

**OVERCOMING THE "HAIR'S BREADTH"  
BETWEEN METHODISM AND CALVINISM**

**Travis M. Stevick, Ph.D.**

**University of St. Andrews, Scotland**

**Elder, Iowa Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church**

tstevick@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *John Wesley once stated that predestinarian views were no more than a "hair's breadth" that separated the Methodists from the Calvinists. Since that time, the division between the two groups has been deep. This article presents an analysis of Wesley's primary concern and of how it is possible for that division to be overcome in the Reformed theology of T. F. Torrance.*

The theological divide between Calvinism and Arminianism is one of the most famous in the history of the church. While the question of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility has been present throughout many centuries, it reached perhaps its highest pitch in the conflict between the Calvinists and the Methodists in the last few hundred years.

If one were to bracket off the specific issue of the metaphysics of salvation, the hostility present between Wesleyans and Calvinists might seem hard to understand. Not only are they closer to each other than either are to the Roman Catholic tradition, they are close to one another on many issues, such as on assurance of salvation and a stress on the importance of sanctification in the Christian life.

In this paper, we will take up the theological issues at stake in the Calvinist/Arminian divide from the perspective of John Wesley, the founder and early leader of Methodism, and examine the theology of Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance with

an eye to whether Torrance's theology may be understood as being exempt from Wesley's most serious concern. If this can be shown, it will open up a concrete path toward improved Wesleyan/Reformed interaction with an eye to reducing or eliminating the barrier that has existed between the two.

### **Wesley and the "Hair's breadth"**

Throughout his ministry, Wesley was engaged in arguments with the English Calvinists. While Wesley's polemical writings<sup>1</sup> engage a variety of topics, including "enthusiasm"<sup>2</sup> and Catholicism,<sup>3</sup> most important for our purposes are his writings against predestination<sup>4</sup> and antinomianism,<sup>5</sup> a topic Wesley understood to be deeply related to, and perhaps even implied by predestination.

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<sup>1</sup> The list of polemical writings cited in the following footnotes is not an attempt to provide an exhaustive list of Wesley's polemical writings. Rather, it is to give a sample of such writings in an easily accessible collection of his works.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, "A Letter to the Author of 'The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared'," in *Wesley's Works*, volume 9, Edited by Thomas Jackson. Reprinted from the 1872 edition issued by Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, London. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1978), 1-14, "A Second Letter to the Author of 'The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared,'" 9:15-60, "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Potter," 9:89-96, "A Letter to the Right Reverend The Lord Bishop of Gloucester," 9:117-173.

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, "A Letter to a Roman Catholic," *Wesley's Works*, 10:80-86, "A Roman Catechism, faithfully drawn out of the allowed writings of the Church of Rome: With a Reply Thereto," 10:86-128, "A Short Method of Converting All the Roman Catholics in the Kingdom of Ireland: Humbly Propose to the Bishops and Clergy of that Kingdom," 10:129-133, "The Advantage of the Members of the Church of England over those of the Church of Rome," 10:133-140, "Popery Calmly Considered," 10:140-158, "A Letter to the Printer of 'The Public Advertiser:' Occasioned by the Late Act Passed in Favor of Popery. To which is added, A Defense if, in Two Letters to the Editors of 'The Freeman's Journal,' Dublin," 10:159-173.

<sup>4</sup> John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," *Wesley's Works*, 10:204-259, "A Dialogue Between a Predestinarian and His Friend," 10:259-266, "Serious Thoughts Upon the Perseverance of the Saints," 10:284-298, "The Question, 'What is an Arminian?' Answered: By a Lover of Free Grace," 10:358-361, "Thoughts Upon God's Sovereignty," 10:361-363, "The Consequence Proved," 10:370-374, "Thoughts Upon Necessity," 10:457-474, "A Thought On Necessity," 10:474-480.

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, "A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Horne," *Wesley's Works*, 9:110-117, "A Dialogue Between an Antinomian and His Friend," 10:266-276, "A Second Dialogue Between an Antinomian and His Friend," 10:276-284, "A Blow at the Root; or, Christ Stabbed in the House of His Friends," 10:364-369.

Famously, Wesley remarked that Methodist convictions were, as a whole, not far from Calvinistic ones. In the Minutes from one of his early conferences, we read the following.

