underlying progression in Torrance's thought would seem to make sense and indeed to offer a naturally satisfying and deeper understanding of his theology.

1 The relation between incarnation and atonement in outline

Outline A of the historical progression in Torrance's thought — ordo cognoscendi

The outline of the progression in Torrance's thought (in so far as it can be ascertained and ordered into a historical sequence of the crucial elements as they came to the fore and became organically incorporated into his theology) would be broadly as follows:

(1) From upbringing, a basic belief in the person of Jesus Christ as the living center of scripture⁵⁵ and in his atoning death as the center of the gospel and the ground of its proclamation freely to all the world.⁵⁶

(2) The formation of the aim, through a reading of Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, to seek and articulate an adequate account of the ontological grounds for Christian faith.⁵⁷

55 T.F. Torrance, "*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* T.F. Torrance — *My Theological Development*," 8 (unpublished manuscript covering from upbringing to education at Edinburgh University, Torrance Archives, Princeton); cf. Torrance's brother David speaking of their parents, "Theirs was a living, dynamic faith centred not on a system of belief, but on the Person of Christ. They had a deep reverence for Scripture as the Word of God. We were never taught any particular doctrine about the Bible other than that it is God's Word," David W. Torrance, "Thomas Forsyth Torrance: Minister of the Gospel, Pastor, and Evangelical Theologian" in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*, edit. Elmer M. Colyer, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2001, 4.

56 *Itinerarium Mentis*, 3.

57 T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1990, 121f; cf. I. John Hesselink, "A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ — An Interview with T.F. Torrance," in *Reformed Review*, vol. 38, 1984, 53.

(3) The stress of H.R. Mackintosh⁵⁸ on revelation as the *self*-revelation of God (93),⁵⁹ on the person of Christ (86),⁶⁰ the centrality of the *homo-ousial* Father-Son relation (77), the oneness of incarnation and atonement (86), the unity of Christ with sinners (85), and the importance of the patristic principle “the unassumed is the unredeemed” (86).

(4) The teaching of Barth on the hypostatic union in Christ, the consubstantial communion of the persons of the Trinity, and the role of the Spirit as the freedom of God to connect the creature to himself in knowing communion.⁶¹

(5) A deeper outworking of a trinitarian doctrine of the atonement.⁶²

Outline B of the theologic of incarnation and atonement in order of being — *ordo essendi*

If the above is the order in which Torrance, as he sought a deeper understanding of the atonement, came to appreciate the significance of the different components of doctrine and the connection between them, the following is an outline of the key components in his mature theology of the incarnational-atonement relation in its *ordo essendi* or order of being:

58 For Torrance’s own appreciation of Mackintosh and topics which were central to his theology, see T.F. Torrance, “Hugh Ross Mackintosh Theologian of the Cross, An Appreciation,” in H.R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, edit. T.F. Torrance, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 2000, 71-94 (first published by the Student Christian Movement 1912). [Torrance’s *Appreciation* of H.R.M. was first published in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* (1987), 160-73.]

59 Note: numbers in brackets here after each topic are all references to the page numbers in Torrance’s *Appreciation* of Mackintosh.

60 Cf. 76-78.

61 *Karl Barth*, 122-25, esp. 123.

62 While Torrance had a trinitarian understanding of atonement early on (see for example his 1954 Albrecht Stumpff Lecture published in T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, vol. 1, Lutterworth Press, London, 1959, 238-47) which he continued to develop in various essays or articles, his fullest and most systematic articulation of it came, as detailed below, much later in his career.

(1) The complete equality in deity (the eternal inter-trinitarian *homoousion* of being) and oneness in *perichoretic* unity of the persons of the Father, Son, and Spirit in the consubstantial communion of the Trinity.

(2) The consequential *homoousion* between Father and incarnate Son, or Father and incarnate Word (as also between the Son or Word and the Spirit) — the deity of the *homoousion* is the guarantee that the salvation of the Son is that of God.

(3) The hypostatic union, as the eternal bond between God and man in the one person of the incarnate Son, is the eternal linchpin of salvation, of revelation and reconciliation.

(4) The *homoousion* of the Son with human being is the guarantee that God has reached us in our humanity, that salvation has been achieved by God *as man*, in man, and for man.

(5) The Son's twin incarnational dynamic of assumption-and-sanctification of sinful human flesh, the total oneness of Christ with sinners, is the guarantee of redemption.

(6) The incarnational union of God and man is the beginning of the atoning assumption and sanctification of sinful humanity, maintained and climaxed on the cross through judgment and death, triumphant in resurrection and ascension.

(7) The Son's sending of the Spirit is the completion of atonement, the realizing in humanity of the salvation completed in his own vicarious humanity as the one for the many.

(8) The Son's continual ministry in uniting humanity to himself in communion as his body through the Spirit and his Word in the apostolic word of scripture.

2 The logic of Torrance's incarnation-atonement theology

Torrance does not break down his theology in the following way, but in order to bring out its logic at this point, his teaching on incarnation and atonement will be divided into its fundamental elements and expounded in its approximate *ordo cognoscendi*. As the different elements and doctrines of theology are all interconnected, the order can only be approximate since each of the principles

singled out below inevitably overlap with each other, and some may precede rather than succeed others or may be simultaneously grasped with them. The order of knowing can be seen as corresponding to some extent with Torrance's concept of the stratification of truth or different levels of theology.⁶³

It is highly significant that Torrance opens his discussion of atonement with a statement of procedure and a warning that in any approach to the doctrine of the death of Christ we need to bear in mind two fundamental points: the essential mystery of atonement in both Old and New Testaments, and the fact that the decisive new deed of divine intervention in atonement in Christ has interrupted all rational continuities of understanding and set our thinking on an entirely new basis.⁶⁴

(a) The mystery of atonement and the nature and method of understanding it

Torrance argues that the mystery of atonement and the radically new act of God in it means that all our normal attempts at rational understanding of it are set aside and turned upside down. That does not mean that we cannot gain any understanding of the death of Christ but that we can only do so by thinking "our way from it" and not "into" it.⁶⁵ There is a rationality in the death of Christ, but it is the wisdom of God, and one we can only access by following, *a posteriori*, Christ himself in the Gospels as he gradually unfolded in his life, in word and act, the meaning of his death.⁶⁶

(i) The sacred mystery of divine atonement

In emphasizing the holy mystery of atonement to his students, Torrance began by reminding them of the awful solemnity of the Day of Atonement in Israel

63 On levels of knowledge and their stratification see T.F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 156-63, 166-73; T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1982, 35ff. and T.F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, Christian Journals Limited, Belfast, 1980, 35ff.

64 *Atonement*, 2-5.

65 *Ibid.*, 3.

66 *Ibid.*, 4.

when the high priest entered once a year alone behind the veil into the holy of holies. Shrouded with a cloud of incense and at the risk of his life he sprinkled the sacrificial blood upon the divine mercy seat, there holding communion with God and making intercession for Israel.

That inner mystery God ordained to be completely veiled from human eyes: the innermost heart of atonement, its most solemn and awful part, was hidden from public view.⁶⁷ It is ineffable.⁶⁸

Torrance then proceeds to draw out the parallel with atonement in the New Testament.

That divine ordinance from the old covenant serves to remind us, as we seek to understand the cross, that though the veil of the earthly temple was rent from top to bottom,⁶⁹ Jesus entered within the veil "into heaven itself,"⁷⁰ into the holy of holies of God's immediate presence and there he acted as our high priest and mediator beyond the view of humankind — the nature of his work was unutterable. That means that the innermost mystery of atonement and intercession remains mystery: it cannot be spelled out, and it cannot be spied out. That is the ultimate mystery of the blood of Christ, the blood of God incarnate, a holy and infinite mystery which is more to be adored than expressed.⁷¹

It is the ultimate and inviolable nature of the mystery of atonement and the impossibility of ever adequately understanding it or expressing it in words which is "in part at least" the meaning for Torrance of the Lord's Supper, for

here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the saviour.⁷² That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.⁷³

67 Lev 16.17. Note: references within quotations from Torrance in this article are part of his original text.

68 *Atonement*, 2.

69 Matt 27.51; Mark 15.38; Luke 23.45.

70 See Hebrews, especially chapter 9.11-12, 24.

71 *Atonement*, 2.

72 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

73 *Atonement*, 3.

Such is Torrance's reiterated emphasis in these pages on the infinitely holy mystery of atonement and the inadequacy of mere words to match its import that any reading of him here makes it very difficult and indeed impossible to accuse him of over emphasizing the incarnation at the expense of the atonement.

(ii) *The decisive new deed of divine intervention*

The mystery of atonement is reinforced here for Torrance by the very nature of the act of God in Jesus setting "our life on a wholly new basis."⁷⁴

It is a decisive deed which makes the ground of our approach to God an act and word of God that cuts away the ground from all our human religion and establishes a new relation to God so utterly wonderful that we are overwhelmed, and so radical that it entails a complete reversal of our previous attitudes and of all our preconceived ideas. This reversal means that *we cannot think our way into the death of Christ because the continuity of our thinking and striving has been interrupted by it, but we may think our way from it* if we follow the new and living way opened up to us in the crucifixion. Here is a deed of unearthly magnitude before which we can only bow in utter humility — far from being able to fit the death of Jesus into our life and our own preconceptions or notions we face the demand that we should be conformed to his death. We can understand the cross only by *metanoia*, repentance and a change of mind...we must be obedient in our understanding and mind if we are even to begin to apprehend its significance.⁷⁵

The atonement sets our lives and thinking on a totally new basis in which we must now begin with the reality and mystery of what God has done for us in Christ. Even beginning to understand it involves a new way of thinking in which we obediently *follow* it, thinking our way out *from* the reality established for us and not attempting to think our way *into* it by normal patterns of rational thought.

