

“I YET NOT I BUT CHRIST”: GALATIANS 2:20 AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. Torrance

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ABSTRACT: T. F. Torrance regarded Galatians 2:20 as a verse of primary importance. It refers to Christ’s vicarious and substitutionary faith which undergirds all of our Christian faith, ministry and worship. The essay discusses how Torrance’s teaching on the vicarious humanity of Christ, the hypostatic union, and union with Christ explicated the theological significance of Galatians 2:20, emphasizing especially the significance for understanding the Christian life.

In the form “I yet not I but Christ,” the doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ plays a central role in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance. Although not used repetitively, Torrance’s perspectives on Christian faith and life can properly be understood to some significant extent in terms of the theological consequences of Galatians 2:20. The verse, in fact, may be thought to function in a hermeneutical manner, giving a significant point of access by which to interpret Torrance’s theology on the terms which he set himself. “For me,” he writes, this is “a passage of primary importance,” for it “refers primarily to Christ’s unswerving faithfulness, his vicarious and substitutionary faith which embraces and undergirds us, such that when we believe we must say with St. Paul ‘not I but Christ,’ even in our act of faith.”¹

Torrance gives clues by which to identify the provenance of this identification of the significance of Galatians 2:20, sending his readers back to the Scottish

1 Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1994), 31.



theological heritage exemplified by his own teacher H. R. Mackintosh² and the great theologian from Dumbartonshire, John McLeod Campbell. A particularly felicitous and informative sentence from the conclusion to *The Nature of the Atonement* sets the direction: "And this is true, whether we contemplate the personal work of Christ in making his soul an offering for sin, or his work in us in respect of which it is true, that when we live to God we must say, 'Yet not we, but Christ liveth in us.'"³ Both Scottish divines, no doubt, as also Torrance, drew upon the teaching of John Knox, from which I quote a well-known passage from his *Treatise on Prayer*, published in 1554. "Mark well these words: John said, We have presently a sufficient Advocate, whom Paul affirms to sit at the right hand of God the Father, and to be the only Mediator between God and man. "For he alone (says Ambrose) is our mouth, by whom we speak of God; he is our eyes, by whom we see God, and also our right hand, by whom we offer anything to the Father; "who, unless he make intercession, neither we, neither any of the saints, may have any society or fellowship with God."⁴

Torrance has observed that Scottish theology at the Reformation gave a place of centrality to the union of God and humankind in Christ, and to the understanding of the Christian life therefore as an offering to God only "by the hand of Christ" (Knox).⁵ Thus, "it is in and through our union with him, that all that is his becomes ours."⁶ And again: "It is only through union with Christ that we partake of the blessings of Christ, that is through union with him in his holy and obedient life . . . Through union with him we share in his faith, in his

2 See, for example, H. R. Mackintosh, "Unio Mystica as a Theological Conception," in *Some Aspects of Christian Belief* (George H. Doran Company, New York: 1923) 103–4.

3 John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Handsel Press, Edinburgh, and Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1996), 259.

4 John Knox, "A Declaration What Trew Prayer Is, How We Suld Pray, And For What We Suld Pray," in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (AMS Press Inc., New York: 1966), 3:97. For ease of reading, I have altered the quoted text to contemporary English.

5 See Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 42, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1965), 151.

6 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1965), 151.

obedience, in his trust and his appropriation of the Father's blessing."⁷ In this way, through union with Christ, Torrance's Christology moves seamlessly to his exposition of the Christian life. Union with Christ is given to us through the gift of the holy Spirit, and as such is the ground of the church and the practice of Christian faith and ministry.

Torrance indicates again and again that he is deeply indebted to Athanasius in many ways. This indebtedness is found, for example, in his development of what the latter spoke of as Christ exercising a two-fold ministry⁸ in which he "ministered not only the things of God to man but ministered the things of man to God,"⁹ a citation for which Torrance seems to have a particular fondness. Here in a nutshell is the Athanasian argument: Jesus Christ "was Very God in the flesh, and he was true flesh in the Word."¹⁰ Thus, Athanasius argues that Jesus Christ not only gives God's Word to and for us, but also as a man, he hears, receives, and responds to God's Word on our behalf. This two-fold ministry of Christ is a vigorously developed theme in Torrance's Christology. It is especially important, then, to explain how Torrance understands the role of Jesus Christ as the true human in his response to God on our behalf. When this is thought through in relation to the doctrine of union with Christ, Torrance introduces directly his understanding of our specific forms of response that are called forth by the gospel. It is in this way, I might suggest in passing, that we can rightly speak of Torrance as a practical theologian. And further, it is in this way that we can understand more deeply how Galatians 2:20 is, for him, a hermeneutic of the gospel.