Q 22. Does not the truth of the gospel lie very near both to Calvinism and Antinomianism? A. Indeed it does; as it were, within a hair's breadth: So that it is altogether foolish and sinful, because we do not quite agree with one or the other, to run from them as far as ever we can. Q 23. Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism? A. (1.) In ascribing all good to the free grace of God. (2.) In denying all natural free-will, and all power antecedent to grace. And, (3.) In excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or does by the grace of God.<sup>6</sup>

What, precisely, was Wesley's problem with Calvinism? The language of "hair's breadth" implies that the problem is not with the Reformed theological tradition in general. Indeed, such language indicates that, taken as a whole, a Calvinist theological outlook is generally unobjectionable. There is only one small aspect that divides the Methodists from the Calvinists: predestination.

It might be argued that, while the issue of predestination is the main issue that divides Calvinists from Methodists, it is not a *small* issue. It has a nearly unparalleled place in Reformed Christianity.<sup>7</sup> Wesley clearly considers it to be an error of dramatic proportions, at one point remarking, "what are all the absurd opinions of all the Romanists in the world, compared to that one, that the God of love, the wise, just, merciful Father of the spirits of all flesh, has, from all eternity, fixed an absolute, unchangeable, irresistible, decree, that part of all mankind shall be saved, do what they will; and the rest damned, do what they can!"<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 8:284-285.

<sup>7</sup> In the Westminster Confession, the chapter "Of God's eternal decree" is third, following only after "Of the Holy Scripture," and "Of God, and of the Holy Trinity." *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. 3rd ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> John Wesley, "Sermon 55: On the Trinity," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 2, 373-86, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1985).

Wesley sets out his objection to the doctrine of predestination most broadly in his sermon "Free Grace," originally published early in the Methodist revival.<sup>9</sup> In this sermon, Wesley puts forward seven objections to predestination, one in each of the major sections of the sermon. Wesley begins with the claim that grace is "free in all to whom it is given," by which he aims to secure the freeness of grace and oppose any doctrine of works-righteousness. He follows up this claim with the assertion that grace is also "free *for* all as well as free *in* all," that God does not, *a priori*, cut anyone off from grace.

Wesley's arguments can be summed up as follows. One, any attempt to defend one's self by claiming to affirm "single" predestination will inevitably collapse into "double" predestination. Two, predestination (specifically what Wesley calls "unconditional reprobation") results in Antinomianism. Three, it undermines assurance. Four, it undermines acts of mercy and evangelism. Five, if predestination were true, it would undermine the purpose of revelation. Six, Wesley appeals to "the whole scope and tenor of scripture" to show that predestination would make scripture contradict itself. Seven, Predestination impugns God's integrity by showing that, while Jesus "everywhere speaks as if he was willing that all men should be saved," this does not reveal the true character of God.<sup>10</sup>

Each of those arguments is interesting in various ways, but a close reading of Wesley's other anti-predestinarian writings reveals that, over time, certain arguments seemed more central than others. In his treatise, "Predestination Calmly Considered," Wesley cites statements from "'The Protestant Confession of Faith,' drawn up at Paris in the year 1559 . . . The Dutch Divines, assembled at Dort in the year 1618 . . . 'The Confession of faith' set forth by the Assembly of English and Scotch Divines, in the year 1646,' and 'Mr. Calvin,'"<sup>11</sup> to argue that to affirm a doctrine of unconditional election seems to imply an affirmation of unconditional

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<sup>9</sup> John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3, 544-563, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986). According to the critical edition of Wesley's works, the "date of composition, if known; otherwise, date preached or published" for this sermon is listed as April 29th, 1739. 3:640.

<sup>10</sup> Torrance would refer to this as driving a wedge between Jesus and God. *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 134-135.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:205-206.

reprobation. Immediately following these citations, Wesley argues once again that "single" predestination, to have a decree of unconditional particular election to salvation without a decree of unconditional reprobation, is impossible.<sup>12</sup>

Wesley spends several paragraphs engaging with various evasions that he likely encountered over his years in ministry. In the course of this, his imaginary interlocutor demands that he explain how he interprets the passages in the New Testament that clearly refer to "election." In response, Wesley distinguishes between two senses of election. The first of these is that election is

a divine appointment of some particular men, to do some particular work in the world. And this election I believe to be not only personal, but absolute and unconditional. Thus Cyrus was elected to rebuild the temple, and St. Paul, with the twelve, to preach the gospel. But I do not find this to have any necessary connexion with eternal happiness.<sup>13</sup>