(iii) *The meaning of atonement only unfolded by following Christ a posteriori*

The only way to understand something of the atonement, Torrance says, is to follow Christ in the gospel accounts of the way that he himself unfolded the meaning of his death. Torrance stresses here the remarkable way in which Jesus revealed the meaning of his mission only gradually, and then only in such a way

74 *Ibid.*

75 *Ibid.*, 3-4.

that his revelation of himself by word and by act kept pace with one another and that he unfolded both together only in tune with the actual unfolding of his mission in life.⁷⁶ Thus he refused the final revelation of himself in *act* "until the hour of God arrived," and likewise

restrained his *words* revealing this purpose and communicated them only as the pattern of his mission began to unfold in its actual course, making his words and acts proceed *pari passu*⁷⁷ in the one mission of revelation and reconciliation...hence the nearer he approached his "hour" as he called it, the more he was ready to reveal the mystery of his passion. That he did in two supreme "words" about his atoning death...*first*, "the son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,"⁷⁸ and *second*, "This is my body given for you. This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins."^{79 80}

Torrance takes these two "words," together with their accompanying acts, as the basis for his doctrine of atonement. Interpreted together with all the other teaching of Jesus and of the rest of the New Testament,⁸¹ and interpreted too against the background of the Old, but in the light of his critical and creative fulfillment of it,⁸² the two "words" take primary place in any understanding of atonement. Torrance looks at all the language and concepts employed by both Old and New Testaments in their teaching on atonement and at how it is all gathered up in the person of the mediator. For Torrance, there can be no abstract theory of atonement, but only an examination of biblical teaching in which we allow the person and work of Christ in word and act to shape our thought, and only a putting together of biblical material "based upon the inherent synthesis to be found in the person of the mediator."⁸³ No merely theoretic understanding can gather up and encapsulate the meaning of atonement. It is only in gathering

76 *Atonement*, 5ff.

77 Latin, "with equal step," in line with each other.

78 Matt 20.28; Mark 10.45.

79 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24. Cf. Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

80 *Atonement*, 5-7. Note again that references within quotations of Torrance in this article are part of his own text.

81 *Ibid.*, 7.

82 *Ibid.*, 1; cf. 7ff., 25ff., 61f., 63ff., 139ff., 174ff.

83 *Op. cit.* 4.

together biblical material and interpreting it in strictest faithfulness to Christ in whom alone biblical images and concepts are held together that we can gain any understanding of the atonement while remaining faithful to its mystery.

Here above all, then, in seeking to understand the death of Christ, we must *follow* Christ, and think only *a posteriori*,⁸⁴ seeking throughout to be conformed in mind to Christ himself as the truth. That is the only way to understand and at the same time to reverence the infinite mystery and majesty of this atoning deed on the cross which by its very nature reaches out beyond all finite comprehension into eternity.⁸⁵

(iv) *The unfathomable depth of atonement*

There is understanding of the wisdom of God in the atonement, but any apprehension given to us of the death of Christ, while real and genuine insight, is only possible in part. Like a beam of light shone up into a dark sky, the meaning we apprehend through following Christ's self-revelation in word and act may be clear and defined at our end but opens out into the infinite depths of his passion and of the love and being of God.⁸⁶ Through his communication of it by word and act in the human language and concepts chosen and molded by his person, the meaning Christ gives us to understand through the Spirit is defined and truly apprehended at our end, but that genuine apprehension reaches into the depths of God and the "mystery of the blood of Christ" for which no words can suffice.

Here we tread the holy ground of the garden of Gethsemane and Calvary and here we must clap our hand upon our mouth again and again for we have no words adequate to match the infinitely holy import of atonement. It is precisely (in part at least) for that reason that before he suffered Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord's supper...here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the savior.⁸⁷ That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the

84 Latin, literally "from after," hence "following on the event," "according to the fact," i.e. obedient to reality.

85 *Atonement*, 4-5.

86 Cf. the discussion in T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1988, 22, 25-26, on the two-fold character of faith and understanding, "determinate and bounded" at our end and "indeterminate and unbounded" at God's end.

87 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.⁸⁸

(b) The “who” of atonement — the person of Christ as God and man

Reflection on the Gospels and on Jesus Christ as we meet him there inevitably raises all the questions raised in the Gospels themselves. “Who is this that can forgive sins?” “He speaks with authority and not as the scribes.” “No man ever spoke like this man.” “Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?” “Who is this that makes himself equal with God” and calls him colloquially “Abba,” my Father? The questions “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” and “Who is this who does what only God can do?” arise inevitably of Jesus and his work. Who is this person who does these things?⁸⁹ But more than that, the deeds which Jesus performs, extraordinary as they are, are not simply deeds done by him, but deeds which in the Gospels betray a connection with his person. They are the deeds of *his* person, only *he* can do these things. There is something in the nature of an intimate connection between the actions and the person. This person does not just raise people from the dead but proclaims “I AM the resurrection and the life.” Who is this?

In any attempt to understand the Gospels and the forgiveness of sins in the risen Christ, the christological “who” question inevitably raises itself of Jesus and his work. As faith searches for understanding, the only answer which really matches the gospel accounts and makes definitive sense is that of classical Christology (echoed by Torrance), “this is God, this is man, yet this is one person.” Such a response not only answers the “who” question but highlights and defines the work also. To say of the atonement, “this is God” and “this is man” defines the work as being that of God himself and yet as being also the act of man in atonement, and to say “this is one person” is to say that this is God acting *as real man* for us.

Such questions and answers have already inevitably raised also the question of the relation between the person and the work of Jesus, between the “who” of his person and the “what” of what he has done for us, and as just seen, the answer to the first affects the understanding of the second. What is the relation between person and work, faith asks?

88 *Atonement*, 2-3.

89 Cf. the account of the majesty and authority of Jesus in *Incarnation*, 128; cf. 138-40 and *Atonement*, 235-6.

(c) Person and work inseparable and only understood in the light of each other

That there is a manifest relation between person and work is clear from the outset: a work is the work of a person and intimately shaped by that person, while the person is shaped by the work. Person and work mutually define each other and each is also known through the other. We come to know the person through the work they do and through knowing the person we can better understand their work. If such mutuality in relation between person and work is true at the human level, it is evidently even more true at the divine, but at the level of divine personhood there are also very significant differences from the human level in the relation of person to work.

In the Gospels, Jesus reveals himself, his person, through his word and act and does so, as Torrance emphasizes, only gradually.⁹⁰ We come to know who he is by what he says in word and does in act. In both, he is revealing the person he is, and it is only through his word and act that we know his person. It is, for example, because he does the works which only God can do — forgiving sins, raising the dead, stilling the storm, teaching with authority, etc. — that we begin to discern the secret of his person. At the same time, it is only through knowing *who* he is that we can truly understand his work and its significance.

With Jesus, however, the relation between person and work is intrinsically and inherently closer than that known anywhere else or in anyone else. This is because of the nature of God and the relation between his being and word and act. He speaks and it is done. There is no gap between his person and what he does, for his act is in perfect accord with his person and being,⁹¹ and the nature of his work is in perfect accord with the nature of his person. Torrance emphasizes, for example, that the nature of the resurrection as the mighty, creative act of God was in complete correspondence and consistence with the nature of the person of Christ. Similarly, the being of God is love, and everything that he does in Christ is in perfect accordance with his being as love.

90 *Atonement*, 5f; cf. *Incarnation*, 19, 21, 161f.

91 T.F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, OUP, London, 1971, 141; T.F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1996, 236.

If there is no gap in God between being and act, what he does as man is equally so. What he is in himself, he does, and what he does, he is in himself:

As incarnate Son of God he confronts us as he in whom person and work and word are indissolubly one. It is his own person that he communicates in his words and deeds, while his words and deeds do not only derive from his person but inhere in it.⁹²

It is here above all that we see the Word made flesh in the unity of person and word, truth and life, word and deed in Jesus Christ...here in Jesus Christ God acts in such a way that he is himself in his act, and what he acts he is, and what he is he acts.⁹³

The identity of person and word, person and work in Christ lies at the core of Torrance's theology and is a major strand running right through it. Christ's work, for Torrance, is inseparable from his person and his person is likewise inseparable from his work. The whole work of Christ is part of his person, and **together person and word and work make up one whole Jesus Christ**. Thus we cannot think of the work of Christ "simply as an act done by Christ." It is the act of *his* person, and it is the person doing the act which makes the work what it is.

It is above all the person of Christ revealing so that revelation cannot be separated off from his person. Similarly, it is the person of Christ atoning, so that atonement cannot be divided from Christ's person. It is because revelation is the person of Christ revealing that it is revelation, and it is because atonement is the person of Christ atoning that it is atonement. Thus, for example, the significance of the cross does not lie simply in the death or in the blood of Christ shed in sacrifice, but it lies in the fact that the person of Christ is the one who sheds his blood for our sin — it lies in the identity of his person and work. The atonement is his person in action, not the action by itself.⁹⁴

It is because it is the person of Christ on the cross, God himself, that atonement is atonement. But equally, atonement is not atonement without the action. It is the person in action, not the person by itself. It is God acting in time and space for our salvation. Person and work are equally necessary and inseparable.

As faith continues to search for fuller understanding of the new life in Christ, the "who" of his person (true God, true man) and the inseparability of his person and work are narrowed down and further defined. Understanding of them is crystallized to find in the hypostatic union their own immediate and deeper basis.

92 *Atonement*, 211.

93 *Incarnation*, 107-8.

94 *Ibid.*, 108.

(d) The hypostatic union the linchpin of salvation

The hypostatic union is the union of God and man in the person of Christ. It is the event in which the eternal God now became also man in such a way that without ceasing to be true God, he became true man in the person of Christ. In time and for all time, God united himself to man in the person of Jesus Christ. That living and permanent union in one person of God and man (“two natures in one person”) is the doctrine of the hypostatic union, and though expressed in technical language, it is simply precise, condensed, theological shorthand for the reality which Jesus Christ is in his person.

