

Participatio

Journal of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship

Supplemental Volume 4: "Torrance and the Wesleyan Tradition" (2018)



PHOTOGRAPH: Thomas Torrance (1871-1959), T. F. Torrance's father, before going to China, with friends "at Missionary College." For discussion see p. 4. Photograph courtesy Torrance family; original now in The Thomas F. Torrance Manuscript Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library.

Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship

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WESLEY AND TORRANCE:

An Introductory Survey of Comparisons and Contrasts

Thomas A. Noble, PhD

Senior Research Fellow at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester
Professor of Theology, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City

tanoble@nts.edu

John Wesley (1703-1791) is one of the major figures of Christian history. Today the World Methodist Council includes denominations claiming over forty million members, while some estimates of members and adherents rise to seventy million and more. But while Wesley has been recognized as the originator of a major Christian tradition, as a great evangelist, and as a key figure in the eighteenth-century revival of evangelical Christianity, it is only comparatively recently that he has been regarded as a significant theologian. George Croft Cell was one of the first to do so,¹ but it was really only with Colin Williams' work that an attempt was made to lay out his thinking as a kind of systematic theology.² It was the Methodist patristics scholar, Albert Outler, who had the leading role in the rise of Wesley Studies,³ proposing that Wesley should be regarded as a "folk theologian." That description was perhaps appropriate in a day when Tillich was dominant in America, and theology was almost regarded as a subdivision of philosophy. Today, when theology is primarily related to the Church rather than the academy, it is more

¹ George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt), 1935.

² Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth Press, 1960).

³ Albert Outler, "Towards a Reappraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian," *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, 14 (1961), 5-14, reprinted in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991); see also the Introduction, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1-33. Outler also initiated the new scholarly edition of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), and edited the first four volumes, *Wesley's Sermons*.

appropriate to describe Wesley as a pastoral or practical theologian, though not a dogmatician. He was, however, a systematic thinker, and major works by Randy Maddox, Kenneth Collins and others, have examined comprehensively his writings on every major Christian doctrine.⁴ Thomas Oden brought together a compendium of his doctrines.⁵

While Wesley was not formally a systematic theologian, it is also true to say that that term is rarely applied to T. F. Torrance. He never occupied a chair of "Systematic Theology", but rather held the chair of Christian Dogmatics at New College, Edinburgh. As an explicitly confessional study, Christian Dogmatics, centring on the great central *dogma* of the Nicene Creed, is clearly closely related to pastoral theology. Wesley's pastoral or practical theology specialized in plain English for 'plain men', and his calling was to evangelize the 'common people' of his day. Torrance was an academic, and yet he always saw his teaching as fulfilling a call to mission and evangelism.

Comparing Contexts

The political and social context within which Torrance worked was so different from that of Wesley that it appears to be a different world. Wesley preached, wrote, and rode through the villages and small towns in the peaceful stable, structured, rural society of eighteenth-century England. Foreign wars were fought by professional armies and by the Royal Navy, but the Kingdom of Great Britain during the reigns of the Hanoverians only knew the two brief warlike episodes of the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. The Industrial Revolution began slowly and it was not till the last decade of Wesley's life that the factory system began to have much effect on the population. Torrance was born in war-torn China just before the great cataclysm of the First World War and served as a chaplain in the Second. In contrast to the itinerant Wesley, while he lectured widely, his professional life was spent almost

⁴ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1994); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). This was considerably expanded in *John Wesley's Teachings*, 4 Vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012-14).

entirely in Edinburgh. They were both British, but whereas Wesley was an Englishman, Torrance belonged to the subtly different national culture and heritage of Presbyterian Scotland.

The cultural and intellectual contexts were strikingly different too. Wesley lived at the zenith of the Enlightenment when thinking was dominated by the great Sir Isaac Newton, by the continental rationalists and by the British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. He opposed the dominant Deism of the day, but while the age could boast great philosophers, it was not an age of great theologians. Eighteenth-century theology may well be regarded as stuck in the categories of seventeenth century scholasticism. Before Torrance was born, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ritschl, and Harnack had revolutionized Theology, and during his lifetime, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Niebuhr had reacted in their various ways to classic Liberalism. Deism had largely given way to widespread atheism or agnosticism among the educated elite, although during Torrance's lifetime it was still defensible to regard the United Kingdom, and particularly Scotland, as a "Christian" country.

It is when we come to compare the family circumstances of the two that we come closer to characterizing the similarities and differences in their thought. John Wesley grew up in the rectory at Epworth, a rural village in the fen country of Lincolnshire. His parents had both been born into Puritan Nonconformist families, but each had independently returned to the Church of England. While their Puritan upbringing influenced their serious and disciplined approach to living, they were Tories, belonging to the "high church" party of "Church and King," the heirs of the Arminians led by Archbishop William Laud who had supported Charles I and the divine right of kings. They had recovered their dominance after the Cromwellian interlude when the monarchy and the Elizabethan settlement of the Church of England was restored in 1660. Samuel Wesley supported the subsequent "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 when the Catholic James was replaced by William and Mary and Parliament became effectively supreme. But Susanna had the Jacobite sympathies of the Nonjurors, those Arminian "high church" bishops and clerics who regarded themselves as bound by oath to the dispossessed King James. John was the thirteenth or fourteenth child (with many infant deaths, they lost count), and was one of only three sons to survive to adulthood. Susanna was an educated woman,

very much a theologian, and believed in strict though kindly discipline which must break a young child's will to make it obedient. John Wesley's methodical, tidy, logical mind was a reflection of his mother's.⁶

T. F. Torrance was the second eldest child and the oldest son among the six children born to British missionaries to China, the Rev. Thomas Torrance from Scotland and his English wife, Mrs Annie Torrance.⁷ They were part of that great generation of student volunteers who re-invigorated the nineteenth-century missionary movement which had its roots in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival of Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield. Thomas Torrance, Snr, grew up in the "Auld Kirk," the established Church of Scotland left behind by the evangelical wing which had left to form the Free Church in the great Disruption of 1843. Virtually alone among British denominations, it had no missionaries, and it is a fascinating link with the Wesleyan tradition, that Thomas Torrance, Snr, went to Cliff College in Derbyshire, a training college for evangelists later associated with evangelical Methodists, to prepare for his missionary work.⁸ As in the Wesley home, the Torrance children were carefully taught to read their Bibles and pray. And their mother, brought up within the Church of England was, like Susanna, a well-informed lay theologian.

The contrast between the two families lay in their theological traditions. The Wesleys, as we have noted, were heirs of the "high church" party of the Church of England. That should not be confused with the later Anglo-Catholic Tractarian

⁶ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989) is the definitive biography and also a history of early Methodism.

⁷ For biography, see Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999): see also Elmer M. Colyer, *How To Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 35-51.

⁸ A photograph of Thomas Torrance during this period is annotated by Thomas F. Torrance, "My Father at Missionary College." During this period there are two possible settings for the photograph: either at Hulme Cliffe College in Derbyshire where he received missionary training 1892-1894, or at Livingstone College in London where he did basic medical training 1894-1895. The evangelist Henry Grattan Guinness, founder of the Livingstone Inland Mission, trained missionaries at Hulme Cliffe College at this time. Its name was changed to Cliff College when it was acquired by the Wesleyan Methodists in 1903.

movement of Newman, Keble, and Pusey in the nineteenth century. The seventeenth-century "high church" party of Archbishop Laud, and of bishops Lancelot Andrewes, Thomas Ken and Jeremy Taylor, were not "papists," although they were suspected of such by the Puritans because of their defence of episcopacy, liturgy, and their emphasis on the sacraments. They were known as "Arminians," whereas the majority of the Puritans were in that part of the Reformed tradition often known as "Calvinism." They particularly rejected what was to become the "high" Calvinism of the Westminster Confession and of John Owen. They saw the Church of England as exemplifying a true catholicism, and became interested in proving their loyalty to the "primitive Christianity" of the early Church Fathers. But that formative Anglican tradition had no tradition of systematic or dogmatic theology. Once the Puritans were evicted from their livings at the Restoration of "Church and King" in 1660 to become the three "Nonconformist" or "Dissenting" denominations – Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists – systematic theology departed with them. John Owen, Vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford under Cromwell, was to continue to produce as a Nonconformist minister what was probably the greatest Puritan theology of the century. But in the Church of England, systematic or dogmatic theology was not even part of the curriculum at Oxford or Cambridge. Accordingly, Wesley's theology is not to be found in a work of systematic theology, but primarily in his collected and published sermons.