The second sense is election as

a divine appointment of some men to eternal happiness. But I believe this election to be conditional, as well as the reprobation opposite thereto. I believe the eternal decree concerning both is expressed in those words: 'He that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned.'<sup>14</sup>

After this articulation of his understanding of election, Wesley culminates with these words. "But unconditional election I cannot believe; not only because I cannot find it in Scripture, but also (to wave [sic] all other considerations) because it necessarily implies unconditional reprobation. Find out any election which does not imply reprobation, and I will gladly agree to it."<sup>15</sup> That is to say, Wesley's concern

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:206-207.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210-211.

with unconditional election is that “unconditional reprobation” seems to be the necessary consequence.<sup>16</sup>

The remainder of the treatise is centered around articulating what Wesley considers to be the negative implications of the core theological error of affirming unconditional reprobation. The practical upshot of this for the purposes of this paper is that if one could find a theological articulation which, while self-consciously within the Reformed theological tradition, could put forth an understanding of predestination and unconditional election in such a way that did not logically entail unconditional reprobation, Wesley claims he would enthusiastically accept it. It seems self-evident that any defense of unconditional election that avoids this logical consequence could be construed as a radical departure from the traditional interpretation of the doctrine. While that may indeed be the case, if such a reinterpretation could be found and seen as viable from within the Reformed context (though it would not likely be affirmed by *all* within the Reformed tradition) it could be seen as a landmark in overcoming the “hair’s breadth” that Wesley considered to separate the Methodists from the Calvinists.

### **T. F. Torrance on Limited Atonement**

In T. F. Torrance’s voluminous writings, the topic of predestination is rarely brought up. Compared to discussions on topics such as the centrality and nature of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and epistemology, Torrance’s published thoughts on predestination are notably infrequent. It is clear that Torrance did not make it a priority to speak in explicitly predestinarian language. While classic Reformed emphases such as the sovereignty of God, the primacy of grace, and priesthood of Christ are abundantly present in Torrance’s writings, he seldom explicitly connected these to an overarching understanding of divine predestination. Indeed, such

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<sup>16</sup> One could perhaps phrase Wesley’s concern as being that Unconditional Election logically entails something like what had come to be known as Limited Atonement. If God elected some people and passed over others who are thus, in effect, cut out of the atonement worked out in Christ, it would seem that, for Wesley, “unconditional reprobation” and “limited atonement” are functionally equivalent. If this is essentially where Wesley saw the problem, we shall see that he was incorrect in his assessment as subsequent theologians have argued from within the Reformed tradition to show that Unconditional Election does not need to imply either Unconditional Reprobation or Limited Atonement.

reflections on predestinarian topics as can be found suggest that Torrance was self-consciously distancing himself from that element of the Reformed tradition.

For the moment, let us restrict our examination of Torrance's comments on election and predestination to works published in his own voice during his lifetime, that is, excluding both works where he is primarily articulating the thoughts of others and the posthumously published volumes on his Edinburgh lectures on the person and work of Christ.<sup>17</sup> We find that discussions of "predestination" are almost non-existent (there are two notable exceptions to which we shall return below). There are a handful of references to "election," but it is clear that Torrance's use of the term is somewhat different from the use that Wesley rejected. To make this point clear, we will survey several such comments.

In an early reference to a common interpretation of election, we read, "How fatal it is to construe the *sui generis* movement of grace in causal terms is apparent perhaps above all in the doctrine of election, for then it is converted into some form of impersonal determinism the relation of which to the Persons of the Trinity can then appear to be only quite arbitrary."<sup>18</sup> Torrance's concern over the translation of grace into impersonal determination is essentially the same as Wesley's that the common understanding of predestination is contrary to the character of God as seen in scripture and, above all, in Christ,<sup>19</sup> as both claims are concerned with a disconnect introduced between election and the reality of God as born witness to by scripture.

A second reference to election reads as follows:

Hence already in the historical experience of Israel before the Incarnation the lineaments of the Church began to become manifest as the worshipping people of God called into being by his Word, with the mystery of divine election hidden behind the events of their history,

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, edited by Robert T. Walker. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), and *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, edited by Robert T. Walker. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 187.