Because he himself, in his risen and ever living person, is both God and man, he is *himself* the bond between God and man. In his person Jesus straddles both sides permanently, and because it is the same person who is God who is man, his one person is the living ontological bridge between, and union of, God and man.⁹⁵ This union, forged at the incarnation, can now no more be undone than the incarnation can be undone or the person of Christ torn in two.⁹⁶

For Torrance, it is critically important that the hypostatic union is understood dynamically and not just statically.⁹⁷ The incarnation was a once for all event, the union of God and man in the birth of Jesus, but it was simply the beginning of a union which had to grow. It had to be lived out throughout a human life, be maintained in the teeth of sin, judgment and death on the cross, and rise into resurrection.⁹⁸ It was the beginning of a continuous dynamic event which was only completed in the resurrection and ascension:

the incarnation involves a union of God and man in Christ accomplished once and for all, but it also involves a living union continuous throughout the life of the historical Jesus Christ moving from his birth to his resurrection.⁹⁹

95 *Incarnation*, 184, 190f., 195; cf. *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 160-1, “the *homo-ousion* [the oneness in being between Jesus and God] is the ontological and epistemological linchpin of Christian theology. With it, everything hangs together; without it, everything ultimately falls apart.”

96 Cf. *Incarnation*, 196, *Atonement*, 167.

97 *Incarnation*, 85f., 182ff.

98 Cf. *Incarnation*, 118ff.

99 *Incarnation*, 85.

Torrance thus speaks of the hypostatic union as “the mainstay of a doctrine of atoning reconciliation”¹⁰⁰ and as “the heart of revelation [and reconciliation] and its full substance.”¹⁰¹ It is the union of God and man in Jesus himself which, in his vicarious humanity, is the center point of our own union with God and is to be seen as the heart of his whole work of revelation, atonement, and reconciliation. He was that living dynamic union throughout his life to its atoning climax on the cross, and he still is, undefeated in resurrection.

(e) The difficulty of the sinless one being “made sin” – the patristic principle of redemption

The statements of Paul (“Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures”),¹⁰² of Isaiah 53 and of Peter (“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree”),¹⁰³ all express the heart of Christian belief. Paul even says that God “made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin,”¹⁰⁴ but how was our “iniquity” laid on the suffering servant; how did he bear our sin, and how was he the sinless one made to be sin?

How can the innocent bear the sins of the guilty, unless merely by imputation or by agreeing to stand in the place of the guilty and bear their penalty? How could the holy God bear sin and how can God the Son possibly be *made sin* on the cross?

The Son’s incarnational identification with sinners – the assumption of fallen flesh

Torrance’s answer to these questions is that Jesus Christ bears human sin not just by imputation, or by being made sin on the cross, but by assuming fallen flesh and fallen humanity from the very beginning of his life. In the incarnation Christ assumed our actual fallen flesh.¹⁰⁵ At the Jordan he the sinless one identified himself

100 *Incarnation*, 196.

101 *Ibid.*, “The hypostatic union of God and man in one person is the heart of revelation and its full substance” (192); “The hypostatic union of God and man in one person is the heart of reconciliation and its full substance” (194).

102 1 Cor 15.3.

103 1 Pet 2.24.

104 2 Cor 5.21.

105 *Incarnation*, 61f., 204f.

with sinners in their baptism into repentance. In his ministry of increasing solidarity with sinners he took their iniquities on himself and bore their diseases even as he healed them¹⁰⁶ all until, "bringing his relation of solidarity with them to its purposed end or completion on the cross,"¹⁰⁷ there "at last all the sin of humanity is finally laid upon him."¹⁰⁸ For Torrance, Jesus bears human sin not just by imputation or by bearing its penalty but by actually identifying himself with sinners and taking their fallen humanity on himself. Christ assumes not unfallen but fallen flesh in the incarnation. His self-identification with sinners and bearing of their sin is therefore *actual*, not simply by imputation, fiat, or "legal fiction." It is also something which *begins at the incarnation* and did not just take place at the cross.

The patristic principle of redemption – "the unassumed is the unredeemed"

In line with the patristic principle of redemption, as he considers it, Torrance argues here that "the unassumed is the unredeemed,"¹⁰⁹ that whatever has not been incarnationally assumed by Christ is unredeemed, that is, that if Christ assumed a human body, but not a mind, then the human mind has not been redeemed or healed. Christ has to become and take on himself all that we are in order for us to be healed, and therefore if we are fallen in body, mind, and soul, then he himself has to assume fallen body, mind, and soul in order for each of them to be restored.

Torrance's position is not without controversy, but the perceived difficulty is not so much with what Christ assumed as with its fallenness, for how

106 Matt 8.17.

107 *Incarnation*, 137f.

108 *Ibid.*, 136.

109 *Incarnation*, 62. For a fuller account by Torrance of the patristic principle together with the citations and references offered in support, see *Trinitarian Faith*, 161-68. Cf. also Athanasius, "the Saviour humbled himself in taking 'our body of humiliation,' and took a servant's form, putting on that flesh which was enslaved to sin," *Contra Arianos* 1.43, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, "Athanasius," Eerdmans repr, Grand Rapids, 1971, 331. Cf. further *Contra Arianos*, 2.61, 66, 69; 3.33, 34 (grateful acknowledgement here to James B. Walker for these references from Athanasius and for his reading and comments on this article).

can Christ assume fallen human nature without sin, without being a sinner himself?

The question of sinless assumption of fallen flesh can only be answered in dynamic terms

Torrance's answer is that Christ's assumption of fallen flesh can only be understood dynamically and not statically.¹¹⁰ Understood statically, Christ's assumption of fallenness would mean that he too became fallen, but for Torrance the incarnation can only be understood dynamically: in the very act of assuming fallen flesh and making it his own, Christ sanctifies it and continues to do so all the way through his life.¹¹¹ At each stage, throughout his ministry of deepening solidarity with sinners, he is engaged in a movement of cleansing and bending wayward human nature back to God until the completion of that mission in atoning sacrifice on the cross.

(f) Incarnation and atonement inseparable and only understood in the light of each other

If the incarnation is already the assumption and sanctification of sinful flesh, how precisely does Torrance see the connection between incarnation and atonement?

Put briefly, Torrance sees the incarnation as the hypostatic foundation for the atonement, while the atonement (followed by resurrection) is the completion and goal of the incarnation. Incarnation and atonement are integral and inter-locking components of the one whole event of salvation, mutually inter-dependent and ontologically inseparable from one another. The incarnation is one end of the whole atoning work of Christ, while atonement followed by resurrection and ascension is the other end. Both belong to the inseparability of Christ's person and work.¹¹² There are several overlapping points here.

110 *Incarnation*, 206; cf. 85.

111 *Incarnation*, 204f; cf. 63f.

112 *Incarnation*, 37, "Jesus Christ is one person whose word is wholly involved in his act and whose act is wholly involved in his person. We cannot therefore think of his person apart from his atoning work, or of his atoning work in abstraction from his person. We begin with the person of Christ, but it is his person who carries out the work of salvation, and in the strict sense it is Jesus Christ himself, the mediator, who

(i) As the hypostatic union of God and man, incarnation is the ground of atonement

For Torrance, the hypostatic union is the ground, the bedrock, and the heart of atonement and is so in two ways:

(1) The whole aim of atonement is to restore humanity to fellowship and union with God, but that union is the union which was established in the incarnation in the person of Christ himself.¹¹³ As the *union of God and man*, the hypostatic union is the reality forged in the person of Christ in order that it might be worked out through all the full estrangement of humanity from God, through judgment and atonement on the cross, into reconciliation.¹¹⁴ This union of God and man with sinful humanity at Bethlehem, lived and battled out in the life of Jesus, is deliberately taken down into judgment and death on the cross that there it might be fully maintained and established and so issue in full and final reconciliation in the resurrection of Jesus.

Reconciliation is the full outworking of the hypostatic union. Reconciliation begins with the birth of Jesus when God and man are brought into real union and it is that real union carried throughout the conditions of our human life in its estrangement from God, in such a way as to restore our human life from its estrangement to fellowship with the Father. Thus the whole life and action of Christ from birth to death constitutes reconciliation. It is ultimately in the death of Christ when he plumbs the deepest depth of our estrangement, in our death, in his suffering the divine judgement upon our sin, that union between God and humanity, begun in the birth of Jesus, and carried throughout his human life, reaches its complete fulfilment. . . . That is the eternalising of reconciliation with humanity in the life and person of the resurrected Son.¹¹⁵

(2) The union in Christ is not simply *between his divine and human natures*, in which case the glue as it were (if we can possibly speak this way) might come unstuck and the union undone, but is a union in which *the person of Christ himself*

is the atonement. It is Christ atoning who concerns us here. Therefore even when we begin with his incarnation, and with his birth at Bethlehem, we are beginning right away with the atonement, for his birth, as the beginning of his incarnate person, is one end of the atoning work, with the resurrection and ascension as the other end."

113 Cf. *Incarnation*, 81f.

114 *Incarnation*, 105-7.

115 *Atonement*, 149-50; cf. 216.

is the bond, a union in which the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in the one person of Christ can no more be undone than the person of Christ can be undone.¹¹⁶ The hypostatic union, forged in incarnation and unbreakably firm on the cross, therefore forms the ontological bond of the union of God and man which lies at the heart of atonement: just as the hypostatic union meant that at Bethlehem he who was God was now also man, so it means that on the cross he who atones is God and is man in the one person of Christ. The atonement is the full act of God and the full act of man, *in man, for man, and by man* in the person of Christ, but an act of *God as man*.¹¹⁷ It is the one person of Christ, which means that atonement is one, at once the full and complete act of God in atonement and the full and complete act of man, one indivisible act of God reaching man and undoing sin, and of man in atoning sacrifice and reception of atonement and reconciliation. It is thus the oneness of the one person of Jesus Christ which is the inner bond of atonement on the cross.

. . . it is important to see that the doctrine of Christ's work of atoning reconciliation presupposes the doctrine of the hypostatic union of two natures in his one person, for the whole work of reconciliation depends upon the fact that *one person acts both from the side of God, and from the side of man*, both in his divine acts and in his human acts, and that these acts are really and truly identical in the person of the mediator.¹¹⁸

(ii) It is the whole incarnate life of Jesus Christ which is offered up in atonement

For Torrance, the death of Jesus cannot be isolated from his whole life for a moment. It is his *life* which he has come to give as a ransom in atonement, and only in atonement does his life come to its completion and appointed end.

116 Cf. again *Atonement*, 167.

117 *Incarnation*, 195.