Following Athanasius, Torrance asserts, then, that in the depth of the vicarious humanity of Christ in the incarnation there is both a humanward and a Godward direction, in which Christ mediates God to us and us to God in the unity of his incarnate personhood. This is the direct correlate of the hypostatic union. Thus

7 Ibid., 158–9.

8 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1983), 83. References to Athanasius include *Contra Arianos*, 1.41, 50; II.7, 12, 50, 65, 74; III.30, 38; IV.6.

9 Thomas F. Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," in *Theology in Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1976), 228.

10 Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, II.41.

Torrance refers to the “double fact that in Jesus Christ the Word of God has become man, has assumed a human form, in order as such to be God’s language to man, and that in Jesus Christ there is gathered up and embodied, in obedient response to God, man’s true word to God and his true speech about God. Jesus Christ is at once the complete revelation of God to man and the correspondence on man’s part to that revelation required by it for the fulfilment of its own revealing movement.”¹¹ Our interest at this point is on how appropriate stress falls especially upon the way Torrance develops the response of the incarnate Son toward the Father. That leads subsequently to reflection on our participation in that response.

Torrance insists that because the Word of God has been addressed to us, and, as such, has actually reached us because it has been addressed to us in Jesus Christ, we have the Word that has found a response in our hearing and understanding. That is,

We do not begin, then, with God alone or with humankind alone . . . but with God and man as they are posited together in a movement of creative self-communication by the Word of God . . . A profound reciprocity is created in which God addresses his Word to man by giving it human form without any diminishment of its divine reality as God himself speaks it, and in which he enables man to hear his Word and respond to it without any cancellation of his human mode of being . . . Thus the Word of God communicated to man includes within itself meeting between man and God as well as meeting between God and man, for in assuming the form of human speech the Word of God spoken to man becomes at the same time the word of man in answer to God.¹²

Torrance identifies the foundation for the Christological development of the incarnate reciprocity between God and humankind in the nature of the covenant partnership between God and Israel.¹³ The pattern for covenanted reciprocity is found, for example, in the covenant established between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai. God knew that Israel would not be able to be faithful as God required. Thus, God, within the covenant established and maintained unilaterally by God, freely and graciously gave a covenanted way of responding so that the covenant

11 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (SCM Press, London: 1965), 129.

12 Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford University Press, London: 1971), 137–8.

13 For the following, see Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 83–6.

might be fulfilled on their behalf. Israel was given ordinances of worship designed to testify that God alone can expiate guilt, forgive sin, and establish communion. This was not just a formal rite to guarantee propitiation between God and Israel, however. By its very nature, the covenanted way of response was to be worked into the flesh and blood of Israel's existence in such a way that Israel was called to pattern her whole life after it. Later, in the prophecies of the Isaiah tradition especially, the notions of guilt-bearer and sacrifice for sin were conflated to give the interpretative clue for the vicarious role of the servant of the Lord.

It would take the incarnation actually to bring that to pass, however, for Jesus Christ was recognized and presented in the New Testament both as the Servant of the Lord and as the divine Redeemer, not now only of Israel, but of all people.

As the incarnate Son of the Father Jesus Christ has been sent to fulfil all righteousness both as priest and as victim, who through his one self-offering in atonement for sin has mediated a new covenant of universal range in which he presents us to his Father as those whom he has redeemed, sanctified and perfected for ever in himself. In other words, Jesus Christ constitutes in his own self-consecrated humanity the fulfilment of the vicarious way of human response to God promised under the old covenant, but now on the ground of his atoning self-sacrifice once for all offered this as a vicarious way of response which is available for all mankind.¹⁴

That is, Jesus Christ has fulfilled the covenant from both sides, from God's side, and from our side. In the incarnate unity of his person he is the divine-human Word "spoken to man from the highest and heard by him in the depths, and spoken to God out of the depths and heard by him in the highest."¹⁵ "Expressed otherwise, in the hypostatic union between God and man in Jesus Christ there is included a union between the Word of God and the word of man."¹⁶ In which case, the gospel is not to be understood as the Word of God coming to us, inviting our response on the ground of our attitude of mind, perspicacity of will,

14 Ibid., 86.

15 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 138.