<sup>19</sup> Wesley, "Free Grace," 3:552-555.

and laden with the ministry of his revelation, and throughout it becomes more and more clear that as the creation and corporate election of God the Church exists prior to the individual members incorporated into it from generation to generation but that it will be brought to its fulfillment only through the death and resurrection of Israel in the body of the Messiah.<sup>20</sup>

While this uses "election" in a positive sense, Torrance is using it to refer to the corporate election of Israel. This kind of use suggests that a major meaning of "election" at least has strong resonances with an understanding of election as to service, not saving faith. We see essentially the same use affirmed by Wesley, as cited above. "I believe [election] commonly means one of these two things," the first of which is that it is "a divine appointment of some particular men, to do some particular work in the world. And this election I believe to be not only personal, but absolute and unconditional . . ." <sup>21</sup>

In several places, Torrance provides an explanation of the purpose of the doctrine of election in the Reformed tradition in such a way that subordinates the particular expression of the doctrine to its more fundamental purpose. When explaining Calvin's own theology, Torrance argued that election, along with the doctrine of "grace alone," facilitated a shift from the subjective to the objective pole of theological knowledge. Such an interpretation implies that such doctrines are secondary to that primary purpose.<sup>22</sup>

While naming it as a characteristic doctrine of Reformed theology, Torrance describes "the doctrine of election" as that which "rejects every projection of man and his creaturely forms into the eternal and divine, and teaches the Incarnation of the divine purpose, the projection, as it were, of the divine into the human, in Jesus

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<sup>20</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 196.

<sup>21</sup> Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," *Wesley's Works*, 10:209-210. It would be a mistake to conclude that Torrance is saying precisely the same thing as Wesley on this point. However, there is clearly a resonance on the idea that election may have more to do with communal service and destiny than individual salvation or condemnation.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic, 1988), 21.



Christ, and the establishing in Him of true relations between God and man and man and God."<sup>23</sup> There is no hint of election being interpreted in the traditional way rejected by Wesley.

In a further comment in the same volume, Torrance reflects that

The Reformation taught us that we do not know God in His isolation from us but only in personal communion, that is, in a two-way relation between subject and object; nevertheless along with this the Reformation brought into great prominence the doctrine of election which asserts that we do not know God or worship Him through acting upon Him but through being acted upon by Him.<sup>24</sup>

Again, there is no hint of the presentation of individual election and reprobation so abhorrent to Wesley. We are beginning to see that, even if Wesley and Torrance are not in total agreement about the doctrine of election and predestination, they are surely closer to one another than either is to those who hold the traditional Calvinistic doctrine of predestination.

The most sustained discussion of predestination in Torrance's own voice in writings published during his lifetime appears in his *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*. He introduces the topic in one chapter, noting he will follow it up in the next. However, even the introduction is telling.

God's grace is invariably equal and impartial toward the obedient and the disobedient, the believing and unbelieving, alike. If people are ultimately damned, that cannot be due to some 'No' in the judgment of God against them in contrast to a 'Yes' in favor of others, for as St. Paul insisted there is no duality of 'Yes' and 'No' in God but only the 'Yes' of his Grace.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 86.

<sup>24</sup> Torrance, *Theological Science*, 96.

<sup>25</sup> Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 87.

It is clear that, however he clarifies what he means, Torrance seems to be every bit as troubled by the understanding of God implied by double predestination as Wesley, even if he uses different terms.

When Torrance resumes the topic in the following chapter, we find both a passionate commitment to a form of predestination but also some strong condemnation of how it had developed within certain streams of Reformed thought.

But what did [Reformed theology] mean by the *pre* in predestination? Originally it was intended to make the point that the Grace by which we are saved is grounded in the inner Life of God himself, and that we are saved by the Grace of God alone. Predestination means therefore that no matter what a man thinks or does he cannot constitute himself a being under Grace, he cannot constitute himself a man loved by God, for he is that already. That is to say, the *pre* in predestination emphasizes the sheer objectivity of God's Grace. However, a different view began to emerge in which election could be spoken of as 'preceding grace', in line with which predestination could be regarded as a causal antecedent to our salvation in time. That is what happened.<sup>26</sup>

Torrance considered this development a corruption of Calvin's own thinking by subjecting it to an Augustinian-Aristotelian framework of thought.