118 *Incarnation*, 184; cf. 195, "The atonement is the work of the God-man, of God and man in hypostatic union, not simply an act of God in man, but an act of God *as man*. And so the hypostatic union and atonement belong together. Atonement is possible on the ground of the hypostatic union, and only on the ground of atoning reconciliation can the oneness of the Word and our flesh of sin be brought to its full *telos* in the hypostatic union of God and man in the risen Jesus Christ."

Jesus does not regard the work he has to fulfil in his death as divorced from his life. It is his *life* which he has come to give in redemption, or in ransom for the many, and that concerns his whole course of obedience as the incarnate servant-Son. His life as the servant comes to its completion in his sacrifice on the cross...It is his whole life, and above all that life poured out in the supreme sacrifice of death on the cross, that makes atonement for sin, provides the ground and basis for forgiveness, and means the redemption of those whose lives have been forfeit before God.¹¹⁹

Such was the importance for Torrance of not divorcing the death of Jesus from his life and of integrating incarnation and atonement in theology that he always set his students an essay on the relation between the two.¹²⁰

(iii) As the sanctification of fallen flesh, incarnation is the beginning of atonement

Torrance's teaching, that in assuming fallen flesh and making it his Jesus sanctified it, means that the incarnation is already atoning event, already the beginning of atonement and of the atoning exchange (where he who knew no sin was made sin for us)¹²¹ of the cross:

We must . . . say that in the very act of assuming our flesh the Word sanctified and hallowed it, for the assumption of our sinful flesh is itself atoning and sanctifying action.¹²²

119 *Atonement*, 22.

120 Cf. "This integration of atonement and incarnation, of the work and person of Christ, is of the most fundamental significance and must not be lost sight of for a moment. The death of Jesus cannot be isolated from his life, while the whole mission of his life presses toward the final act of obedience to the will of God when through the sacrifice of himself in death on the cross, he made expiation for our sins and mediated a new covenant," *ibid.*, 23.

121 2 Cor 5.21.

122 *Incarnation*, 63; cf. "The verse 'he made him to be sin who knew no sin' does not mean that God made him a man who sins, or sins again, but that he was made that by way of exchange, *katallagē*, or substitution. That carries us right into the heart of the atonement. That atoning exchange begins right away with the incarnation, with its assumption of our flesh of sin, its condemnation of sin in the flesh, its sanctification of our humanity through the gift of divine righteousness and sanctification of man in Christ." *Ibid.*

[The union in Christ] between our fallen human nature and his divine nature, [is] a union in which he, while assuming our fallen nature, sanctifies it in the very act of assumption, and so begins our redemption from his very birth. Thus incarnation in the narrower sense of the term is itself redeeming event.¹²³

The incarnation needs to be seen as itself the beginning of atonement, as “the reconciliation wrought out on the cross . . . already at work in the person of Christ,” and the life of Jesus needs to be seen in turn as the visible working out, to its climax on the cross, of what had already actually begun to take place in his birth.¹²⁴

(iv) Jesus’ redeeming life and ministry proleptically dependent on the atonement

Such is the inter-relation between incarnation and atonement that while the incarnation is often described by Torrance as the beginning of an atoning action which is completed on the cross, he also sees it (as just mentioned above) as the cross “already at work in the person of Christ.”

For Torrance, Jesus’ miracles of healing and forgiveness in which he rescued the sick and the possessed from the power of evil already involved a taking of their sins on himself and a struggle with evil which looked forward to the final conflict and victory of the cross:

It was only in anticipation of Calvary that Jesus wrought those miracles, in which he healed the sick, drove out demons, forgave sins, and raised the dead. All through his life and ministry, from the baptism to the cross, he was at work in holy atonement, bearing the sins of the world on his spirit. . . . In this way we see that the whole of his life was an atoning sacrifice, although it is on the cross that at last all the sin of humanity is finally laid upon him, and there that through the eternal Spirit he offered himself once and for all in complete and final expiation for the sin of mankind.¹²⁵

Although Torrance does not do so (as far as the present writer is aware), it seems fair to draw something of a parallel between what he says about the daily

123 *Incarnation*, 82.

124 *Incarnation*, 108, “The reconciliation wrought out on the cross is already at work in the person of Christ, and all his life is the visible working and working out of what took place when the Son of God became man in the midst of our flesh of sin.”

125 *Incarnation*, 136.

forgiveness of sins in ancient Israel and what he is saying here. Just as the day to day atonement for sins in Israel looked forward to and was dependent on renewal of the covenant on the Day of Atonement, so here Jesus' exercise of atoning and redemptive power in his miracles looked forward to and was only in anticipation of final atonement and redemption on the cross.

Despite the parallel there is an essential difference. Daily forgiveness in Israel was in no sense the ground for forgiveness on the Day of Atonement and was completely proleptically dependent on it. By contrast, the incarnation, as the sanctifying union of God and man in the person of Christ, was already the beginning of atonement while reaching out to its future completion. In that sense, the hypostatic union worked out in Jesus' life and ministry is both the essential ground of atonement on the cross and proleptically dependent on its final realization and permanent actualization in the cross and resurrection.

(v) Atonement (and resurrection) the indispensable fulfillment of the incarnation

If atonement is only possible on the ground of incarnation and hypostatic union, it is equally true that it is only through his ultimate identification with us on the cross in our sin and God-forsakenness, only through his maintenance of the hypostatic union in the depth of our estrangement,¹²⁶ only through atonement at that point of damnation and final judgment, only in and through all that, that Christ's incarnational assumption of our humanity and the union of God and man in him is fully and finally fulfilled¹²⁷ and so issues in resurrection.¹²⁸

We have to see reconciliation not only as the outworking of the hypostatic union, but as the ultimate fulfilment of God's assumption of our humanity in the incarnation. . . . That assumption of our fearful and lost condition reaches its supreme point in the cross where the Son freely assumes our damnation and final judgement, freely assumes our God-forsakenness in the *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani* of death on the cross under judgement. And so he achieves our assumption into oneness with himself, and because that assumption is

126 *Atonement*, 149f.

127 Cf. *Incarnation*, 137-38.

128 Cf. again, *Incarnation*, 195, "Atonement is possible on the ground of the hypostatic union, and only on the ground of atoning reconciliation can the oneness of the Word and our flesh of sin be brought to its full *telos* in the hypostatic union of God and man in the risen Jesus Christ"; cf. also *Atonement*, 120-25.

maintained even in the hell into which the Son descended, it achieves its end in the resurrection of man out of hell and the exaltation of man in Christ to the right hand of God.¹²⁹

If the incarnation does not reach down into the very depths of human guilt and estrangement under final judgment it has not really assumed our humanity to its ultimate actuality, but because it has done so, and because the hypostatic union held firm even there, the incarnation emerges on the other side of death into its permanent fulfillment in the risen humanity of Christ.

(g) The relation of incarnation and atonement one of profound inter-relation

It is clear from the above that the relation between incarnation and atonement is not simply one of mutual relation, but one of the profoundest *inter-relation* in which incarnation and atonement are constitutively interlocked with one another: incarnation cannot be understood without reference to atonement, nor atonement without reference to incarnation, while incarnation is already the beginning of atonement and atonement is the completion of incarnation.

The several aspects of the constitutive inter-relation

There are several aspects to the inter-relation and inseparability of incarnation and atonement: the need for redemption to involve real God and real man, for it to be the true act of both God and of man worked out and accomplished in history, and the need for all of these to be held together in an unbreakable unity. Torrance therefore is at pains throughout to emphasize both the unity of God and man in hypostatic union and the inseparability of person and work in the whole Jesus Christ from birth to resurrection and ascension.

To put the argument in Anselmian terms: as the human race is incapable of saving themselves, only *God* can redeem them, and only by reaching them as they are in their state of *fallen flesh*. He can only do that by *himself becoming man* and therefore by *himself assuming fallen flesh*, but as holy God he cannot do so without *sanctifying the fallen flesh even as he assumes it* to make it his, and that means that incarnation is already atonement in commencement. Or to put the same argument the other way around: if atonement must reach man

129 *Atonement*, 150; cf. 216-7.

as *fallen* flesh, and if only God can do so through becoming man and taking fallen flesh on himself, then atonement can only be achieved on the ground of incarnation and is its completion.

It must be stressed here that for Torrance, as for Anselm, the “necessity” of God becoming man and becoming what we are is not one of logical necessity or of *a priori* rational reasoning. As Torrance emphasized in his classes, the “need” or the “had to” behind God becoming man was not one of external compulsion on God, far less any kind of logical necessity, but simply the “logic of grace,” the inner logic of his freedom and act of grace. We cannot think our way *into* the atonement but only *out from* it, for we cannot demonstrate the necessity for incarnation and atonement on purely logical grounds: we can only begin from and unfold the logic and rationale inherent in the whole act of God in Christ.

(h) The twofold mystery of the incarnation — the person of Christ and his sanctifying assumption of fallen flesh

Torrance does not speak of there being a twofold mystery in the incarnation but only of the mystery of the person of Christ. He does speak of the mystery of atonement and of the incarnation as already atoning event. Although the primary mystery of incarnation is the person of Christ, and although it is only on the cross that we have in all its fullness the mystery of atonement, it is fair to see in the incarnational assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh a second element of mystery, and in that sense to speak of the twofold mystery of incarnation.

(i) The mystery of God and man in one person — the givenness of duality in unity

The mystery of Jesus Christ is “*the mystery of true divine nature and true human nature in one person.*”¹³⁰ Its mystery is that here is “a new and unique reality” which we cannot know in terms of anything else, which we can know “only out of it itself,” and in which as we “acknowledge it in wonder and thankfulness, in adoration and praise” we know that “it remains a mystery,” ultimately inconceivable and impossible of exact expression even “in the midst of its disclosure.”¹³¹ It is “the duality of God and man in the unity of

130 *Incarnation*, 83.

131 *Ibid.*

one person,"¹³² the irreducible "starting point" of Christology or "the given" in theology.¹³³

(ii) *The mystery of divine assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh*

The assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh in the incarnation is likewise a mystery. We cannot say how God can really assume actual fallen flesh and sanctify it without taint or becoming a sinner. Just as we cannot say how the sins of the whole world were laid on Christ at the cross and he was made sin for us, so we cannot put together the sinlessness of Christ and the assumption of fallen flesh. The *how* of atonement on the cross is the mystery of God and so in the incarnation is the *how* of assumption. Both can only be conceived in their reality as the creative and dynamic act of God, but their *how* remains a divine mystery beyond human knowledge. As with the creation itself, we can know them as realities brought into being by God, but their *how* is hidden in him.