Thomas Torrance, Snr, by contrast, stood in the Reformed tradition of the Church of Scotland, a tradition in which systematic or dogmatic theology was vibrant. The greatest name, of course, was that of John Calvin, and so Thomas Torrance was in the Calvinist tradition. But this was not the "high" Calvinism of the Synod of Dort with its "five points" including the doctrine of "limited atonement" and the decree of unconditional reprobation. The Torrance family tradition rejected "scholastic Federal Calvinism," but revered the theology of John Calvin himself. They could have been called "moderate Calvinists" although there was a spirit of evangelical ecumenism in that whole enthusiastic generation of the student missionary movement which rejected such labels. They were, as it has sometimes been said of Charles Simeon and the Anglican evangelicals, Arminians in the pulpit, but Calvinists on their knees.

Comparing Theological Perspectives

Given the points of comparison and contrast in their social, intellectual, theological, and family contexts, how might we characterize the respective theologies of John Wesley and T. F. Torrance? At this point, before we come to the scholarly papers which follow, we need only attempt an introductory overview.

We have to begin from the context we have just sketched by noting that the horizons of the eighteenth century were much narrower than those of the twentieth. Two centuries after the Reformation, Protestant theology, both continental and British (including the colonies), was still fighting the battles which arose then. In particular, the theological scene was dominated by the Protestant scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century. The dispute between Calvinists and Arminians was dominant, particularly among those who participated in the evangelical awakening. But the rise of German Pietism, coming to England with the Moravians, brought a new flavour to the scene with its doctrine of instantaneous conversion or “new birth.” But that also characterized the revivalist Puritan theology of Jonathan Edwards, closely reflected in the other great Calvinist leader (Church of England clergyman though he was), George Whitefield. To that emphasis on the new birth, the Wesleys added their concern with Christian “perfection,” a heritage from the early Fathers, pre-Reformation spirituality and the “holy living” school of Jeremy Taylor and George Herbert among the Anglican Arminians.

What made all of that rather “narrow” was its focus on the justification, regeneration, sanctification, and eternal destiny of *the individual*. That focus arose from Luther’s deep (and legitimate) concern with his own justification. But it meant that in the shape of Protestant theology revealed in the great Reformation confessions, the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology were reduced to two doctrines among many others. In Protestant thinking, they no longer gave focus and shape to the whole of Christian theology as they did in the age of the Fathers and the creeds. In the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, for example, there are certainly five articles on the doctrines of God and Christ, two on Scripture, one on the creeds, and one on the atonement. But there are thirty on the individual Christian and the Church. It would not be unfair to say as a broad generalization that Protestant theology, whether Lutheran or Anglican, Calvinist or Arminian, magisterial or

Anabaptist, largely took the doctrine of the Triune God for granted. It is true that they were loyal to the creeds (the Anabaptists not perhaps so clearly). It is also true that Christology was debated between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, but little of that percolated across the English Channel to Great Britain. The real focus of interest was either the doctrine of the Church (particularly Church government and the sacraments) or the salvation of the *individual*. It is worth noting that the Reformation was largely contemporary with the Renaissance: Protestantism was a child of the era of modernity with its focus on the *individual*.

Wesley cannot be blamed for living in his own century, and several things can be said here in his favour. Elmer Colyer has argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is the “deep structure” of his theology, and it can be argued that there is a Trinitarian structure to the organization of the body of his *Sermons*.⁹ It is certainly true to say that, if we take Methodist worship into account as shaped by the hymns of Charles Wesley, Methodism was a living tradition of Trinitarian faith and piety.¹⁰ It can also be shown that from 1738, following his encounter with the Moravians and his clear testimony to trusting in “Christ alone” at the famous meeting in Aldersgate Street, Wesley’s theology was focused on the gospel of Christ.¹¹ But all that being said, it remains true that neither Wesley nor any of his contemporaries demonstrate that clear and explicit integration of Christian theology as a whole into that Christocentric, Trinitarian shape which is so clearly exemplified in the theology of T. F. Torrance.

Of course, Torrance was standing on the shoulders of giants. Schleiermacher, for all his inverted Pietism, demonstrated a new methodology of integrated,

⁹ See T. A. Noble, “John Wesley as a Theologian: An Introduction,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 82 (2010), 238-57. See also Elmer Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley’s Theology*, (Nashville: New Room Books, 2018).

¹⁰ See T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 203-09; Jason E. Vickers, “‘And We the Life of God Shall Know’: Incarnation and the Trinity in Charles Wesley’s Hymns,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 90 (2008), 329-44; Geoffrey Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” *The Drew Gateway*, 59.2 (1990), 26-43, and “Trinitarian Theology and Wesleyan Holiness,” in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, edited by S.T. Kimborough, (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s, 2002), 59-80.

¹¹ See Isaac Hopper, “‘Christ Alone for Salvation’: The Role of Christ and His Work in John Wesley’s Theology,” University of Manchester PhD thesis, 2016.

comprehensive theological thinking. That left behind the scholastic model in which doctrines were strung out in distinct, separate articles or *foci* like washing on a line (as R. P. C. Hanson vividly expressed it).¹² Hegel had introduced the notion of a dynamic Trinity as a *Vorstellung* (illustration) of his panentheistic philosophy. But Barth had rejected the whole “Neo-Protestant” theology of the nineteenth century.¹³ It is true that he followed Schleiermacher in presenting an integrated comprehensive theology, but it began not with “religion” but with God’s self-revelation in Christ. And in contrast to Hegelian Idealism, he embraced Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference,” further amazing the theologians of his day by launching his *Church Dogmatics* with a treatise on the Trinity.

It was following those theological revolutions, and particularly as the heir to Barth’s turning of the tide, that Torrance claimed a thoroughly scientific methodology for Christian Dogmatics in his first *magnum opus*, *Theological Science*.¹⁴ His integration of the doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement, long clearly expounded in his posthumously published Edinburgh lectures,¹⁵ underlay many of his publications and was clearly evident in *The Mediation of Christ*.¹⁶ But the full shape of his Trinitarian theology became evident in *The Trinitarian Faith* and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*.¹⁷ What is clear is that, while his theology had a “scientific” methodology in the way that was understood by Michael Polanyi and exemplified by Clerk Maxwell and Einstein, it was a contemporary version of the theology of the great Greek Fathers, particularly Athanasius and Cyril.

¹² R. P. C. Hanson, *The Attractiveness of God: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1973), 47.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM, 1972).

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1969).