The consequences of this approach were devastating, yielding nothing less from Torrance than a charge of heresy against those who took Reformed thinking in this direction.

On the one hand, it traced predestination back to an eternal irresistible decree in God which by-passes, so to speak, the Incarnation and the cross, grounding it in some arcane 'dark patch' in God behind the back of Jesus Christ. This had the effect of driving a deep wedge between Jesus Christ and God, thereby introducing by the back door an element of Nestorianism into Calvinist Christology, which called in question any final and essential relation between the incarnate Son and God the

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<sup>26</sup> Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 134.

Father and threatened to extinguish the light of the Gospel. It is hardly surprising that a Calvinism of this kind which stressed the utter impassibility and immutability of God should have given rise again and again to a heretical liberal theology with its denial of the Deity of Christ.<sup>27</sup>

At this point, we see Torrance's core theological convictions coming to the surface to drive him to resist a major stream of thought within his own tradition. Though he wants to affirm something like Calvin's doctrine of predestination, if it gets developed in a way where one must choose predestination or the hypostatic union, Torrance emphatically chooses the latter.

This is another point of convergence between Torrance and Wesley. Both theologians are concerned with anything that will, as Torrance says, "drive a wedge" between Jesus and God. While Torrance appeals to theological concepts like Nestorianism to express his concerns, Wesley appeals more directly to the biblical witness and the character of Christ.

This doctrine represents our blessed Lord, 'Jesus Christ the righteous,' 'the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth,' as a hypocrite, a deceiver of the people, a man void of common sincerity. For it cannot be denied, that he everywhere speaks as if he was willing that all men should be saved. Therefore, to say he was not willing that all men should be saved, is to represent him as a mere hypocrite and dissembler. It cannot be denied that the gracious words which came out of his mouth are full of invitations to all sinners. To say, then, he did not intend to save all sinners, is to represent him as a gross deceiver of the people. You cannot deny that he says, 'Come unto me, all ye that are weary and heavy laden.' If, then, you say he calls those that cannot come; those whom he knows to be unable to come; those whom he can make able to come, but will not; how is it possible to describe greater insincerity? You represent him as mocking his helpless creatures, by offering what he never intends to give. You describe him

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<sup>27</sup> Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 134-135.

as saying one thing, and meaning another; as pretending the love which his had not. Him, in 'whose mouth was no guile,' you make full of deceit, void of common sincerity; – then especially, when, drawing nigh the city, He wept over it, and said, 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often *would* I have gathered thy children together, – and *ye would not* . . . ' Now, if you say, *they would*, but *he would not*, you represent him (which who could hear?) as weeping crocodiles' tears; weeping over the prey which himself had doomed to destruction!<sup>28</sup>

At root, the concerns of Torrance and Wesley seem to be substantially the same. Both are worried that a major way of understanding predestination implies that Jesus is not a faithful witness to God and so cannot be a true incarnation of God. For both, to accept this interpretation of predestination is to deny the Incarnation and the hypostatic union.

Some of Torrance's writings are in his own voice, clearly developing and advocating a perspective he embraces. In other works, however, he takes up the task of historical theology, articulating the views of other people. It is not always clear at which points he is simply giving voice to a historical perspective and at which points his appraisals can be seen as reflecting his own perspective.<sup>29</sup> While it is difficult to be entirely certain, there are moments when, taken in the context of the whole Torrance corpus, it seems clear he is voicing his own convictions in his historical assessment of others. The most important work along these lines for the purposes of this paper is his volume on Scottish Theology.<sup>30</sup>

As a history of the theology in one of the great Calvinist countries, there are many references to predestination and its various aspects in this volume. Because

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<sup>28</sup> Wesley, "Free Grace," 3:554-555. Original emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the blurry line between Torrance's own position and that of the sources he appropriates, see Travis M. Stevick, *Encountering Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 103-105.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

of its close relationship with Wesley's primary objection to predestination, we will restrict our survey to passages concerned with Limited Atonement.