(iii) *The patristic principle as a statement of faith*

The patristic principle, as Torrance terms it, that "the unassumed is the unhealed," and therefore that Christ assumed fallen flesh in the incarnation, is a statement of faith. It is a theological judgment arrived at through interpretation of the bible as a whole and endeavoring to understand it in its inner logic.

The bible nowhere says in quite so many words that Jesus assumed fallen flesh,¹³⁴ far less, as Torrance does, that all the way through his life Jesus was bending human nature back into obedience to God. What then are the grounds for Torrance's assertion that the whole life of Jesus was one of atoning conversion of human nature, begun in the incarnation and fulfilled on the cross and in resurrection?

While he may be able to point to certain biblical passages, Torrance is apparently going beyond anything they explicitly say and understanding them and a raft of other biblical material in terms of a theological framework of interpretation. What kind of rationale would he give for doing so?

132 *Incarnation*, 37; cf. 3.

133 *Incarnation*, 3, 7.

134 Though see and compare here the discussion of "sinful flesh" just below under the heading "Incarnational solidarity in Romans and John."

He would certainly agree that he is using a theological framework to interpret biblical texts, but he would argue that it is a framework which is derived from them and which offers a deeper, more illuminating and coherent understanding of them, and so makes for deeper christological sense and greater fidelity to the bible. Torrance would argue, in other words, that such a framework brings to light the "inner logic" of the bible and of the salvation which is in Christ.

If to say with Paul that "Christ died for our sins" and was made sin for us¹³⁵ is to make a statement of faith, to say that the atonement began with the incarnation is to make a similar statement of faith, but one based on sustained theological reflection on what Paul says and formed also in the light of all that the Gospels and New Testament have to say about the person and work of Christ. Taken together with statements about Jesus bearing sins on the cross, passages such as Matthew's that in healing people Jesus took their iniquities and diseases on himself,¹³⁶ or the Gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism in identification with sinners when he was at once driven into the wilderness to experience temptation in conflict with evil, or accounts of Jesus touching unclean lepers and cleansing them,¹³⁷ such passages point to Jesus' public ministry as being one in which he identified himself with sinners from the outset, and in healing them was already taking their iniquities on himself. Such passages thus point in the direction of Jesus' redemptive activity having its beginning before the cross in the ministry inaugurated at his baptism.

The argument in Hebrews of Christ's incarnational solidarity with human nature

The argument in Hebrews that if "the children are flesh and blood" then the high priest has to be so likewise in order that by sharing their nature and dying their death he might destroy death,¹³⁸ is very close here to the logic of the patristic principle that the unassumed is the unhealed. It is the argument that if the children have human nature, are tempted, and die, then the priest who represents them must do so likewise, sharing in all that they are and experience in order to be truly one with them and redeem them. The redeemer has to

135 1 Cor 15.3; 2 Cor 5.21.

136 Matt 8.17 (quotation from Isaiah 53).

137 Matt 8.2-4; Mark 1.40-44; Luke 5.12-14.

138 Heb 2.14f.

share the same nature as those who need redemption in order to redeem them from it. In Hebrews, although the redeemer shares the nature of those he redeems and makes *himself* an offering for their sin, there is no explicit concept of the redeemer incarnationally assuming the *fallen* human nature of those he redeems.

It may be argued that the logic of the Hebrews passage points in that direction, but it does not take that step as Torrance does. It simply stops at the point of incarnational solidarity with sinners in flesh and blood and in temptation, suffering, and learning obedience.¹³⁹ It can be legitimately argued that Hebrews does not rule out such a step, and in fact leaves it open. Torrance takes that step, and at this point there are further passages he can adduce in support, in particular Romans 8 and John 1.

Incarnational solidarity in Romans and John

(1) "The likeness of sinful flesh" — *"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (**en homoiōmati sarkos hamartias**) and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh."*¹⁴⁰

Referring to the phrase "in the likeness of sinful flesh," Torrance would ask the class in his dogmatics lectures whether such "likeness" was just the likeness of the beard of a billy goat to the beard of a man, or whether it was not something much more than that. For Torrance, Jesus' likeness was not simply one of outward resemblance but a real likeness and a real sharing in sinful flesh although without sin himself. Torrance's argument was that unless Jesus actually lived in and shared our sinful flesh, he could not by his sinlessness condemn sin in it and so free us from it.¹⁴¹

"The likeness of men" — In the somewhat similar passage in Philippians,¹⁴² the use of the same word "likeness" (*homoiōmati*) most certainly does not mean that Jesus was not really and fully man. The "likeness of men" no more means

139 Heb 2.10-18; 5.7-9.

140 Romans 8.3.

141 Cf. *Trinitarian Faith*, 161.

142 Philippians 2.6-8.

that Jesus was only *like* man, than being “in the *form* of God” means that he was not really God, or than “taking the *form* of a servant” and “being found in human form” means that he was not really a servant and really man. The whole force of the passage is that Jesus who was really God, became really man, and as man did not repeat the sin of Adam but went the other way, humbling himself to become a servant.¹⁴³ The use of the word *homoīōmati* by Paul in Philippians here confirms Torrance’s understanding of the Romans passage as meaning much more than external resemblance.

(2) “The Word became flesh”¹⁴⁴ — Torrance argues that when the Word became flesh it was not some neutral flesh he assumed or some ideal humanity, but “our actual human nature and existence in the bondage and estrangement of humanity fallen from God. . . . There can be no doubt that the New Testament speaks of the flesh of Jesus as the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam’s fall.”¹⁴⁵ Torrance would undoubtedly have agreed with Barth’s whole account that the “flesh” the Word assumed was our actual flesh in its state of unholiness and corruption¹⁴⁶ and indeed Torrance’s language in the above citation echoes that of Barth.¹⁴⁷

143 Although Torrance did not refer to this passage in the context of the Romans one, he did regularly refer to it in class and make the point that it was an implicit allusion to Adam. In contrast to Adam who was not God but man, Jesus who was God became man, and unlike Adam who as man tried to snatch at equality with God, Jesus took the form of a servant and became obedient to death. Speaking of Christ the passage runs, “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the *form* of God (*en morphē Theou*) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the *form* of a servant (*morphēn doulou*), being born in the **likeness** of men (*en **homoīōmati** anthrōpōn*). And being found in human form (*en schēmati heuretheis ōs anthrōpos*) he humbled himself and became obedient to death” (RSV), *ibid.*, vv.5-8. For Torrance’s understanding of the passage, see *Incarnation*, 74-6.

144 See *Incarnation*, 58-67, for Torrance’s full exposition of “the Word became flesh.”

145 *Incarnation*, 61.

146 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, English translation, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956, 147-159.

147 Cf. *op. cit.* 151ff.

“Flesh” is also used in the bible in a more neutral sense (as in “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,”¹⁴⁸ or simply to speak of the body,¹⁴⁹ or of the life-giving flesh of Jesus¹⁵⁰), but it remains true that all flesh is fallen and that it is “flesh” in the narrower sense¹⁵¹ of flesh in its hostility to God which is commonly used in Paul, while in John it is of flesh as that which is “of no avail”¹⁵² and indeed in “darkness.”¹⁵³ Torrance (and Barth likewise) can therefore argue with good reason that the flesh assumed by Christ was flesh in its human condition of sinfulness and weakness.¹⁵⁴

148 Joel 2.28 (Acts 2.17).

149 E.g. 1 Cor 15.38-39f.

150 John 6.51ff.

151 *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, 151ff.

152 John 6.63 RSV (“counts for nothing” NIV, “profiteth nothing” KJV), cf. John 3.6.

153 Cf. John 1.4-14; *Church Dogmatics* 1.2, 151.

154 In response to a personal query about the meaning of the three passages considered here, N.T. Wright indicated his general agreement with the above analysis and offered three further comments. He first makes the point that though “it’s hard to know if the distinction we make between fallen/unfallen humanity corresponds to anything Paul would have recognized,” he suspects that “he [Paul] would have said that if Jesus’ humanity wasn’t fully Adamic he would have been incapable of dying.” Wright adds, “it seems to me clear that the ‘condemnation’ is not simply that Jesus lived a sinless life but that on the cross God condemned sin in the flesh of the Son. Paul doesn’t say that God condemned Jesus but that God condemned sin in his flesh.” The point behind both comments is ultimately the same, that if Jesus had not assumed fully Adamic humanity (the “flesh of sin” in Pauline language) he could not have died and the death that he died on the cross could not have been God’s condemnation of sin in his flesh.

Wright’s final comment was to draw attention to his suggestion that the Philippians *ouch harpagmon* should be best translated as “he [Jesus] did not regard his equality with God as something to exploit.” See N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, chap. 4, for his full analysis of the Philippians passage. Wright indicated that he regards Torrance’s analysis and rendering of the text as complementary rather than as in conflict with his own. Wright’s understanding can be seen as

The fact remains, however, that Torrance's bold affirmation of Christ's assumption of *fallen flesh* seems at first sight to go beyond any one passage and beyond any explicit statements of scripture. It needs to be seen as a statement of faith and a theological judgment unfolding the logic of redemption in Christ and of the New Testament as a whole. Like the statement that Christ died for our sins, albeit on a very different theological level, Torrance's argument that atonement begins with incarnation is a statement of faith. Is it a legitimate extension of the logic behind the Hebrews statement of Christ's incarnational solidarity with humanity? Before attempting an answer and in preparation for it, it will be helpful to consider the question of the nature of theological understanding.