16 Ibid., 142.

or strength of piety, but as including “the all-significant middle term, the divinely provided response in the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ.”¹⁷

According to Torrance, it is in terms of the vicarious humanity of God in Christ that the full meaning of the obedience of Christ and the cross may be understood. To this end Torrance is fond of citing Hebrews 3.1-6, where reference is made to Christ as the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. “Here we have described Christ’s twofold function in priestly mediation. He is the Apostle or *Shaliah* of God, and he is also our High Priest made in all points as we are, but without sin.”¹⁸ As High Priest, Jesus is contrasted with Moses, who was faithful in all his house as a servant (Numbers 12.7 and Hebrews 3.5), while Jesus is Son over his own house (Hebrews 3.6).

In this particular passage the work of Christ as Apostle and High Priest, both in the sense of “the Son over the House”, is described in terms of confession, *homologia*, a word which occurs in three other passages (3.1; 4.14; 10.23). In each case it sets forth primarily the confession made by the High Priest as he enters within the veil. It is the confession of our sin before God and the confession of God’s righteous judgement upon our sin. As Apostle Christ bears witness for God, that he is holy. As High Priest he acknowledges that witness and says Amen to it. Again as Apostle of God he confesses the mercy and grace of God, his will to pardon and reconcile. As High Priest he intercedes for men, and confesses them before the face of God.¹⁹

This confession of Christ as Apostle and High Priest is not in word only, but includes the actual judgment of God at the cross and the actual submission of Christ in full and perfect obedience. But this obedience of Christ to the judgment of God must not be limited to his passive obedience only in which he was “made under the Law” to bear its condemnation in our name and on our behalf. For he lived also — in a phrase Torrance often used — to bend back the will of humankind into a perfect submission to the will of God through a life lived in active filial obedience to his heavenly Father. Torrance understands, therefore,

17 Ibid., 145.

18 Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1955), 11.

19 Ibid., 12.

that the humanity of Christ was not external to the atonement, and that the atonement cannot be limited only to his passive obedience. Rather, Jesus Christ "is our human response to God"²⁰ in such a way that both his passive *and* active obedience are imputed to us,²¹ for he not only suffered the judgment of God on the cross for us, but fulfilled the will of God in an obedient life of filial love. In view of this development of the vicarious humanity of Christ, it is clear why Torrance insists that incarnation and atonement must be thought together, and why revelation and reconciliation are inseparable.

One final point remains to be discussed, namely, Torrance's doctrine of union with Christ, for it is only through this union that we partake of the blessings of his holy and obedient life.²² Writing on the doctrine of deification through grace he notes that

Reformed theology interprets participation in the divine nature as the union and communion we are given to have with Christ in his human nature, as participation in his Incarnate Sonship, and therefore as sharing in him in the divine Life and Love. That is to say, it interprets 'deification' precisely in the same way as Athanasius in the *Contra Arianos*. It is only through *real and substantial union* (Calvin's expression) with him in his human nature that we partake of all his benefits, such as justification and sanctification and regeneration, but because in him human nature is hypostatically united to divine nature so that the Godhead dwells in him 'bodily', in him we really are made partakers of the eternal Life of God himself.²³

The Christian Church is what it is because of its indissoluble union with Christ through the Spirit, for in him is concentrated the Church and all ministry . . . (Thus), there is only one ministry, that of Christ in his Body.²⁴

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of that statement for ecclesiology and ministry. It is the case, then, that the Holy Spirit constitutes the church in union with its head, joining us to Christ to share in his communion with the Father, and to bear faithful witness to him in the life of the world.

20 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 90.

21 Reformed theology argues that grace is imputed, not inferred or infused.

22 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 158.

23 *Ibid.*, 184.

24 *Ibid.*, 208.