One of the major players in the shift away from Limited Atonement in some quarters of Scottish theology was Thomas Erskine. He "was one of the most prominent and respected lawyers in Edinburgh who as a layman was not fettered by formal submission to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, but was nevertheless completely faithful to the Nicene Creed and the catholic theology of the Orthodox Church Fathers' and of the great Reformers."<sup>31</sup> According to Torrance, even though he was a layperson, Erskine's primary theological concern was a pastoral one. "His object was to raise questions about the bearing of Christian doctrines on the character of God and to show the intelligible and necessary connection between them. What worried him was the fact that there was a serious discrepancy between the content of the Gospel of the saving love of God and the rather stern notion people entertained about God which had little moral influence on their lives."<sup>32</sup>

This discrepancy, and the practical concerns to which it gave rise, put Erskine at odds with the mainstream of theological orthodoxy in his context.

Undoubtedly what roused Erskine was the persistent teaching in the Kirk about divine predestination and the limitation of the Atonement it involved, for they put severe question marks in people's minds about the nature of the love of God and undermined their assurance of salvation. 'What view does this doctrine give of the character of God? And what influence is the belief of it fitted to exercise on the character of man?' This made him question and think through the currently held doctrine of election.<sup>33</sup>

These concerns are notably similar to some of those raised by Wesley over a hundred years prior. They are given pithy expression in Erskine's own words. "I feel that to separate the work of Christ and the character of God is Socinianism."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 263.

<sup>32</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 264.

<sup>33</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 265.

<sup>34</sup> Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 264.

It was twice asserted that the above allusions and discussions were the primary sources of Torrance's convictions on predestination *in works published during Torrance's lifetime*. Such statements imply that a stronger presentation can be found outside of those works. This is indeed the case as the most sustained discussion explicitly on the topic of Limited Atonement in Torrance's own voice is found in *Atonement*, the second of two volumes of Torrance's lectures on Christology at the University of Edinburgh. We will engage in a close reading of these pages as they form perhaps the clearest explanation of Torrance's reservations regarding Limited Atonement as well as provide evidence that he and Wesley are not so far off, in spite of the fact that Torrance is a "Calvinist" and Wesley is an "Arminian."<sup>35</sup>

The fact that Torrance places his discussion within lectures on Christology is significant. On the one hand, it is unsurprising because atonement is a topic that flows from Christology. However, it is particularly appropriate because, as has been shown, Torrance insists that Christological considerations must be primary and that if a doctrine is developed in such a way as to violate those core Christological convictions, it must be rejected or revised.

When explicitly discussing Limited Atonement, Torrance characteristically appeals to Christology and what such a view of atonement would imply about Christ. In particular, Torrance claims that there are three questions that are raised by the doctrine of Limited Atonement:

- (i) Whom did Christ represent in his incarnation and in his death? Did he represent all humanity, or only a chosen few?
- (ii) What is the relation between the death of Jesus on the cross and the Father in heaven? Did God himself condescend to take upon himself man's judgment, or did he send someone to represent him and do a work which was rewarded with forgiveness as he saw fit?

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<sup>35</sup> The scare quotes are to acknowledge that, while Torrance identified as a Calvinist, he did not affirm the version of Calvinism that Wesley rejected and that, while Wesley identified as an Arminian (even publishing "The Arminian Magazine"), he deviates notably from the version of Arminianism that Torrance rejects, as we shall see below.

(iii) What is the nature of the efficacy of the atoning death of Christ?<sup>36</sup>

Torrance addresses the first question with two further questions. The first one is, "What is the relation of the Incarnation to the Atonement?"

If incarnation and atonement cannot be separated, then Christ represents in his death all whom he represents in his incarnation. If they can be separated, then even if he represents all humanity in his incarnation, does he represent in his death only those for whom he chooses to bear judgment, or only those whom the Father gives him according to his secret counsel?<sup>37</sup>

Torrance does not believe that incarnation and atonement can be separated from one another. As such, Jesus represented all people in his death every bit as much as in his incarnation. Note also that Torrance refuses to interpret the "many" in the New Testament as anything less than "all."<sup>38</sup>

The second question is "What is the relation between the redemptive work of Christ and election?" Torrance's overarching concern is Christological. "Whatever we do, we cannot speak of an election or a predestination behind the back of Jesus Christ, and so divide God's saving action in two, into election and into the work of Christ on the cross." For Torrance, to posit a split between the atoning work of Christ and election is to separate Christ from God, something he clearly considers unacceptable throughout the length and breadth of his writing.<sup>39</sup>

In addressing the second major question, Torrance appeals to the hypostatic union between divine and human natures in Christ and the intra-Trinitarian relationship between the Son and the Father. Torrance names the error of what he calls "hyper-Calvinism" to be a denial of the hypostatic union. Such a denial would be required in order to sustain the belief that "in Christ's life and especially in his death on the cross, the deity of Christ was in repose. He suffered only in his

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<sup>36</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 182.