(iv) Apprehending the reality while guarding the mystery – divine disclosure and the nature of theological understanding

The person of Jesus Christ and the atonement he effected are realities we recognize as at once realities to be apprehended and realities whose existence is miracle in our midst. We acknowledge them as realities to be known, and yet as realities whose very existence is mystery, whose coming into being and mode of operation reach beyond our understanding.¹⁵⁵

This lays on theology a double task: to acknowledge and endeavor to understand, in faith, the nature of the reality which is Jesus Christ, and yet in doing so to recognize and preserve the essential mystery of his person and work and so preserve his reality as it is. The task is to explore the nature of his positive reality without trespassing on its mystery, the sheer miracle of his presence in our midst, understanding him in the nature of his person and work *in so far as it may be understood*, while respecting its nature as mystery and therefore refusing, *in so far as it may not be understood*, to attempt to reduce it to our prior categories of human understanding and so falsify it.

rightly highlighting the full deity of Christ in the Pauline text while Torrance at this point, in total agreement here with the complete and continuing equality of Jesus with God, highlights also the soteriological significance of the difference between the action of Adam and that of Jesus as man.

155 Cf. again *Incarnation*, 83, *Atonement*, 3.

The two tasks belong essentially together as both involve the attempt to be scrupulously faithful to the reality of Jesus Christ: it is strict attention to who and what he actually is in his positive reality which leads at once to recognition of him *as God and man in one person*, and at the same time to acknowledgement that *how* he is or can be both these is beyond our understanding. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ involves recognition of his reality and nature even as his existence remains mystery and miracle. The reality and mystery of his person are mutually interlocking.

For Torrance, it is only by indwelling the scriptures and allowing them to soak into the depths of our being in faithful study, prayer, and worship¹⁵⁶ that we can begin to be conformed to the mind of Christ and begin to acquire a theological instinct and judgment which guides us in the search for understanding of what may be understood while respecting the boundaries of what may not.

Allowing positive disclosure of Christ by separating off wrong ways of understanding

It is important here for Torrance that while we cannot understand the *how* of the mystery of the person of Christ or of atonement, we can understand what are wrong ways of attempting to do so, and therefore can state or mark out, as the Chalcedonian formula does, how the person of Christ is *not* to be understood, that is, with any confusion, change, division or separation of the divine and human natures of Christ. It is through such careful delineation and fencing off of wrong ways of understanding Christ that we can better focus on allowing him to disclose himself to us in his positive reality. Outlining the way in which the mystery of Christ is only capable of negative definition, Torrance writes,

The place of the mystery of Christ in our understanding can only be stated and guarded in *negative* terms. The mystery is that in Jesus Christ true God and true man are united in one person — that is the doctrine of the *hypostatic union*. But we must mark out, on either side of that mystery, what it is by saying what it is *not*. In this way we allow the mystery to declare

156 “We can only acknowledge it [the reality of Christ in his mystery] in wonder and thankfulness, in adoration and praise. That doxological approach to the person of Christ is the first step in the doctrine of Christ,” *Incarnation*, 83.

itself to us, and to keep on declaring itself to us without hindering the depth and breadth of its self-disclosure by positive man-made definitions of what it actually is.¹⁵⁷

For Torrance, “the early church rendered theology magnificent service” here in the way it succeeded in acknowledging the reality of Christ while preserving his mystery:

It gave its account of him in such a way as to acknowledge the reality of his divine and human natures in their union in the one person of the Son, but declined to state *how* those two natures were united in Christ. . . . In other words, the early church sought to preserve the mystery of Christ, and sought to guard that mystery from errors that divided or separated the two natures of Christ on the one hand, or that confounded them or fused them into a higher or lower unity on the other hand.¹⁵⁸

Discerning the boundaries between fruitful and unfruitful ways of understanding

An important task of theology is therefore that of marking out the boundaries (by marking out the wrong ways of understanding beyond them and fencing them off so to speak) within which the biblical revelation may continue to delineate Christ to us and Christ reveal himself through the Spirit. It is as we learn, in and through scriptural study, to discern in godly reverence the nature of the mystery of Christ that we can learn to direct our attention more and more

157 *Ibid.*,

158 *Incarnation*, 183 — the full quotation runs, “The doctrine of Christ in the early church had at least this great advantage, that it sought to give its account of Christ in such a way as to leave Christ himself ample room for his own glory and self-revelation. It refused to encase the doctrine of Christ within the mind of man. It gave its account of him in such a way as to acknowledge the reality of his divine and human natures in their union in the one person of the Son, but declined to state *how* those two natures were united in Christ. It was content to declare that the difference of these two natures was not removed by their union, but rather that the propriety of both natures was preserved precisely in their concurrence and union in the one person of Christ the Lord. In other words, the early church sought to preserve the mystery of Christ, and sought to guard that mystery from errors that divided or separated the two natures of Christ on the one hand, or that confounded them or fused them into a higher or lower unity on the other hand.” *Ibid.*

precisely to him and away from ways of understanding which do not respect his reality and mystery. It is then that as we learn the direction and manner of focus on Christ, he can further disclose himself to our understanding and we can more appropriately apprehend him. Just as an astronomer needs to know where in the sky to direct the telescope in order to hone in on and observe a particular star, so in theology and in faith seeking understanding we need to hone in on the "interior logic" of the bible, as Torrance calls it, in order to allow it to direct us to Christ and deeper apprehension of him.

All theology points to God (or should do!), but each theology necessarily does so in terms of its particular framework of understanding and interpretation. The more a theology "hones in" on the central logic of the bible, the more it is able to direct people to God in Christ "clothed with his gospel," and when they know him through the offered framework, their understanding of him is in terms of it. The aim is to allow the reality and mystery of Christ himself to come more into view through continually refining the conceptual tools of apprehension to give richer and deeper understanding. The more faithful these are to the gospel, the less they distort him and the more they allow him to come to light in our understanding. Through discovering and articulating the inner logic of the bible, theology aims to construct a window or refined lens through which Christ in his gospel may be grasped more clearly and in more of his significance as he reveals himself to us.

Discerning where best to look and where not to look for fruitful understanding

A key factor here is not only discovering and articulating the inner logic, but the process of discerning where to look for it, how to follow it, and what it is. It is learning to judge, as the inner logic begins to come to light, which are the most fruitful points at which to search for illumination and understanding. Then, as the whole picture begins to take shape and one continues to search for understanding, it is discerning and learning how to follow the most fruitful thread of illumination. Much of the time in theology, the task can almost be more one of discerning where *not* to look for understanding, of discerning which concepts or modes or thought do *not* have sufficient mileage in them, in order that by *not* following unfruitful leads one can focus on the fruitful as one searches there and waits for understanding. The key task of theology is

discovering how to read scripture, how and where to look, and how and where not to look, in order to focus on the inner logic of scripture which leads to Christ and brings him to light.

Orienting the focus of theology towards the center

The task of theology then, for Torrance, is to state the truth of Christ as accurately and faithfully as possible in its depth and coherence. In doing so, theology aims to refer beyond itself to the reality of Christ that he might disclose himself. The direction and manner of that referral depends on the framework of understanding and interpretation employed and these should always be oriented to the central focus of the bible which is Christ. The search for greater understanding of the bible and of it as a whole should thus always be oriented towards that center, towards the points at which illumination most opens up the inner trinitarian-*christologic* and *soteriologic* of the bible.

Through the shape and content of its framework, the resulting theology will broadly mark out the boundaries within which it has reached its understanding and within which it judges that understanding is best and most fruitfully to be found. What is outside those boundaries of understanding is thereby adjudged to be less fruitful or inadequate and even scripturally unfaithful. Torrance's theology may therefore be read as saying, "Look here in this direction, through the framework of this lens and along these lines for the most fruitful, adequate, and compelling understanding of the person and work of Christ in incarnation and atonement!"

To return now to the question posed above: Is Torrance's concept of incarnation as already the beginning of atonement a legitimate extension of the Hebrews logic of incarnational solidarity between Christ and those he saves? It is time to bring the discussion to a head and crystallize Torrance's whole argument here. Though he himself does not raise the issue or the question as such, *should the assumption of fallen humanity be part of the theological lens?*

(i) The inner logic of incarnation as atoning event

For Torrance, the assertion of Christ's incarnational assumption of fallen flesh is an integral part of such a lens and of the whole inner logic of Christ and his gospel. Positively, it coheres with scripture and offers a deeper and more

illuminating understanding of everything it says. It is a missing piece in the theological jigsaw, cementing together the person and work of Christ and reinforcing the unity of the priest with those he redeems and the link between incarnation and atonement.

While for Torrance the assumption of fallen flesh is so much of an essential, compelling factor in an adequate christology and soteriology that he takes it for granted and simply expounds it rather than detailing all the reasons, it is not too difficult to see some of his reasons immediately from his own positive exposition and by tracing and gathering others from his theology to understand the logic of his thinking here and spell out a case for him.

(i) The meaning and reasoning behind Torrance and the assumption of fallen flesh

The thrust of Torrance's argument would be that for several inter-locking reasons (each coherent with scripture and certainly not inconsistent with it but on the contrary positively in line with it) an assumption and sanctification by Christ of fallen flesh at birth makes much more scriptural and theological sense than a bearing of sin only on the cross:

(1) it means that God has come all the way to us as we are, that he has not stopped short of us by assuming only unfallen humanity, but that in his love has from birth taken on himself what we are in our fallenness in order to save us;

(2) it means that he bears sin by full incarnational identification with us, that is, by taking on himself our actual fallen human nature, our actual human physical and mental existence which committed the sin and *is* sin in its concrete corrupted condition, not simply sin in the abstract as though sin could somehow be separated from the physical doer, or sin simply by imputation;

(3) it means that atoning sanctification of human nature began already before the cross and therefore that in line with certain biblical indications Christ's actual life has redeeming significance;

(4) it takes seriously the life of Jesus, his whole ministry of revelation in preaching and teaching the word and applying it to people in healing and forgiveness, as well as Jesus' own saying that he had come to give his *life* as a ransom on the cross;

(5) it takes the incarnation seriously, and therefore the importance of the relation between incarnation and atonement in which each is only seen in its full significance in relation to the other;

(6) not least and perhaps most importantly of all, it takes the person of Christ seriously and the essential relation between his person and work. It sees that it is the person of Christ (God and man in one person) atoning which makes atonement what it is, and not simply the work by itself. If it is just the work which is important, it is much easier to think of atonement as happening only on the cross, with sin being laid on him or imputed to him there, and much easier also to think of his dying the death due to sin without his *person* assuming actual sinful human nature. But if it is the person atoning, and if above all it is the union of God and man *in one person* which is the heart of salvation, it is very much harder to understand atonement unless Christ in his person assumes fallen human nature into union with his person thereby sanctifying it in the process.