¹⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 2008; Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

¹⁷ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

Unlike Wesley, therefore, Torrance was educated within a tradition which valued dogmatic theology and which had come to see it in a richer, fuller Trinitarian form. Like Wesley, he was a keen student of the Fathers, but even within that similarity we see a profound difference. Wesley was interested in the ante-Nicene Fathers as exemplars of holy living. He paid comparatively little attention to the Nicene Fathers, Athanasius and the Cappadocians, who defended the deity of Christ and formulated the church doctrine of the Trinity, or to Cyril of Alexandria, who carried on the Alexandrian tradition of basing Christian sanctification not only in the death of Christ, but in his incarnation.¹⁸ Wesley defended the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ against the Deists, and without question these were the “deep structure” of his theology. It is also true that he regarded the atonement as (in George Cell’s words) the “burning focus of faith.”¹⁹ But he did not integrate incarnation and atonement and was not Christocentric in the way that Torrance was. He did not integrate his doctrine of the Christian life into the Christocentric, Trinitarian shape of theology in the way that Torrance did. That is not a criticism, for Wesley lived in the eighteenth century, Torrance in the twentieth.

One point where there is considerable agreement between them was in their conviction that “scholastic Federal Calvinism,” with its series of eternal decrees and its doctrines of predestination and limited atonement, was a distortion of the faith of the Reformation. They both regarded it as an unbiblical, rationalistic system, which seriously distorted the doctrine of God and had devastating pastoral consequences. Wesley employed the resources of the Arminian tradition to confront it, and yet that still remained within an *individualistic* way of thinking. Torrance presented a deeper critique which focused not on the election of the individual, but on election in Christ.

Across two centuries then from the eighteenth to the twentieth, we have much to learn from the comparisons and contrasts between these two Christian thinkers, both theologians, but in different ways. This broad sketch may serve to

¹⁸ See Ted Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). See particularly the revealing table in Appendix 2.

¹⁹ Cell, *Rediscovery*, 297.

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set the scene for the following papers which examine the comparisons and contrasts in greater depth.

ALL OF HIM FOR ALL OF US:

Christ's Person and Offices in John Wesley and T. F. Torrance

E. Jerome Van Kuiken, PhD

**Assoc. Prof. of Ministry and Christian Thought
Oklahoma Wesleyan University**

jvankuiken@okwu.edu

Abstract: *T. F. Torrance's theology has found a warm reception from some theologians in the Wesleyan tradition. This essay examines the similarities and differences in Torrance's and John Wesley's Christologies, specifically concerning the person of Christ and his munus triplex. After sketching the two men's distinctive missions as a background, the essay first considers Wesley's and Torrance's shared commitment to the orthodox dogma of Christ's person and defends both of them against allegations of heterodox tendencies. Secondly, the essay explores convergences and complementary emphases in Wesley's and Torrance's handling of Christ's threefold office, concluding with ways that Wesleyanism can repay its debt of enrichment by Torrance's theology.*

My introduction to T. F. Torrance came at a Wesleyan seminary. My Methodist theology professor, Bill Ury, enthusiastically assigned *The Mediation of Christ*. Given my low-church evangelical Wesleyan background, the book both bothered and beguiled me. I decided that if ever I pursued a doctorate, I would study Torrance's Christology. Meanwhile, Methodist scholar Elmer Colyer published *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, which I eagerly snatched up. Eventually the opportunity arose for postgraduate research under former Torrance student and Nazarene theologian (and now president of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship) T. A. Noble, at whose invitation Torrance had delivered the lectures published as *The Mediation of*

Christ. The circle was complete. This essay springs from and seeks to further the interaction between Wesleyan and Torrancean theology that has shaped me.

Two Men, Two Ministries

If Great Britain were a human body, Scotland would be its head and England its torso and limbs. This geographical analogy fits the respective missions of T. F. Torrance and John Wesley. Torrance's passion was the conversion of the *mind* — its repentant restructuring in light of Christian truth.¹ He made a career at New College, Edinburgh, teaching and writing toward that end. At a lower latitude, Wesley famously felt his *heart* strangely warmed through faith in Christ as Savior. He spent the rest of his life circulating throughout England (with occasional forays elsewhere) fostering revival and practical discipleship, especially among the early Industrial Revolution's working class. Torrance's calling required him to speak the dialect of academic theological discourse (with a Scottish Reformed accent), while Wesley forsook the life of an Oxford don in order to speak "plain truth for plain people"² in his Anglican environs. Their differences should not be overdrawn: Torrance had pastoral experience and ethical concerns;³ Wesley promoted education and engaged in informed theological dispute.⁴ Both men also had wide-ranging intellects and shared interests in Christian antiquity and the scientific advances of

¹ See, e.g., the epilogue to Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 437-47.

² John Wesley, Preface 2-4 to *Sermons on Several Occasions*, 1st series, The Works of John Wesley, 3rd ed. (hereafter WJW) (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 5:1-2 (quote from 2). This essay generally cites easily-accessible rather than critical editions of Wesley's writings.

³ On Torrance's experience as a parish minister and army chaplain, see Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (London: T&T Clark, 1999), 60-83; on Torrance's ethical concerns, see Todd Speidell, *Fully Human in Christ: The Incarnation as the End of Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

⁴ On Wesley's promotion of education (of both children and adults), see Herbert W. Byrne, *John Wesley and Learning* (Salem, OH: Schmull, 1997), 187-204; on Wesley's debates over Calvinism, see Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Wilmore, KY: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987); for Wesley's most extensive theological treatise, written against a denier of the doctrine of original sin, see *The Doctrine of Original Sin, according to Scripture, Reason, and Experience*, WJW 9:191-464.

their times.⁵ Still, recalling the difference between their ministries will curb false expectations as we compare their Christologies. We shall look first at their beliefs about the *person* of Christ, then see how those beliefs impact their views of the *work* of Christ via the doctrine of his threefold office (*munus triplex*).

A Common Commitment to Creedal Christology

For the sake of ecumenical rapprochement and the renewal of orthodoxy, Torrance expended much effort expounding the dogmatic tradition concerning the person of Christ, especially as distilled in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The *homoousion* was never far from his thoughts!⁶ Wesley, on the other hand, spent most of his time setting forth the offices and benefits of Christ, leaving his creedal orthodoxy largely implicit. In a landmark study of Wesley's Christology, written under Torrance's *Doktorvater* Karl Barth, Methodist theologian John Deschner notes that Wesley's doctrine of Christ was "absolutely fundamental in his theology, but [one] which he did not emphasize when he preached at street corners."⁷

Wesley's deeply-held commitment to orthodox Christology does surface on occasion. In order to make the cream of classic Christian literature easily and inexpensively available to the common people of England, Wesley edited a thirty-volume series entitled *A Christian Library*. Volume Fourteen includes the

⁵ On Torrance and patristics, see Jason Robert Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014); on Torrance and science, McGrath, *T. F. Torrance*, 195-236. Wesley's engagement with the (especially Eastern) church fathers, while real, has been exaggerated by some Wesley scholars. For balanced surveys, see Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991); Richard P. Heitzenrater, "John Wesley's Reading of and References to the Early Church Fathers" in S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 25-32. For a sample of Wesley's interest in science, see his two-volume *Compendium of Natural Philosophy* at wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-compendium-of-natural-philosophy/.

⁶ Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian & Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 70-82; Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, Great Theologians Series (Farnham, UK: Routledge, 2009), 74: "Even the most cursory exploration of Torrance's theology will disclose the centrality of the *homoousion* for understanding who Jesus is."