The doctrine of our union with Christ has its ground in the person of Jesus Christ. According to Torrance, the *homoousion* is to "be taken along with a cognate conception about the indissoluble union of God and man in the one Person of Christ."²⁵ Reconciliation is not something that is added to the hypostatic union; it is the hypostatic union at work in expiation and atonement. In this way the incarnation and the atonement constitute both the ontological and the epistemological center of knowledge of God. Jesus Christ is of God and humankind, being in the union of his person both Word of God addressed to humankind and word of humankind hearing and responding obediently to the Word of God in union with whom through the Holy Spirit we have communion with and knowledge of God. Just as God is antecedently and eternally who he is in and through Jesus Christ, so also the whole of our humanity has to be assumed by Christ in the personal union of his two natures, not only our corrupted physical nature, but also our spiritual nature in which we have become alienated from God in our minds. It is a real union of one who was truly God and fully human.

The hypostatic union is the personal union that takes place when the one person of the Son assumes human nature into himself, and thus into his divine nature. The union of divine and human natures is entirely the act of God in becoming a man. The result is that the Son of God exists as the man, Jesus, son of Mary, in the integrity of his human agency. Apart from this act of God in becoming human, however, Jesus would not have existed. In which case, the fully human life of Jesus must be regarded as grounded in the act of the Word of God becoming flesh. Christ's human nature was nevertheless a real and specific existence in which Jesus had a fully human mind, will, and body. This is why we must think of the incarnation in terms not of God in humankind, but in terms of God as a man, yet without ceasing to be God, referring to the one action of the "God-man," maintaining the unity of his person, in which grace is understood in terms of Christ's human as well as his divine nature.²⁶ This means that the hypostatic union is to be understood not just in terms of incarnation, but also

25 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (T&T Clark, Edinburgh: 1996), 94. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (The University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville: 1980), 165; Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 57.

26 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 183.

soteriologically in terms of the reconciliation between God and humankind, while reconciliation is to be understood not just in terms of the cross, but also in terms of the incarnation.

The point here, in summary, is that in the hypostatic union God has set forth in the person of Jesus Christ the union of God and humankind by which we may be united to God by sharing in that union through the action of the Holy Spirit and by faith. This is not now an additional union, as it were, but a sharing through the Spirit in Christ in his primary union with us. "The 'objective' union which we have with Christ through his incarnational assumption of our humanity into himself is 'subjectively' actualised in us through his indwelling Spirit, 'we in Christ' and 'Christ in us' thus complementing and interpenetrating each other."²⁷

On this ground, now, the doctrine of union with Christ is properly understood to be the central, organizing feature of all Christian faith and life, a basic belief in the act of God that influences every other belief and every act of believing faith. In all things we do not stand before God on the strength of our own piety, faith, good works, knowledge and the like. Rather, because the Holy Spirit joins us to Jesus Christ we share in everything that is his, sharing in his union and communion with the Father. In and through him we are children of the heavenly Father, sharing in his own life in, and before, and from, God. Joined to Jesus Christ we share in the communion and mission of the Holy Trinity — Christian faith and life means no less than this! We stand before God in Christ's name alone. And we serve in Christ's name alone. The real meaning of the Christian's faith is the trust that "for Christ's sake" we are enfolded into the inner life of the Holy Trinity, to share in Christ's communion with the Father and in his mission from the Father.

All of this — the two-fold ministry of Christ and our union with him whereby we share what he in the flesh has offered to the Father on our behalf — may be summed up as the theological intent of Galatians 2.20, *I yet not I but Christ*.²⁸ The message of the vicarious humanity of Christ is the gospel on which we rely. The whole of the Christian life in all regards is included in the *I yet not I but*

27 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 67. See also Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Peter Lang, New York: 2003), 201.

28 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 107. See also Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31.

Christ, for in Jesus Christ all human responses “are laid hold of, sanctified and informed by his vicarious life of obedience and response to the Father. They are in fact so indissolubly united to the life of Jesus Christ which he lived out among us and which he has offered to the Father, as arising out of our human being and nature, that they are *our responses* toward the love of the Father poured out upon us through the mediation of the Son and in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ Torrance calls this a theological form of Fermat’s principle insofar as the human’s true and faithful response in the vicarious humanity of Christ invalidates, and actually makes impossible, all other ways of response.³⁰ Thus, “the actual coming of (God’s) eternal Word into our contingent existence in Jesus Christ excludes every other way to the Father, and stamps the vicarious humanity of Christ to be the sole norm and law as well as the sole ground of acceptable human response to God.”³¹