For Torrance, the centrality of the person of Christ in atonement and redemption here is further reinforced by the Old Testament concept of *go'el*,¹⁵⁹ the “kinsman redeemer” who redeems someone out of slavery, bankruptcy, or forfeited rights in virtue of their own kinship with the person in family ties and community of property. Applied to Christ, the *go'el* concept emphasizes the solidarity of his person with us. He redeems us in virtue of his complete incarnational kinship with us in flesh and blood.

(ii) The arguments against Torrance and the assumption of fallen flesh

The arguments against Torrance’s position are principally (1) that it conflicts with Christ’s sinlessness, (2) that it detracts from the centrality of the cross as the pivotal atoning event, and (3) that the assumption of fallen flesh goes beyond the statements of scripture.

(1) The conflict with Christ’s sinlessness?

Torrance’s reply could be said to be threefold.

159 For Torrance’s analysis of *padah*, *kipper*, and *go'el*, the three component strands of the Old Testament concept of redemption and their application to Christ, see *Atonement*, 27-53 (*go'el*, 44-50) and *The Trinitarian Faith*, 168ff.

(A) As already stated, he argues that ***in the very act of assuming fallen flesh Christ sanctified the flesh he assumed and so remained sinless***. He also argues that the incarnation cannot be interpreted *statically* (in which case it might be taken to imply Christ's becoming sinful) but *only dynamically*, and that the whole life of Christ to its climax on the cross was one of increasing solidarity with sinners in which as he took their sin on himself he sanctified it in himself and so remained sinless throughout.

(B) He argues that there is *an essential mystery to atonement* and he would therefore argue that just as we cannot say *how* Christ atoned on the cross, or *how* he the holy God was made sin at the cross, so we cannot say *how* he assumed actual fallen flesh in his birth and sanctified it while remaining sinless. But ***the fact that we cannot understand the how does not mean that Christ could not have assumed fallen flesh without sin***. Atonement is the dynamic act of God and is something which he has worked out and accomplished and which we know as a living reality, although we cannot begin to plumb its depths or say *how* he accomplished it.

(C) Although Torrance nowhere discusses the point as such (at least not to the knowledge of the present writer), he would have argued that if we believe that Christ bore sin and was made sin on the cross (as we have to if we take scripture seriously) while remaining sinless himself, we cannot legitimately argue that he could not have done so in the incarnation. The same arguments used against Christ's assuming fallen humanity apply equally to his bearing and being made sin on the cross. Conversely, ***if we believe that Christ took sin on himself on the cross and remained sinless, we can believe that he did so in his birth***, and indeed Torrance would argue (as outlined just above) that it makes infinitely more sense to do so. It is much easier and simpler to believe that Jesus took sin on himself by assuming fallen flesh in full incarnational solidarity with us rather than by having it abstractly laid on him at the cross or imputed to him. It also enhances understanding of the *go'el* element in redemption, giving it more depth and meaning.

(2) Does Jesus' sanctification of fallen flesh at birth detract from the cross?

Torrance's arguments here can be said to be threefold.

(A) As outlined above (section 2 [a]), everything he says about the cross abundantly illustrates **the central place of the cross in his theology** and the unfathomable depth of its mystery.

(B) **Far from depreciating the cross, its relation to the incarnation enhances rather than diminishes its importance.** It is now understood as the critical and climactic fulfillment of the struggle which began at the incarnation, and in that light the cross is seen to have *more* and not less significance.

(C) **It is a mistake to think of any sanctification of fallen flesh at the incarnation statically or as a completed event at that point in time.** In addition, it is wrong to think of it simply in terms of a time-line on the horizontal dimension. It must also be thought of in terms of the vertical dimension, of God breaking into history and of Jesus bringing the truth of God more and more to bear on the human heart. In both, the horizontal dimension of the life and ministry of Christ in time and the vertical dimension of his divine penetration into humanity and the kingdom of evil, **the action of Jesus in his person as God and man is one of increasing intensity to its final and great climax on the cross and in the resurrection.**

As Torrance also points out (section 2 [f] [iv] above), Jesus' miracles of healing and forgiveness are not just part of a salvation begun at the incarnation and completed on the cross, but are themselves only done in anticipation of the cross and proleptically in dependence on its redeeming power.

(D) For Torrance, it would be complete nonsense to think of incarnation and atonement as in any way in competition or separable. They are part of the one great saving event which is Jesus Christ and in fact **incarnation and atonement are the same saving event**, with *one at the beginning and the other at the end*. The incarnation, God and man in hypostatic union, is the basis and presupposition of atonement, while atonement is the completion of incarnation. Neither could be what it is without the other. The incarnation is the beginning of atonement, and the atonement is the outworking of an incarnation which could not be what it is without the full and final atonement of the cross.

(3) Does the assumption of fallen flesh go beyond scripture?

There are several things to be said. The first is that the question as it stands is ambiguous. What does it mean to go *beyond* scripture and should the question itself not perhaps be reframed?

For Torrance, all theology must be faithful to scripture and must have sufficient warrant for it in scripture, but it is a mistake to think that every doctrine can be read off its surface or must be grounded on its explicit statements. The doctrine of the Trinity is nowhere explicitly stated in scripture as such, although there is a more than abundant basis there for it.

The need to go through scripture to know God in person

In all reading and interpretation of scripture, even the simplest reading of it in faith, we need to go beyond or behind it to know the God it bears witness to.¹⁶⁰ We only know him through the words of scripture, but we do not stop there. We penetrate into the thought behind it and know the God who speaks in it. Only then, in understanding the words of scripture in their reference to God can we truly interpret them. It is only the reality of God himself (whom we only know through the words) who can truly give meaning to the words which point to him, for he is himself their ultimate content.

Interpreting scripture and all doctrine from its center in Jesus Christ

In theology and dogmatics, for Torrance, we penetrate into the inner logic of scripture and understand all doctrine in its coherence around Jesus Christ. To do that we necessarily go beyond scripture in one sense, not in order to leave it behind, but in order that we might follow the reference of scripture to its termination on Christ in God, and through interpreting it from its center in him have a deeper and truer understanding of it.

In Christology and soteriology the task more specifically is to understand the whole logic of the person and work of Christ through searching for understanding of all that the bible says about him. Granted that all theology must go beyond scripture in the sense mentioned above, should the teaching that Christ assumed fallen flesh in the incarnation be regarded as a legitimate and integral element of Christology and soteriology?

Torrance's answer would undoubtedly be in the affirmative. From the

¹⁶⁰ See here *God and Rationality*, 37f., on the way in which biblical interpretation should follow the intention of scripture to the reality or realities it indicates in order to interpret its words in the light of those realities.

examination of his thought and argument above, we can agree that his theology of full incarnational solidarity is certainly not inconsistent with scripture. We can also agree that there are definite scriptural indications in its favor, and that although the bible does not explicitly speak about it in so many words, the theology and language of "assumption of fallen flesh" does cohere with and can be seen to be a natural extension of the logic of the biblical indications cited (Jesus' baptism, the healing miracles in Matthew, and his incarnational solidarity with humanity in Hebrews, Romans 8.3, and John 1).

(iii) The assumption of fallen flesh dovetails with scripture and deepens its understanding

The assumption of fallen flesh remains an article of faith, but one that dovetails with and fits beautifully into the whole logic of the person and work of Christ as expounded by Torrance. Although atonement in its inner heart and unfathomable depth must always remain an essential mystery to us, the theology of Christ's assumption of fallen flesh does shed considerable light on the logic of incarnation and atonement as we think our way *out from* the reality of the cross in the attempt to understand something of that inner logic.

Positively, then, far from lacking consistency with scripture, the assumption of fallen flesh can be argued to be more faithful to it and has a great deal to offer in deepening its meaning and reinforcing the rationale in theology for holding together incarnation and atonement, priest and people, and person and work in Christ. The light offered by the assumption of fallen flesh at all these points goes a long way in favor of its adoption.

Alternative positions possible but less fruitful and illuminating

Another factor may help to persuade the doubter. As we search for understanding in theology, we often peer through a glass darkly, especially where scripture may appear to offer no help and be silent, leaving ends open and questions undecided. Here we simply have to search for light where it may be found, but possible alternatives appear even darker. The alternatives to incarnational assumption of fallen flesh are (i) Christ's bearing sin only on the cross by having sin in the abstract (sin in abstraction from the persons of sinners) somehow laid on him or imputed to him, or (ii) the more intermediate position (intermediate

between incarnation and the cross) of his voluntary identification with sinners in a baptism which he completed on the cross and where in life he was already taking their sins on himself in “wonderful exchange” for healing and forgiveness.

If adopted, the first alternative simply has to be accepted in faith without further understanding. Other than the claim that this is the biblical position truly interpreted and that therefore this is the way God has willed it, the first alternative offers no light of deeper understanding, and as such appears to be a dead end. It thinks in terms of purely imputational and legal or forensic categories which, if accepted as the full biblical position, offer no possibility of further understanding.¹⁶¹ Granted that there is genuine and irreducible mystery in atonement we cannot penetrate and therefore a line which understanding cannot pass, the first alternative appears to draw that line prematurely and unnecessarily early.

The second alternative takes on board important biblical elements bypassed or overlooked by the first alternative and so is able to provide a richer, deeper, and more meaningful account of Jesus’ atoning identification with sinners. The second alternative, however, is content to leave it where the bible leaves it without seeking to press on to fuller understanding. While recognizing the redemptive significance of the human life and ministry of Jesus before the cross, the second alternative sees the baptism of Jesus as the beginning of his identification with sinners and of his ministry of atoning exchange. It leaves unexplored the relation between baptism and his *person* in incarnation and life before baptism.

