

**THE CLAIM OF HUMANITY IN CHRIST:
Salvation and Sanctification in the
Theology of T. F. and J. B. Torrance**

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Salvation and sanctification are key words in all Christian theology. They have a particular resonance across the whole spectrum of evangelical Christianity, including the modern missionary movement which shaped the Torrance family. Dr. Alexandra Radcliff's elegantly structured and clearly written monograph, based on her St. Andrews thesis, is a comprehensive exploration of the significance of the theology of T. F. and J. B. Torrance for what is sometimes called "the doctrine of the Christian life."

Standing in the Reformed tradition, T. F. Torrance in particular was "sternly objective" (as John Webster writes about Barth). This reviewer remembers the strictures of both brothers in class on the dangers of subjectivism in both existentialist liberal and pietistic evangelical traditions. They were greatly aware that some evangelicals influenced by their Pietist roots could focus (as J. B. used to say) on "our experience of God" instead of on "the God whom we experience." But given the Torrances' focus on "the Triune God of grace," are there not implications to be drawn for a positive understanding of how we are changed by "the God whom we experience"? This is the question the book raises.

Dr. Radcliff devotes Part 1 to "The Triune God of Grace and Salvation," and the three chapters form a triadic structure: Father, Son, and Spirit. Here so many themes from the Torrances' trinitarian theology are laid out in comprehensive clarity. Chapter 1 on "The Father as a Covenant and not a Contract God" lays out a theme particularly emphasized by J. B. The title and the sub-title, "Filial over Federal," indicate that J. B.'s debate with Federal Calvinism is expounded here with familiar themes such as "Who" over "How," covenant not contract, and the obligations of grace in opposition to legalistic conditional grace. Universal atonement is distinguished from universalism and "logico-causal categories" criticized.



Chapter 2 develops the theme which T. F. used to say was the heart of his theology, "The Vicarious Humanity of the Son." The sub-title "Ontological over External" indicates how once again the debate is carried on with the tendency of much Western theology (and particularly part of the evangelical Reformed tradition) to reduce the doctrine of the atonement to external, forensic categories. It is not that the Torrances dismiss the forensic element (despite some claims that they do), but that the atonement is understood to be so much richer when Person and Work, incarnation and atonement, are considered in unity. The atonement must be considered in its prospective as well as retrospective aspect (as McLeod Campbell declared), and as not just "by Christ," but ontologically "in Christ." Attention is drawn to current New Testament scholarship which bears out the Torrances' understanding of πίστις Χριστού.

In the third chapter, "Drawn to Participate by the Holy Spirit," the subtitle, "Objective over Subjective," indicates how crucial this is for the thesis propounded by the whole book. But it is here that Dr. Radcliff develops her perspective from the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition as she addresses the question whether the strongly Christocentric theology of the Torrances leads to a neglect of the Spirit, as some have alleged. She rejects that criticism in view of the self-effacing character of the Holy Spirit, but she does detect a slight differentiation in the brothers. T. F., devoting himself to study and publication, tends to focus more on the *noetic* aspect, that by the Spirit we come to recognize what is already ours in Christ; J. B., while in no way disagreeing with that, has more developed pastoral concern for the Holy Spirit as not only "the Spirit of truth" but also "the Spirit of adoption." Both draw on the Eastern concept of *theosis* as understood by George Florovsky in terms of communion with God.

But it is in the second part of the book, entitled "Sanctification and Human Participation," that Dr. Radcliff develops her perspective from the Pentecostal-Charismatic perspective, also taking the Wesleyan tradition into account. She notes that T. F. affirms both sides of the Patristic formula: "From the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit, and in the Spirit, through the Son to the Father" (112). If the first part of her book explores the first side, the God-humanward movement, the second explores the human-Godward movement. But while the structure of the chapters in the first part of the book is trinitarian, all three chapter titles in the second part focus on Christ: Chapter 4, "Christ is Our Holiness," Chapter 5, "Growing Up into Christ," and Chapter 6, "Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus." It is in the subtitles that we see a reverse movement, Chapter 4 sharing the subtitle "Objective over Subjective" with Chapter 3; Chapter 5 sharing the sub-title, "Ontological over External" with Chapter 2, and Chapter 6 sharing the sub-title,

"Filial over Federal" with Chapter 1.