⁷ John Deschner, *Wesley's Christology: An Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), xii.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, abridged to exclude material with which Wesley took exception (such as the unconditional election of some and reprobation of others).⁸ Wesley's redacted catechism teaches that Christ, "being the eternal Son of GOD, became man, and so was, and continued to be, God and man, in two distinct natures and one Person, for ever" (Question 18). He "became man, by taking to himself a true body, and a reasonable soul . . . yet without sin" (Question 19) and so fulfills the threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King (Questions 20-23).⁹ Likewise, Wesley's irenic *Letter to a Roman Catholic* sets out beliefs held by both Catholics and Methodists. Such common beliefs include Christ's *munus triplex*, his being "God of God, very God of very God" (note the Nicene language), and his hypostatic union with a human nature consisting of body and soul.¹⁰ Wesley's *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* are his revision of the King James Version accompanied by concise commentary in the format of one of our contemporary study Bibles.¹¹ The *Notes*, which became a Methodist doctrinal standard, make such orthodox comments as that Christ shares "unity of essence" with the Father while being "a true man" (Jn. 1:1);¹² that Scripture's wording excludes both Sabellianism and Arianism (Jn. 10:30); that Christ's humanity is "personally united" to his divine nature (Eph. 1:4); and that his human nature included body, soul, and all sinless weaknesses (Jn. 1:14; Heb. 2:14; 5:15). Lastly, when Wesley abbreviated the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England as an additional doctrinal standard for American Methodism, he retained Article Two's ecumenical confession that "the very and eternal God, of one substance with the

⁸ On Wesley's alterations to the Westminster Shorter Catechism and their significance, see Herbert McGonigle, "Wesley's Revision of the Shorter Catechism," www.usacanadaregion.org/sites/usacanadaregion.org/files/Roots/Resources/Weleys-Revision-of-the-Shorter-Catechism.pdf [sic].

⁹ Available at wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-christian-library/a-christian-library-volume-14/the-assemblys-shorter-catechism/.

¹⁰ WJW 10:81.

¹¹ For a survey of its characteristics (including formatting and translation value), see Robin Scroggs, "John Wesley as Biblical Scholar," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 28.4 (Oct. 1960): 415-22.

¹² John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*; cited in-text by Scripture reference. This and all subsequent citations from Wesley's *Notes* may be accessed at wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-new-testament-john-wesleys-translation/.

Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man."¹³

Wesley on Christ's Humanity: A Hair's Breadth from Heresy?

Despite these signs of formal assent to creedal orthodoxy, Deschner and other Wesley scholars have charged him with a tendency toward monophysitism, Apollinarianism, or even docetism, an emphasis on Christ's full deity at the expense of his full humanity.¹⁴ Wesley's single alteration to Article Two is taken as symptomatic: the original Anglican article says that Christ took his humanity "in the womb of the blessed Virgin, *of her substance*." Wesley omits those last three words. Similarly, when Wesley abridged the Apostolic Fathers for the first volume of *A Christian Library*, he deleted several of Ignatius of Antioch's references to Christ's birth from David's seed. Wesley's *Notes* contain further suspicious material: for instance, he ascribes Christ's amazement (Mk. 6:6), ignorance of the date of the Parousia (Mk. 13:32), and boyhood growth in wisdom (Lk. 2:40, 52) strictly to his humanity, not to his deity. At Lazarus' tomb (Jn. 11:33-35), Wesley's Jesus experiences emotion only voluntarily and weeps for others' grief and mortality rather than for any personal loss. Most damningly of all, Wesley opines that Christ occasionally escaped his enemies by becoming invisible (Lk. 4:30; Jn. 8:59)!

There is one problem with all this evidence: it is decontextualized. More specifically, it has been torn from the threefold matrix of Wesley's complete corpus, the tradition of exegesis to which he was heir, and the intellectual climate in which he ministered. Thus Wesley's abridgment of Article Two must be seen in light of his intention that the Articles of Religion would not stand alone as the standard of Methodist doctrine; rather, they were to function alongside his sermons and

¹³ Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 115-48 (p. 131 covers Article Two).

¹⁴ E.g. Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 24-28, 31; Scroggs, "John Wesley as Biblical Scholar," 420-21; Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*, 80-81; for a more complete survey, see Richard M. Riss, "John Wesley's Christology in Recent Literature," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45.1 (Spring 2010): 108-43.

Notes.¹⁵ In his sermon “The End of Christ’s Coming,” he combines Galatians 4:4 and Luke 1:35 to affirm that the incarnate Christ was “‘made of a woman,’ by the power of the Highest overshadowing her.”¹⁶ The *Notes* directly teach that Jesus took his humanity “of the substance” of Mary (Gal. 4:4). Likewise, in Volume One of *A Christian Library*, Wesley merely avoids redundancy by omitting several of Ignatius’ later references to Christ’s lineage: Ignatius’ first and last references remain, unedited and explicit in orthodoxy.¹⁷ In terms of the history of exegesis, Wesley’s *Notes* echo explanations of Jesus’ amazement, ignorance, development, and emotions by the very church fathers who established orthodox Christology.¹⁸ Wesley’s milieu also explains his editorial and exegetical emphases. Unlike the era of the Apostolic Fathers, the unorthodoxies stirring in England were not Gnosticism but Arianism, Socinianism, and Deism. Wesley could take for granted a universal belief in Jesus’ humanity.¹⁹ What was doubted was his deity — and here Wesley leapt to the defense.²⁰

All three contexts converge in Wesley’s suggestion — and it is only a suggestion — that Christ turned invisible once or twice when threatened with premature execution. Deschner thinks that in these cases “Jesus’ human nature seems to evaporate” and Robin Scroggs takes Wesley to mean that, once invisible to his enemies, Christ “passed through them as if there had been no physical obstacle.”²¹ Such statements betray that Deschner and Scroggs equate invisibility

¹⁵ Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology*, x, 7-8; and Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, especially ch. 6.

¹⁶ WJW 6:273.

¹⁷ Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 7, 18; *Smyrn.* 1 (see also Polycarp, *Phil.* 6-7) at wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-christian-library/a-christian-library-volume-1/volume-1-the-epistles-of-the-apostolical-fathers-st-clement-st-ignatius-st-polycarp-the-martyrdoms-of-st-ignatius-and-st-polycarp/.

¹⁸ See the comments for each of the above-cited verses in Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014).

¹⁹ Jason E. Vickers, “Christology” in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 555-56.

²⁰ Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology*, 15-18; Vickers, “Christology,” 556; Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity*, 76-77.

²¹ Deschner, *Wesley’s Christology*, 31; Scroggs, “John Wesley as Biblical Scholar,” 420.

with insubstantiality. But this is a false equation. Elsewhere in his *Notes*, Wesley's comments on Christ's Easter disappearance at Emmaus (Luke 24:31) and appearance in a locked room in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36) indicate that Wesley thought of Christ as physically exiting and entering without being seen. In short, Christ's invisibility meant miraculous concealment, not dematerialization. Wesley's contemporaries and near-contemporaries Matthew Poole, Matthew Henry, and John Gill all suggest in their comments on John 8:59 that Christ made himself invisible, perhaps by using a concealing mist.²² Interest in unseen yet physical things and persons was widespread during the lifetimes of Poole, Henry, Gill, and Wesley: pioneer scientist Robert Boyle experimented with air and invisible ink; he and his peers formed a network called "the Invisible College"; and Rosicrucians in France became known as "the Invisibles" due to their reputed skills in self-concealment.²³ However plausible or not one finds Wesley's suggestion, it contains no docetic denial of Christ's embodied, material humanity.²⁴

Deschner draws a line from Wesley's semi-monophysitism to his diminution of the significance of Christ's active obedience: just as Christ's divine nature dwarfs his human nature, so the divine wrath which he passively bore on Calvary overshadows the human obedience which he displayed in active ministry.²⁵ Deschner's analogy feels forced — is Christ's human obedience truly less prominent

²² Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 3:325, also at biblehub.com/commentaries/poole/john/8.htm; Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 5:1008, also at www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete/john/8.html; John Gill, *Gill's Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 5:687-88, also at www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/john-8-59.html. Cf. Wesley's *Notes* on Lk. 24:31, in which Wesley writes that a "supernatural cloud" prevented the disciples on the road to Emmaus from recognizing Jesus.