(j) The incarnational assumption of fallen humanity – summary and conclusion

Torrance’s work integrates Christology and soteriology fully together, incorporating patristic, Anselmian, Reformation and modern insights in a theology which

161 It needs to be emphasised here that Torrance’s theology does not deny the forensic and penal substitutionary elements in atonement, only the adequacy of a *purely* forensic and penal substitutionary conception of atonement. His theology is in fact radically substitutionary in its understanding of the full implications of the vicarious humanity of Christ. For the importance of this point for Torrance and the stress he lays on it, see further “Preaching Christ Today,” in T.F. Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry: T.F. Torrance, Collected Studies I*, Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 2012, 248-54 (previously published as *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994).

argues that Christ's work of atonement can only be rightly understood in the closest possible association with his *person* as God and man and therefore with his incarnation. Seen in this light, the atonement is no longer simply a work on the cross but one in which the person and the nature of the person doing the work become foundational. Seen in the light of Jesus' baptism and the passages in Matthew, John, Romans, and Hebrews, in which identification with sinners and the redemptive significance of the healing miracles comes to the fore, the question then becomes whether the person of Jesus can be said to have redemptive significance from the incarnation itself, or only from baptism. Is the assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh constitutive of and integral to his person and work (or *person in act*) from the very beginning?¹⁶²

Torrance's argument would be that in every way it makes much more sense biblically, christologically, soteriologically, and theologically, to think person and work, incarnation and atonement, into each other, and to see Christ's bearing of sin not simply as a work occurring on the cross, but as the act of God himself in his incarnational assumption-and-dynamic-sanctification of human-nature-in-its-ontological-fallen-reality into hypostatic union with his own person. The

162 The question raises the issue of the nature of the incarnation, for Torrance, and the relation between person and work. The nature of the incarnation, "new even for God" (as Torrance used to put it, as he paused in lectures to stress the need to think of the incarnation as an entirely new event, even for God), is that God became what he was not before, true God *and* true man in one person. In the inseparability and indissolubility of his person and work (cf. *Atonement*, 222), Christ's work is in accordance with the nature of his divine person (op. cit. 235f.) and inherent in it ("his words and deeds [and work and *kērygma*] do not only derive from his person but inhere in it," op. cit. 211). Without any change or confusion, nor division or separation between divine and human, Christ's work and gospel are now structurally bound up with his person. Torrance can therefore say, "The Christ who is proclaimed to us in the New Testament . . . is the Christ who is clothed with the *kērygma* of his death and resurrection, for they are *ontologically and structurally bound up with who he is in himself and in his relation to the Father*" (ibid. — italics added). Cf. likewise, "The resurrection is to be regarded not only as the completion of that saving work [atonement and overcoming of death] but as belonging to *the ontological structure of the mediator himself*" (ibid., 212 — italics original). The nature of the incarnation for Torrance means that any work of Christ becomes ontologically part of his person.

hypostatic union is the foundation and the heart of atonement, begun in the incarnation, lived out by Christ in his ministry, steadfastly held firm in the ultimate conflict with evil and final unfathomable hour of atonement, and so brought to completion in resurrection and ascension.

Torrance's concept of Christ's assumption of fallen humanity at incarnation goes beyond any explicit statements of scripture, but is certainly not inconsistent with it, and in fact offers a deeper and more unified and faithful understanding of scripture itself, of the person and work of Christ, and of incarnation and atonement. It remains an article of faith and a matter of theological judgment, but its consistency with scripture, its faithfulness to passages such as Romans 8.3, and the light it provides in theological understanding are compelling arguments in its favor. The fact that alternative positions do not appear to enjoy the same explanatory capacity and range, biblical or theological, and do not provide the same light, simply confirms Torrance's concept and adds to its being more convincing than other possible paths of understanding.¹⁶³

The mystery and the sacraments

It is only appropriate, in bringing this section of the essay to a close, to reiterate Torrance's emphasis on the sacred mystery of atonement and to cite his words more in full. Torrance in his theology endeavors to think his way *from* the reality and mystery of the cross and to come to such understanding as may be found only *a posteriori* by faithfully following Christ through the gospel account and apostolic witness to him. He endeavors to understand the whole life and mission of Jesus from the mystery of incarnation to the final unfathomable mystery of atonement on the cross for which no human words are adequate:

Here we tread the holy ground of the garden of Gethsemane and Calvary and here we must clap our hand upon our mouth again and again for we have no words adequate to match the infinitely holy import of atonement.

163 It must be added that Torrance's theology enjoys an ecumenical breadth not often achieved. He holds together all three aspects of redemption as he calls them: the ontological element (the patristic emphasis on the person of Christ), the cultic-forensic element (the Anselmian and Western emphasis on the sacrificial and substitutionary aspect), and interwoven with both, the dramatic element in redemption. For Torrance's analysis of the place of the three elements in different church traditions and the way in which they all need to be held together, see *Atonement*, 50-60.

It is precisely (in part at least) for that reason that before he suffered Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord's supper, that the broken bread and the poured out wine enacted in solemn *anamnesis*¹⁶⁴ might speak and communicate to us ever again what our poor human words are unable to do. As often then as we go to holy communion and see the celebrant take the bread in hand and break it and utter anew the words of Jesus, "This is my body given for you," and pour out the wine and raise the cup and utter anew, "This is my blood shed for you," we are directed to the fact that here in the action of the sacrament there is extended to us the inexpressible mystery of atonement through the body and blood of the saviour.¹⁶⁵ That sacrament ordained to communicate Christ to us in action forbids us at any point to think that we can enclose the mystery of the blood of Christ in words or in doctrinal formulations, or to think that we can set forth any fully adequate account of its meaning.¹⁶⁶

3 Trinitarian understanding of atonement

As faith seeks understanding for the whole reality and mystery of Christ from incarnation to atonement on the cross, it cannot do so without being faced with the mystery of God in Christ and therefore with the mystery of God in his trinity, for to speak of *who* Jesus is in his being and of him as Son of God is to raise the question of his relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. As Torrance says, to speak of Jesus Christ as Son of God means speaking of him in his deity as Son of the Father and in his full trinitarian context.¹⁶⁷ In Torrance's lectures, the inseparable relation of Father and Son, and equally of Son and Spirit in the bond of the Trinity,¹⁶⁸ are throughout fundamental. Everything the Son does in his humanity he does in obedience to the Father and through the power of the Spirit.¹⁶⁹ The acts of the Son are inseparable from those of the Father and the Spirit, so that from beginning to end the whole work of salvation from

164 Greek, "remembrance," calling to mind again, re-calling.

165 See Matt 26.26-28; Mark 14.22-24; Luke 22.17-19; 1 Cor 11.23-26.

166 *Atonement*, 2-3.

167 *Incarnation*, 164.

168 Cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1992 (the revised edition of 1992 has an added chapter on "The Atonement and the Holy Trinity"), 111ff.

169 See especially *Incarnation*, 114ff., 135f.

incarnation to atonement, foundation of the church and final redemption, is the work of three divine persons.¹⁷⁰ What Torrance says of the atonement, that “we cannot but think of the atonement as a threefold act grounded in and issuing from the triune being of God,” applies equally to incarnation and all acts of God in salvation. It is God in his triunity who is the ground and agent of redemption, so that for faith to seek understanding of incarnation and atonement means faith seeking understanding (insofar as it may be granted) of God as eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While a full articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity may be the final level in the stratified layers of theological levels of knowledge of God, the Trinity appears at every level of faith and understanding and in every doctrine of theology, as Torrance’s stress on it throughout his career makes unambiguously clear. Although it was only after retirement that Torrance found time to devote himself to articulating systematically the doctrine of the Trinity in his two great monographs on the Trinity,¹⁷¹ there is a considerable volume of trinitarian material scattered throughout his works, much of it embodied and embedded within his Christology and soteriology lectures, and much of it elsewhere.¹⁷²

In the lectures, Torrance’s trinitarian focus falls particularly on the unbroken solidarity, in being and act, in obedience and prayer, between the Son and the Father,¹⁷³ on the mutual inseparability of the work of Son and Spirit,¹⁷⁴ and on the way in which the mystery of Christ in time recedes into the eternal mystery of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and is the actualization in time of the eternal will of God for humanity.¹⁷⁵ It is only as and when we are brought, in and through

170 Cf. *Atonement*, 359ff.

171 *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988) and *The Christian Doctrine of God* (1996).

172 See especially, T.F. Torrance, *The School of Faith*, James Clarke, London, 1959, xcv-cxxvi; *Theology in Reconstruction*, SCM Press, London, 1965, 192-208 and esp. 209-58; *God and Rationality*, 165-92; *The Mediation of Christ*, 99ff., esp. 109-26; *Trinitarian Perspectives*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994.

173 *Incarnation*, 18f., 105-29, 164-96.

174 *Incarnation*, 124f., 135-37, *Atonement*, 320-29; cf. 177-81, 275-81, 368f., 386f.

175 *Incarnation*, 164-80; cf. *Atonement*, 342, 359f.

atonement,¹⁷⁶ to know God in his triune communion of love¹⁷⁷ that faith seeking understanding finds the “whence” and the “whither,” the ground and goal of incarnation and atonement in the eternal Trinity, for incarnation and atonement have their ground in the triune love of God for humanity¹⁷⁸ and their goal in the exaltation of man in Christ into participation in the eternal communion of Father, Son, and Spirit.¹⁷⁹ As Torrance puts it,

To repeat, it is through the incarnation and atonement effected by the conjoint activity of Christ and the Holy Spirit that God has opened the door for us to enter into his holy presence and know him as he really is in himself in his triune being. In this two-way movement of atoning propitiation whereby God draws near to us and draws us near to himself, the access to the Father given to us through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the communion of the Holy Spirit is such that we are enabled, quite astonishingly and beyond any worth or capacity of our own, to participate, creaturely beings though we are, in the eternal communion and inner relations of knowing and loving within God himself, and know him there as one God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.¹⁸⁰

The reality and mystery of incarnation and atonement are the reality and mystery of Christ himself, the unfathomable mystery and yet reality of his person and work on earth, that through the work of Father, Son, and Spirit we in our humanity are incorporated in him into their own eternal communion of love.

176 *Mediation of Christ*, 110.

177 *Mediation*, 110ff., 114f., 116f., 118f.

178 *Mediation*, 112ff., *Atonement*, 359.

179 *Atonement*, 230f.; cf. *Incarnation*, 196, and also *Mediation*, 115-19.

180 *Mediation*, 118-19.