Chapter 4 affirms the Torrance's focus, "Christ is Our Holiness." Their emphasis was on the objective sanctification of our humanity achieved by Christ, but according to Dr. Radcliff, they said little about how this is subjectively realized in us. In fact, however, the focus on objective sanctification in Christ provides the necessary basis for the fuller subjective realization of sanctification in us without "throwing us back on ourselves." Some "well-meaning" evangelical Protestant traditions tend to make our sanctification into an "external anthropocentric endeavour," and therefore she agrees with them that more needs to be said about how our sanctification is not achieved by our self-consecration or self-discipline, but by the freedom of the Spirit which is ours in Christ.

Chapter 5 addresses this need to say more. The eschatological reserve created by Christ's ascension means that "sinfulness is a continuing presence." There is an eschatological tension between the hidden and the manifest, and this has implications for the outworking of our sanctification. This is not an external process of becoming progressively more holy by our own efforts. We have been made completely holy in Christ, and the progression of time only serves the unveiling of this definitive reality. This does not deny human activity but puts it in its proper place. There is therefore an appropriate "confidence in Christ," and Romans 7 cannot be regarded (as in the Puritan tradition) as the normative Christian life. At this point Dr. Radcliff ventures the criticism: "However, there is a general lack of discussion of this confidence by the Torrance's in relation to the subjective outworking of sanctification" (159). While they focus on the priestly office of Christ, more might have been said about the "subjective outworking" by enlarging on Christ's kingly victory.

This line of thought is developed in Chapter 6, "Fixing Our Eyes on Jesus," where the subtitle takes up again the theme from Chapter 1, "Filial over Federal." Here the understanding of sin as *cor incurvatus in se* leads to an understanding of sanctification as *cor excurvatus ex se*. So repentance cannot be a matter of a self-examination in which we carefully enumerate our sins or of the self-discipline necessary to keep the law (as advocated, it is said, by James Packer and others in the Puritan tradition). It is rather a "renewing of the mind" as we centre our attention not on ourselves but on Christ. The outworking of our sanctification, already complete in Christ, comes about from the noetic process of knowing ourselves to be in him, and from the participatory relationship of dwelling in him. There seems to be a clear logic in this: if sin is essentially self-centeredness, then self-examination and self-improvement through self-discipline seem to be exacerbating the problem!

One wonders, however, if there is not a riddle at the heart of this matter. Undoubtedly Dr. Radcliff is correct that the Torrances are right that the priority should be given to grace over law, the indicatives over the imperatives, the filial over the federal, the objective over the subjective, and the ontological over the external. Occasionally, however, a question or hesitation appears. There is the question already mentioned whether more does not need to be said about “the subjective outworking of sanctification” (159). One might ask: should more not be said of the third use of the law? Did Calvin not give this its due weight, and is Book Three of the *Institutes* not all about the doctrine of the Christian life – faith, regeneration, repentance, penitence, self-denial, bearing the cross, and so on? In fact the Torrances’ brother-in-law, R. S. Wallace, wrote the definitive work on this, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life*. A Wesleyan would have to ask whether, while grace is prior to law, the recurrence of antinomianism does not require us to make sure that the law is given its true though subordinate place as *torah* (instruction). Is no practical guidance to be given in matters of the disciplines of Christian living? Of course, responses to those questions are appropriate. In the first place, the Torrances were in a specific context trying to correct imbalances toward subjectivism. But after all, they were also dogmatic theologians, and while practical or pastoral theology ought to arise out of dogmatics, the development of pastoral theology was not their particular remit.

What Dr. Radcliff has given us, however, is a splendid investigation of the important message the Torrances have for the spectrum of pietistic evangelical traditions in particular. “It is a dangerous thing to do,” said P. T. Forsyth, “to work at your own holiness.” Evangelical pietists of all stripes—Calvinists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics—can all surely benefit from hearing that sanctification is not the result of working at our own sanctification. Do-it-yourself sanctification is an absurdity. Sanctification is rather the work of the Spirit in us so that our lives, our thoughts, our longings and desires, and our relationships are focused on the Christ who has already procured our sanctification by the power of the Holy Spirit in his own incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension.

We are indebted to Dr. Radcliff for elucidating this aspect of the Torrances’ theology. She has highlighted an area where their resolute Christocentric, Trinitarian focus can be of immense value to the church at large by countering the in-built tendency of fallen humanity to be subtly trapped in self-centered religion and a self-centered attempt at self-sanctification.

T. A. Noble