²³ Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 2011), esp. 36-37, 57; Philip Ball, *Invisible: The Dangerous Allure of the Unseen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 34.

²⁴ Although arrived at independently, my conclusions corroborate those of David A. Graham, "The Chalcedonian Logic of John Wesley's Christology," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20.1 (2018): 84-103; also at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ijst.12228>.

²⁵ Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 152-69, esp. 167.

in his crucifixion than in his ministry? — and, as we have seen, his case against Wesley's Christology falls apart. Still, he is right to question whether Wesley has shortchanged Christ's active righteousness. We shall return to this issue later in relation to the *munus triplex* and look to Torrance for a solution. Now, however, we must examine whether Torrance himself avoids Christological error.

Torrance on Christ's Humanity: An Unorthodox Approach?

Wesley is not alone in falling under suspicion of harboring a heterodox Christology. Critics have imagined Apollinarianism in Torrance's early Auburn lectures and Nestorianism in his career-long insistence that Christ assumed our fallen, alienated human nature. I have made the case elsewhere that these accusations arise from misreading Torrance.²⁶ To summarize: at Auburn, Torrance does not claim that Christ lacked a human will; rather, his claim is that Christ's conception was not due to autonomous human will (i.e., Joseph's or Mary's initiative). Furthermore, Torrance's denial of human "personality" to Christ is simply an affirmation of the orthodox doctrine of *anhypostasia*. Young Torrance was no Apollinarian. Nor was he a Nestorian later in life: his references to Christ's contention with our sinful nature do not mean that Christ's own human mind and will operated independently of and in hostility to his divine mind and will. The hostility which he battled came from the rest of humanity. So run my previously-published arguments. In what follows, I exorcize a specter of heresy left unaddressed in my earlier work: Bruce McCormack's charge that the mature Torrance exhibits "Apollinarian tendencies."

McCormack claims that the essence of Apollinarianism is not its denial of a human mind to Christ but its reduction of his humanity to "a passive instrument in the hands of the Logos" such that "the mind and will that are proper to Christ's human nature do not cooperate fully and freely in every work of the God-human." This Apollinarian spirit has continued to haunt the Church ever since Chalcedon, and Torrance is not free from it, despite his emphasis on the Son's assumption of a

²⁶ E. Jerome Van Kuiken, *Christ's Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 32, 35-40, 161-62.

human mind.²⁷ The examples cited are a pair of passages from *The Trinitarian Faith* in which, according to McCormack, “the grammatical subject ‘Christ’ is equated, not with the God-human in his divine-human unity, but with the deity in him alone. . . . God the Son is seen as doing something in and to his human nature.” To find the flaw in McCormack’s interpretation, it is necessary to requote from the passages which he quotes:

[T]he Lord transferred to Himself fallen Adamic humanity . . . However, far from sinning in it himself or being contaminated by what he appropriated from us, Christ triumphed over the forces of evil entrenched in our human existence, bringing his own holiness, his own perfect obedience to bear upon it in such a way as to condemn sin in the flesh and deliver us from its power (*Trinitarian Faith*, 161).

and

Through his penetration of the perverted structures of human existence, he reversed the process of corruption and more than made good what had been destroyed, for he has now anchored human nature in His own crucified and risen being (*ibid.*, 182-83).²⁸

In these quotes, the grammatical subject “the Lord” refers to the divine Son *simpliciter* only in the very first line, which speaks of his initiating the Incarnation. Thereafter the grammatical subject is always the divine-human Christ, to whom may be attributed such distinctively human acts as (hypothetical) “sinning,” “perfect obedience,” and being “crucified and risen.” This does not entail a change of subject but the acquisition by the same subject of new, human predicates. As Torrance had written only a few pages earlier, “it is an act of God as man, translated into human

²⁷ Bruce L. McCormack, “The Ontological Presuppositions of Barth’s Doctrine of the Atonement,” in Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III, eds., *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 352–53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 352n9.

actuality and made to issue out of the depths of man's being and life toward God."²⁹ Indeed, when *Trinitarian Faith* first introduces Apollinarianism as a heresy, Torrance stresses "the *human agency* of the incarnate Son within the essential conditions of actual historical human existence."³⁰ Rather than being passive, then, Christ's human mind and will are intensely active in the process of redemption. In becoming incarnate, the divine Logos assumed an ignorant human mind, and with that mind he "learned obedience" (Heb. 5:8) himself and enlightened the minds of others with his saving teachings. With his human will, he "shared all our experiences, overcoming our disobedience through his obedience and sanctifying every stage of human life" vicariously, for our sakes, so that through his obedience and self-sanctification we might cease to be rebellious and instead become sanctified.³¹

Recognition of the vicarious or representative-substitutionary character of Christ's activity is crucial in order to avoid misreading Torrance. When he speaks of Christ's acting upon "human existence," "the flesh," and "human nature" (as in McCormack's quotes), Torrance is not describing a purely divine agent acting upon his own passive, objectified humanity. On the contrary, he is describing a divine-human agent acting not only upon his own concrete humanity but also, through it, upon all humankind.³² As Torrance puts it, there is a "blessed exchange . . . between the *divine-human* life of Jesus *and mankind* [which] has the effect of finalising and sealing the ontological relations between every man and Jesus Christ."³³ Nor does this mean that only Christ's humanity is active while the rest of humanity is passive. To see how this is not the case, we must return to McCormack's critique.

²⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 158-59; here, as throughout Torrance's corpus, "man" is used inclusively.

³⁰ Ibid., 151 (italics his).

³¹ Ibid., 164-67, 186-88 (quotation from 167). And Torrance, *Atonement*, 69-70, 160-63, 437-47.

³² Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 146-90; and *Atonement*, 162.

³³ Ibid., 182 (italics mine); this sentence is only one sentence removed from the start of McCormack's second Torrance quote and sets the stage for properly interpreting it.

McCormack urges that in order for Christ's human mind and will to be fully, freely active his miracles and sinless life must be the result not of "the direct influence of the Logos within" but of "unbroken dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit."³⁴ Such language suggests a zero-sum relationship between Son and Spirit, a notion that Torrance rejected.³⁵ He would concur, though, that the Spirit frees Christ's humanity to be itself in relation to his divinity. As Torrance writes of the Holy Spirit in *The Trinitarian Faith*,

Through him the eternal Son became man without overriding or diminishing the reality of the human person . . . but on the contrary gave it real subsistence in himself Far from the presence of the Deity of the Son overwhelming or displacing the rational human person in Jesus, his human mind and human soul, the exact opposite took place. And so it must be said that no human being has such a full and rich personal human nature as Jesus.

But Torrance teaches that what is uniquely true in Christ's case applies analogously to the rest of us: "Far from crushing our creaturely nature or damaging our personal existence, the indwelling presence of God through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit has the effect of healing and restoring and deepening human personal being."³⁶ Divine agency enables rather than cripples human agency. Torrance elsewhere calls this the "logic of grace": "all of grace" means "all of us," not "none of us."³⁷ We will revisit this crucial point later, as it provides common ground with Wesley.

³⁴ McCormack, "Ontological Presuppositions," 353.

³⁵ See not only his discussion of the undivided trinitarian relations in *Trinitarian Faith* ch. 6 but also, in his Auburn Lectures, his explicit criticism of Edward Irving for making the same bifurcation that McCormack does: Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 121-22.

³⁶ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 230.

³⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, "The Atonement. The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order," in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed., *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 230; and Colyer, *How to Read*, 117-23; Myk Habets, "The Doctrine of Election in Evangelical Calvinism: T. F. Torrance as a Case Study," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73.3-4 (2008): 340-42, 345-52. Doi: 10.1177/0021140008095442.