Thus, before we refer to our own faith, faith must be understood first of all in terms of “Jesus stepping into the relation between the faithfulness of God and the actual unfaithfulness of human beings, actualising the faithfulness of God and restoring the faithfulness of human beings by grounding it in the incarnate medium of his own faithfulness so that it answers perfectly to the divine faithfulness.”³² Jesus acts in our place from within our unfaithfulness, giving us a faithfulness in which we may share. he is both the truth of God and human being keeping faith and truth with God in the unity of God revealing himself and human being hearing, believing, obeying, and speaking his Word.³³ In this way our faith is grounded objectively yet personally in the One who believes for us; our faith depends upon the faithfulness of God in Christ for us. “Thus the faith which we confess is the faith of Jesus Christ who loved us and gave himself for us in a life and death of utter trust and belief in God the Father. Our faith is altogether grounded in him who is ‘author and finisher’, on whom faith depends from start

29 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 108.

30 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 145. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1982), 88.

31 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 146.

32 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 92.

33 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 154.

to finish.”³⁴ Indeed we are summoned to believe, but in such a way “in which our faith is laid hold of, enveloped, and upheld by his unswerving faithfulness.”³⁵ We do not rely upon our own believing, “but wholly upon (Christ’s) vicarious response of faithfulness toward God.”³⁶

Likewise with regard to worship, Torrance insists that Jesus Christ has embodied for us the response to God in such a way that henceforth all worship and prayer is grounded in him. “Jesus Christ in his own self-oblation to the Father *is* our worship and prayer in an acutely personalised form, so that it is only through him and with him that we may draw near to God with the hands of our faith filled with no other offering but that which he has made on our behalf and in our place once and for all.”³⁷ Thus, all approach to God is in the name and significance of Jesus Christ, “for worship and prayer are not ways in which we express ourselves but ways in which we hold up before the Father his beloved Son, take refuge in his atoning sacrifice, and make that our only plea.”³⁸ Christ has united himself to us in such a way that he gathers up our faltering worship into himself, so that in presenting himself to the Father he presents also the worship of all creation to share in his own communion with the Father. Christ takes our place, and we trust solely in his vicarious self-offering to the Father.

The essential nature of the church, as of individual Christians, is participation in the humanity of Jesus Christ. That is, “the Church is Church as it participates in the active operation of the divine love.”³⁹ As the Son is sent from the Father, so the being of the church in love involves a sharing also in the mission of Jesus Christ from the Father for the sake of the world. This point has been especially developed by James B. Torrance in a clear and persuasive manner,⁴⁰ building perhaps on the insight of John McLeod Campbell that “Christ, as the Lord of our

34 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

35 Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 31.

36 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 154.

37 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 97. See also Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 158.

38 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 97–8.

39 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 30.

40 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove: 1996).

spirits and our life, *devotes us to God* and *devotes us to men* in the *fellowship of his self-sacrifice*.”⁴¹ In this way, ministry is grounded upon a Christological pattern (*hupodeigma*). Thus, “as the Body of which he is the head the Church participates in his ministry by serving him in history where it is sent by him in fulfilment of his ministry of reconciliation.”⁴² The ministry of the church is not another ministry, different from the ministry of Christ or separate from it, but takes its essential form and content from the servant-existence and mission of Jesus. The mission of the church is not an extension of the mission of Jesus, but is a sharing in the mission of Jesus. “Thus Jesus Christ constitutes in himself, in his own vicarious human life and service, the creative source and norm and pattern of all true Christian service.”⁴³

In the emphasis placed upon the vicarious humanity of Christ, the hypostatic union, and union with Christ, Torrance has explicated the theological significance of Galatians 2:20. And with respect to the understanding of the faith, worship, and mission of the church, he has shown the consequence. In this way it may be rightly said that Galatians 2:20 gives a special point of access to the theology of T. F. Torrance and his understanding of the Christian life.

41 McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 255. This dual theme of forgiveness and renewal was already expressed in Scottish theology in John Knox’s Liturgy: “I confess that Jesus Christ did not only justify us by covering all our faults and iniquities, but also renews us by his Spirit and that these two points can not be separate, to obtain pardon for our sins, and to be reformed into a holy life” (Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 20).

42 Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 35.

43 Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 162.