<sup>38</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 183.

<sup>39</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 183.

humanity."<sup>40</sup> This is a problem because it means that, in his death, Christ was acting only as a man and not as God of God, which means that "all that Christ does is not necessarily what God does or accepts." As such, Torrance considers the kind of division required to undergird a doctrine of Limited Atonement to ultimately rest "upon a basic Nestorian heresy."<sup>41</sup>

Besides how can we think of the judgment on the cross as only a partial judgment upon sin, or of a judgment only upon some sinners, for that is what it is if only some sinners are died for and only some are implicated in Christ and the cross? But what would that mean but a destruction of the whole concept of atonement, for it would mean a partial judgment and not a final *No* of God against sin; it would mean a partial substitution and thus a repudiation of the concept of radical substitution which atonement involves. And it would mean a divorce of the cross from the final judgment, for a judgment upon sin would still have to be poured out. Or to put it in another way: it would mean that outside of Christ there is still a God of wrath who will judge humanity apart from the cross and who apart from the cross is a wrathful God. But that is to divide God from Christ in the most impossible way and to eliminate the whole teaching of the 'wrath of the lamb,' namely that God has committed all judgment to the Son.<sup>42</sup>

Again, Torrance appeals to the unity between divine and human natures in Christ and the intra-Trinitarian unity between the Son and the Father to undermine the presuppositions upon which the doctrine of Limited Atonement is based.

In response to this third question, Torrance takes up the distinction, made by the scholastic Calvinists, between the "sufficiency" of Christ's passion and its "efficacy" in individuals. This has manifested itself as a claim that Christ's death is sufficient for all but efficacious only in the elect. However, this seems to presuppose

a philosophical or metaphysical conception of irresistible grace and of

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<sup>40</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 184.

<sup>41</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 184-185.

<sup>42</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 185.



absolute causality, such that it could not be held that all for whom Christ died efficaciously must necessarily be saved. The doctrine of absolute predestination thus appears to supply a notion of causal efficacy to the death of Christ which makes it applicable savingly only to the elect, as otherwise all would be saved.<sup>43</sup>

Either this means that there is a will of God that is sovereign even over the work of God in Christ (making atonement arbitrary), or else the divide between elect and reprobate is pushed back into the nature of God, which Torrance considers to be an "attack" on God's nature.<sup>44</sup>

At this point, Torrance turns to what could be seen as a counter argument against much of the Wesleyan tradition.

The alternative to that would be to assert that all that God provided was the possibility of salvation for all in the cross, and that each person has to translate that general possibility into actuality in their own case, but that is to land in Arminianism and to teach that ultimately every one is their own savior, in so far as they have to cooperate with Christ for their salvation. But if all that has been done in the death of Christ is the creation of the possibility of salvation, then who can be sure of their salvation, since everything depends in the last analysis on human weakness?<sup>45</sup>

This, of course, would be utterly damning to Wesley's position if it were, in fact, accurate to his position. In point of fact, Wesley's own understanding of the relationship of grace and works is not far removed from Torrance's. For Wesley, the work of God in and for people unto salvation is the fundamental presupposition of evangelism. It is for precisely this reason that he resisted the version of predestination he encountered.

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<sup>43</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 186. It is at this point where we can see that, for Torrance, it is this rendering of "unconditional election" in logico-causal terms is what gives rise to the traditional interpretation of "limited atonement." It also seems to be the root of the "unconditional reprobation" that Wesley objected to so strongly.

<sup>44</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 187.

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 187.

But if [Predestination as Wesley encountered it] be so, then is all preaching vain. It is needless to them that are elected. For they, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be saved. Therefore the end of preaching, 'to save souls,' is void with regard to them. And it is useless to them that are not elected. For they cannot possibly be saved. They, whether with preaching or without, will infallibly be damned. The end of preaching is therefore void with regard to them likewise. So that in either case, our preaching is vain, as your hearing is also in vain.<sup>46</sup>

Representative of Wesley's convictions regarding what it means to "work with God" for our salvation is the following, in the context of his sermon explaining Philippians 2:12-13.<sup>47</sup> "We shall then see there is no opposition between these, 'God works; therefore, do we work'; but, on the contrary, the closest connexion; and that in two respects. For, First, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works, therefore you *must* work."<sup>48</sup>

Torrance then sets out to make some positive affirmations about the range of atonement. The first thing he wants to affirm is that "Christ died for all humanity - that is a fact that cannot be undone."<sup>49</sup> This is the affirmation that traditionally leads to universalism (to which Limited atonement is the equally ill-founded response).<sup>50</sup> How does Torrance understand this universal atonement to fit with the biblical statements that not all are saved?