For now, suffice it to draw two conclusions. First, as with Wesley, so with Torrance: the charge of heterodox Christology remains unsustained. Second, Torrance's profound insights into the ontological implications of the Incarnation go well beyond Wesley's simple affirmations of classical orthodoxy. These insights, coming as they do from a Reformed theologian, bear out a dictum by Deschner: "Ontological depth is among the things that Wesleyan christology . . . can learn from participation in the ecumenical christological discussion."³⁸ As we turn from Christ's person to his offices, we shall see how Torrance's ontological depth can supply Wesley's soteriology with a firm foundation.

A Common Commitment to the Threefold Office

Wesley and Torrance agree that the one Christ in two natures holds three offices. Here both men reflect the influence of John Calvin, who featured the *munus triplex* in his Christology.³⁹ As we have seen above, Wesley's abridgment of the Westminster Shorter Catechism and his *Letter to a Roman Catholic* both affirm the *munus triplex*, and in his other writings as well he refers to it frequently as a synopsis of Christ's saving work.⁴⁰ Torrance's Edinburgh lectures relate his own soteriology to the threefold office,⁴¹ making it a useful paradigm for comparing his teaching with Wesley's. Both of them make room in Christ's offices for the Reformation concerns with active and passive obedience, justification, and sanctification. Admittedly, the *munus triplex* is a somewhat stylized or even artificial soteriological framework.⁴² This very artificiality gives it a certain flexibility in terms

³⁸ Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, xix.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.15. Calvin's influence on Wesley was mediated through the Church of England: see David Rainey, "John Wesley's Doctrine of Salvation in Relation to His Doctrine of God" (PhD thesis, University of London, 2006), 41.

⁴⁰ Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 73-74, 203-11.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 58-62, 265.

⁴² Adam J. Johnson, "The Servant Lord: A Word of Caution Regarding the *munus triplex* in Karl Barth's Theology and the Church Today," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65.2 (2012): 159-73; and Andrew Purves, *Exploring Christology & Atonement: Conversations with John McLeod Campbell, H. R. Mackintosh, T. F. Torrance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 208n27, who finds Torrance's correlations of Hebrew terms for redemption with the *munus triplex* and incarnational, active, and passive obedience "a bit forced; it is too neatly drawn"; and Torrance's own comments on the *munus triplex* in *Atonement*, 58-59.

of categorizing content, so that it is unsurprising to find differences as well as overlaps in the material that Wesley and Torrance assign to each office. These differences in distribution, as well as the two theologians' differing personal interests, also mean that each of them sees a different office as foundational to the other two. The following diagram sketches these overlaps and differences:⁴³

Office	Wesley	Torrance
Prophet	Christ's active obedience; sanctification	Assumption of sinful flesh (w/ original sin); sanctification (foundational office)
King	Impartation of the Spirit; sanctification	Christ's active obedience; impartation of the Spirit; justification
Priest	Christ's passive obedience; justification (foundational office)	Christ's passive obedience; justification

As a young man, Wesley had labored long under the faulty notion that one must become saintly enough before being declared righteous by God. At last he grasped the gospel of the justification of sinners *sola fide*, resulting in his pivotal experience at Aldersgate of a heart strangely warmed. As a result, for Wesley Christ's priesthood is his basic office because our sanctification springs from our justification rather than the reverse.⁴⁴ While Wesley concentrates on the theology of Christian experience, Torrance is more concerned with theological ontology. Before the eternal Son could act or suffer humanly, he had to become human, and Torrance associates this assumption of human nature with the prophetic office via John 1:14's "The Word became flesh." Thus Christ's other two offices flow from his

⁴³ The diagram combines the sequencing and content of Wesley's *munus triplex* from Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, chs. 3-6 (pp. 74-83 give Deschner's rationale for his sequencing) with Torrance's correlations in *Atonement*, 58-60 and his content on 106-108, 115-16 and in Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 80-81.

⁴⁴ Isaac Hopper, "'Christ Alone for Salvation': The Role of Christ and His Work in John Wesley's Theology" (PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2017); Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 74, 76.

being as Prophet.⁴⁵ In addition, Torrance wishes to nail our forensic justification and reception of the Spirit to a real condition of righteousness and holiness — not as found in ourselves but in Christ. Thus the prophetic office is primary because God has not just pardoned our sinful acts or superficially pasted the Spirit onto us but has reached to the roots of our sinful being and healed it in the self-sanctification of Christ.⁴⁶ In what follows, we will compare Wesley's and Torrance's treatments of each office in more detail.

Christ the Prophet

Wesley and Torrance concur that Christ's prophetic teaching ministry was integral to his redemptive mission. Both of them describe him as enlightening our sin-darkened minds and as doing so not simply through verbal instruction but through incarnation.⁴⁷ Wesley's *Notes* affirm that the Son of God assumed "our miserable nature, with all its innocent infirmities" (Jn. 1:14; Heb. 2:14, 5:15) and so experienced weariness (Mt. 8:18, 27:32; Jn. 4:6), deep sorrow and terror (Mt. 26:37, 39, 41; Mk. 14:33; Heb. 5:7), and physical pain (Mt. 27:34, 46), yet was wholly without sin. As Wesley preaches in "The End of Christ's Coming," Jesus was "the only one born of a woman 'who knew no sin,' who, from his birth to his death, did 'all things well;' doing continually 'not his own will, but the will of Him that sent him.'"⁴⁸ In this way he teaches by setting an example of the holy life to which we are called. Wesley was greatly shaped by the then-popular "holy living" school (embodied in the writings of Thomas à Kempis, Henry Scougal, Jeremy Taylor, and William Law), which described the authentic Christian life in terms of the "imitation of Christ" (*imitatio Christi*). Such imitation included not only outward conduct but, more fundamentally, inward character, with virtues like humility and gentleness constellating around a singlehearted intention to glorify God in everything.⁴⁹ This

⁴⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, 59-60; and *ibid.*, *Incarnation*, 64.

⁴⁶ Torrance, *Atonement*, 53-54, 125-34, 328.

⁴⁷ Wesley's *Notes* on Mt. 1:16; Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 186-88; *ibid.*, *Atonement*, 437-47.

⁴⁸ WJW 6:273-74.

⁴⁹ Geordan Hammond, "John Wesley and 'Imitating' Christ," *Wesley Theological Journal* 45.1 (2010): 197-212.

was the quality of Christian existence that Wesley and his Methodists pursued as a this-worldly holy possibility for believers. Wesley used a variety of biblical phrases to speak of this holy possibility, among them “entire sanctification” (drawn from 1 Thess. 5:23), “perfect love” (1 Jn. 4:17-18; and Mt. 5:43-48), and “Christian perfection” (a far too easily misconstrued term based on the King James Version’s translations of, e.g., Job 1:1; 1 Kings 15:14; 1 Cor. 2:6; Phil. 3:15; Heb. 5:13–6:1).⁵⁰ But two of his phrases suggest his debt to the *imitatio Christi* tradition: to have “the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:5) and to “walk as he walked” (1 Jn. 2:16).⁵¹ To that end, Wesley’s *Notes* present Jesus as a role model in his active obedience in meeting temptations (Mt. 4:1; Mk. 1:12), demonstrating virtues (Mk. 3:5; 9:39; Lk. 7:36, 13:32; 1 Pet. 2:22–23), and hallowing human development by his progress from infancy to adulthood (Lk. 2:40, 43, 52).⁵²

Torrance goes beyond Wesley in his view of the educative impact of the Incarnation. Thanks to McCormack’s quotes, we already have sampled Torrance’s pervasive insistence that Christ assumed fallen human nature and penetrated into the depths of our depravity. Such graphic language signals a richer conception than Wesley’s of the connection between incarnation and sanctification. Torrance sees Christ’s earthly life not simply as an exemplar of holy living to emulate but as actually healing human nature within himself, renewing our alienated mind into “the mind of Christ.” Torrance supports this view exegetically. When Luke 2:52 says the boy Jesus “increased” in wisdom, Torrance detects in the original meaning of the Greek word *prokopto*, “to beat out with blows,” the implication that Jesus advanced

⁵⁰ Note well: Wesley did not simplistically read the KJV’s term “perfection” and anachronistically project a current popular construal of perfection onto the word. Quite the opposite: Wesley knew the original biblical languages and, while keeping the KJV’s term, waged a decades-long struggle to grasp and communicate the biblical content behind it. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, WJW 11:366-446, is a survey of this struggle.

⁵¹ For Wesley’s most extensive exposition of this doctrine, including its biblical phraseology, see his *Plain Account*.

⁵² Wesley was familiar with Irenaeus: see Wesley’s *Letter to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton*, WJW 10:21-22, 33-40, 78-79. Wesley’s *Note* on Lk. 2:43 both borrows from Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* 2.22.4-6 and rejects its fancy that Christ lived to old age.

in wisdom despite the resistance of fallen human ignorance.⁵³ The “flesh” assumed by the Word (Jn. 1:14) refers to human nature in its fallen state. When Romans 8:3 says that Christ came “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” this means not a mere similitude to sinful flesh but a concrete instantiation of it. As the Apostle Paul puts it elsewhere, “For he [God] hath made him to be sin” (2 Cor. 5:21 KJV).⁵⁴ Wesley’s *Notes* on these verses are tamer. Young Jesus’ growth in wisdom has no agonistic quality about it (Lk. 2:40, 52). The term “flesh” in John 1:14 indicates a complete human nature, not a corrupt human nature. We have sinful flesh; what Christ has is a sinless resemblance to it (Rom. 8:3). Following the mature Augustine, Wesley translates 2 Cor. 5:21 as “*He made him a sin offering.*”⁵⁵

What would Wesley have thought of Torrance’s “ontological healing” theory of the Incarnation? When Torrance presented his view at a World Council of Churches meeting, premiere Wesley scholar and Methodist theologian Albert Outler protested, “Was humanity therefore fallen on purpose? Is humanity sinful in itself?”⁵⁶ Maybe Wesley himself would have asked the same questions. On the other hand, Wesley’s one-time mentor William Law later published a pair of works mediating the teachings of the Kabbalah-influenced mystic Jakob Boehme. In response, Wesley vigorously opposed a number of Law’s theosophical speculations and deviations from received orthodoxy. Yet Wesley never rebuked Law for repeatedly writing of Christ’s incarnation in language that anticipates Torrance, for instance:

He was made Man for our Salvation, that is, He took upon Him our fallen Nature, to bring it out of its evil crooked State If the Life of fallen Nature, which Christ had taken upon Him, was to be overcome

⁵³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 64, 106.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-64, 199, 255-56, and across Torrance’s corpus.

⁵⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus* 41.5-6; *ibid.*, *Enchiridion* 41. On the evolution of Augustine’s exegesis of this verse, see A. Bastiaensen, “Augustine’s Pauline Exegesis and Ambrosiaster,” in Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt, eds., *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 47-50.

⁵⁶ Faith and Order Commission Paper, No. 23, in *Minutes of the Working Committee, July 1956, Herrenalb, Germany, Commission on Faith and Order, World Council of Churches*, quoted in Harry Johnson, *The Humanity of the Saviour: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Human Nature of Christ in relation to Original Sin, with special reference to its Soteriological Significance* (London: Epworth, 1962), 172-73.

by Him, then every Kind of suffering and dying, that was a giving up, or departing from the Life of fallen Nature, was . . . necessary And therefore the Sufferings and Death of Christ were, in the Nature of the Thing, the only possible Way of his [sic] acting contrary to, and overcoming all the Evil that was in the fallen State of Man.⁵⁷

Arguments from silence are, of course, inherently weak. Perhaps Wesley found such language objectionable but chose to ignore it to focus on what he deemed to be Law's more egregious claims. Yet the tantalizing chance remains that Wesley was open to Law's early version of the view that Torrance later championed.

Christ the King

Taken in isolation, Wesley's account of sanctification as *imitatio Christi* could promote Pelagian self-effort. But Wesley complements Christ's exemplary prophetic office with his empowering regal office. As resurrected King, Christ subdues the evil in our hearts and conforms us to his image, progressively establishing his kingdom within us by means of his Spirit of grace.⁵⁸ Wesley's important sermon "On Working out our own Salvation"⁵⁹ sets this process beneath the banner of his trinitarian

⁵⁷ William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer and The Spirit of Love*, ed. Sidney Spencer (repr. Cambridge: James Clarke, 1969), 249 (italics original); and 35, 47, 190, 250. Wesley's expansive critique of Law's works appears in WJW 9:466-518. For analyses of Law's influence on and clashes with Wesley, see J. Brazier Green, *John Wesley and William Law* (London: Epworth, 1945); Eric W. Baker, *A Herald of the Evangelical Revival: A Critical Inquiry into the Relation of William Law to John Wesley and the Beginnings of Methodism* (London: Epworth, 1948). For Boehme's and Law's possible roles in the rise of the modern "fallenness" view in Christology, see Van Kuiken, *Christ's Humanity*, 9-11.

⁵⁸ Wesley, *Notes on Mt. 1:16*; his sermons "The Way to the Kingdom," "On Sin in Believers" (esp. 3.8), and "The Repentance of Believers" (esp. 3.4) in WJW 5:76-86, 144-70.

⁵⁹ WJW 6:506-513.

vision of divine and human agency in salvation, a vision that avoids false oppositions between monergism and synergism.⁶⁰ To this sermon we now turn.

Wesley's sermon text is Phil. 2:12-13, "Wherefore work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." He begins by noting the wider religious context of the Philippian letter: unlike the moral theism which formed the apex of pagan theologizing, the Gospel uniquely reveals the Son and Spirit of God and their roles in redemption. The verses immediately prior to Wesley's text describe the Son's *kenosis* in becoming human and dying for our sins. What Christ has done for us objectively, as described in the preceding text, the Spirit applies to us subjectively, as described in Wesley's text. Wesley takes its second clause first: the fact that all our good willing and doing results solely from God's working strips away all conceit or fantasy of human merit. "If we know and feel that the very first motion of good is from above, as well as the power which conducts it to the end; if it is God that not only infuses every good desire, but that accompanies and follows it, else it vanishes away; then it evidently follows that 'he who glorieth' must 'glory in the Lord.'"⁶¹ The Spirit's work begins with universal prevenient grace, the light that enlightens everyone who comes into the world (Jn. 1:9), without which fallen human nature would be devoid of conscience or any inclination toward God and the good. The Spirit's work continues by granting the graces of repentance and faith,

⁶⁰ These terms are slippery. Colyer, *How to Read*, 120-21, makes monergism mean God does all and we do naught, while synergism says God and we each do part. If so, monergists should be quietists and synergists, self-congratulatory, but typically neither is the case. Habets, "Doctrine of Election," 352-53, writing of Arminianism, defines and decries synergism as "meritorious" human contribution independent of grace *à la* Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. Yet he affirms a "non-synergistic co-operation" with grace that "make[s] salvation a reality in the present tense." Evangelical Arminians deny Habets' definition of synergism and concur with his affirmation of non-meritorious, grace-enabled cooperation with God that makes salvation present: see Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 17-19, 30-31, 80-81, 97-178, 200-220. And Paul's use of *synergeo/synergos* (1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Thess. 3:2; Mk. 16:20). For Wesley's synthesis of monergism and synergism (defined differently than by Colyer and Habets), see Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 11-15, 73-81, 155-68, 195-228, 288-92.