That then is the first thing we have to say, that Christ died for all

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<sup>46</sup> Wesley, "Free Grace," 3:547-548.

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, "Sermon 85: On Working Out Our Own Salvation," in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler, vol. 3, 199-209, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986). The critical edition of Wesley's Works describes this sermon as "The late Wesley's most complete and careful exposition of the mystery of divine-human interaction, his subtlest probing of the paradox of prevenient grace and human agency." 3:199.

<sup>48</sup> Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," 3:206.

<sup>49</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> Torrance refers to "universal salvation" and "limited atonement" as "twin errors." *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 136.

humanity, and no human being can undo or escape the fact that everyone has been died for, and no one can evade, elude, or avoid the fact that they are loved by God. Therefore when they do the inconceivable thing in the face of that divine love, namely, refuse it, defy it, turn away from it, that unavoidable self-giving of God is their very judgment. It opposes their refusal of God, it opposes their attempt to elude God, and is therefore their judgment in the very event of refusal. If we think of the Incarnation of Christ into our human nature, and therefore of the fact that all men and women have been ingrafted into Christ in that he has made himself brother of all in their flesh and existence, then we may think of human refusal of the atonement, a refusal met by God's opposition of love, as a breaking off of people, like a branch from the vine, and yet that must not be thought of as if it meant the undoing of the fact that Christ died for them.<sup>51</sup>

Torrance summarizes the implications of his position. "Objectively, then, we must think of atonement as sufficient and efficacious reality for every human being - it is such sufficient and efficacious reality that it is the rock of offense, the rock of judgement upon which the sinner who refuses the divine love shatters himself or herself and is damned eternally."<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the theology of T. F. Torrance, many of Wesley's most pressing concerns over "Calvinism" have been addressed and overcome. This is not to say that Wesley would have found Torrance's position to be satisfactory. It is quite possible that, given the framework of theological discussion in the eighteenth century, Wesley would find Torrance's Reformed terminology troublesome. However, it may be said that at least some of those misgivings would be more an expression of terminology rather than of substance. While Torrance is content to retain terms from his Reformed context that Wesley rejects, his rethinking of the entire theological

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<sup>51</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 189.

<sup>52</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 189.

framework means that the two men are not far from one another, perhaps even less than a hair's breadth.

It seems noteworthy that the primary arguments that Torrance utilizes against Limited Atonement, that it undermines assurance of salvation and that it violates the integrity and character of God, are two of the seven objections against unconditional election mentioned by Wesley in his sermon on Free Grace cited above. While Torrance is not manifestly concerned with five of Wesley's objections to unconditional election, it is significant that those objections do not simply signal the difference between the ultimate beliefs of Wesleyans and Calvinists but can be seen, at least in part, as reflecting concerns and contradictions within certain forms of traditional Reformed theology. What Torrance's theology may say to Wesleyans is that the problems arising from certain traditional interpretations of unconditional election may not require the rejection of the Reformed theological perspective but could be seen merely as evidence that Reformed theology stood in need of more careful and consistent thinking with regard to its *fundamental* theological convictions, not simply its more *distinctive* ones.

Wesley claimed that the difference between the Methodists and the Calvinists was small, no more than a hair's breadth. However widespread the implications might be, a close reading of Wesley's publications on the topic makes it clear that his driving concern was over the popular interpretation of unconditional election and its consequences. Specifically, as noted above, Wesley claimed that if one could affirm unconditional election without unconditional reprobation, he would "gladly agree with it." In T. F. Torrance we see precisely the kind of rejection of unconditional election that Wesley seemed to be searching for within the Reformed tradition. This remarkable convergence in an area where such agreement had seemed impossible for so long should encourage both Wesleyans and Calvinists to revisit the other traditions to see if there are treasures they may have missed because of this historic feud.