⁶¹ Wesley, "On Working out our own Salvation" 1.4, WJW 6:509.

justification and sanctification, progressively perfecting the mind of Christ in us.⁶² It is within this framework of the constant initiative by which “God worketh in you” that Paul urges his readers to “work out your own salvation.” Wesley quotes an imagined opponent who protests that “if we allow that God does all, what is there left for us to do?” He dismisses this question as “the reasoning of flesh and blood . . . For, first, God works; therefore you *can* work. Secondly, God works; therefore you *must* work.” That is, God’s grace makes us *able to respond*, hence *responsible*.⁶³ Wesley counsels his hearers to cooperate with the grace already at work within them rather than resisting it, thus courting God’s judgment.

What would Torrance make of this sermon? There is a clear resonance between Wesley’s central premise and Torrance’s “logic of grace.” Like Wesley, Torrance rejects fallen human oppositional logic: “All of grace” truly does implicate “all of us.”⁶⁴ As Torrance wrote early in his career, Christ “has come not to manipulate human beings, but to bring them to decision . . . He brings their whole beings under the sovereignty of His Word, [so] that He makes them *responsible*, and so for the first time truly personal.”⁶⁵ Confronted by Christ with that decision, one gains the ability to say “yes” or — absurdly — say “no” and so fall back under the very judgment that he bore in our stead.⁶⁶ Like Wesley’s, Torrance’s view of the relationship of divine and human agency succumbs to neither a monergism of irresistible grace nor a synergism of human autonomy. Torrance points to two precedents: the Virgin Birth and the hypostatic union. In the Virgin Birth, God rather than man (i.e. Joseph) takes the initiative in Jesus’ conception, yet without erasing Mary’s response of faith to God’s grace: “Let it be to me as you have said.” The Holy Spirit overshadows her to produce the hypostatic union, in which Christ’s

⁶² Wesley’s sermon “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” WJW 6:43-53.

⁶³ Wesley, “On Working out our own Salvation” 3.1-2, WJW 6:511 (italics his). And the title of Randy L. Maddox’s study of Wesley’s theology: *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

⁶⁴ See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), xii.

⁶⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, “Predestination in Christ,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 13 (1941): 112 (italics his).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

humanity has no existence independently of the Word, yet truly and concretely exists in union with the Word without any separation or fusion between the divine and human natures. So too “there is a kind of hypostatic union between Grace and faith, through the Holy Spirit,” between the divine and human decision in salvation. Electing grace gives the human response of faith a wholly dependent yet wholly real existence.⁶⁷ The two decisions coexist without separation or confusion. Torrance draws parallels between soteriological missteps and Christological heresies: those that separate the divine and human are Pelagianism (corresponding to adoptionism or ebionism) and synergism (corresponding to Nestorianism and Arianism), while those that confuse the two are determinism (corresponding to docetism) and the notion of “mystic infused grace” (corresponding to Eutychianism).⁶⁸

On the other hand, Torrance’s extensive grounding of divine and human agency in the Virgin Birth and hypostatic union underscores the difference of emphasis between Wesley and himself. For Wesley the accent falls on our subjective, sequenced, and fluctuating appropriation of salvation within the communion of the body of Christ.⁶⁹ Wesley’s default mood is the (Spirit-enabled) imperative while Torrance’s is the incarnational indicative of Christ’s objective once-for-all accomplishment. Thus Torrance ties Christ’s kingly office to his active obedience to a much greater degree than Wesley does. At his baptism, Christ has repented for us, believed for us, and received the Spirit for us. Throughout his

⁶⁷ Ibid., 130. Note the implicit *anhypostasia-enhypostasia* couplet. Torrance treats the Virgin Birth expansively as a paradigm for salvation in his Auburn and Edinburgh lectures: see his *Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 115-21; *ibid.*, *Incarnation*, 87-104.

⁶⁸ Torrance, “Predestination in Christ,” 129-31. Torrance’s complex, imperfectly coordinated sentence structure tangles these lines of correspondence. Wesley’s synergism and line that God “infuses every good desire” (see above) should not be confused with the Nestorian-like synergism and Eutychian-like “mystic infused grace” in Torrance’s typology. In these cases, common terminology does not equal common conceptuality. For critiques of Torrance’s typological uses of heresy, see Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*, 193 and E. Jerome Van Kuiken, “Convergence in the ‘Reformed’ Theologies of T. F. Torrance and Jacob Arminius” in Keith D. Stanglin, Mark G. Bilby, and Mark H. Mann, eds., *Reconsidering Arminius: Beyond the Reformed and Wesleyan Divide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 126.

⁶⁹ This last line is crucial: Wesley spurned any purely private pursuit of salvation. See Preface 3-5 to his and Charles Wesley’s *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, WJW 14:320-321. Part 2.4 of “On Working out our own Salvation” envisages working out one’s salvation within a sacramental, serving community.

earthly life, he has waged costly yet victorious warfare against the power of evil, thereby sanctifying the human mind and will. Triumphant resurrected and ascended to heaven, he has poured out his Spirit on all flesh. His active obedience is imputed to us so that we may genuinely participate in his righteousness. Once we grasp Christ's "total substitution" for us, Torrance is confident that we will gladly light our own small candles of repentance, faith, righteousness, and holiness from Christ's royal bonfire.⁷⁰

Christ the Priest

Wesley and Torrance share a broad field of concord regarding Christ's priestly office. Both teach that, for our justification, he has borne the wrath of God against sin so as to provide a full atonement for the sin of the whole world. Neither has any patience with the doctrine of limited atonement or the view of unconditional limited election that undergirds it.⁷¹ God's grace is as wide as it is deep. In Wesley's words, grace is "free in all" (owing nothing to human merit; the prevenient ground of all human goodness) and "free for all" (excluding no one).⁷² Or as Torrance puts it, grace is as extensive as it is intensive.⁷³

Once again, Torrance adds greater depth to Wesley's doctrines. First, Wesley's explanation of the atonement is largely a forensic, penal substitutionary account.⁷⁴ Torrance does not deny this perspective but sets it on an ontological basis: the reconciliation of divinity and humanity in the Word's hypostatic union with fallen flesh. Because the Word is the agent through whom all were made, his assumption of human nature has saving significance for all humankind; in this way

⁷⁰ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 114-26, 235-39; *ibid.*, *Atonement*, 265-71, 328; *ibid.*, *Mediation of Christ*, 81-86, 92-98. The term "total substitution" comes from Colyer, *How to Read*, 117 (de-italicized). See Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 154-67 on Wesley's reticence to preach the imputation of Christ's active righteousness due to antinomian abuses of the doctrine.

⁷¹ Wesley, "Free Grace," WJW 7:373-86; *ibid.*, Methodist Articles Two and Twenty in Oden, *Doctrinal Standards*, 131, 143; Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate*; Torrance, "Singularity," 225-56; *ibid.*, *Atonement*, 120-25, 181-92.

⁷² Wesley, "Free Grace" 2-4, WJW 7:373-74.

⁷³ Torrance, "Predestination in Christ," 115.

⁷⁴ Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 150-54; Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 94-98.

Torrance can charge the doctrine of limited atonement with a Nestorian division between Christ's divine creative action and his human redemptive suffering.⁷⁵ Secondly, Wesley knows no alternative to Calvinist unconditional partitive predestination except a (diluted) Arminian conditional partitive predestination, in which God foreknows who will believe and who will not and elects or reprobates accordingly.⁷⁶ Torrance makes predestination radically Christocentric: all humanity is both elect and reprobate in Christ, who suffered the damnation due us so that we might live through him.⁷⁷ Lastly, Wesley's doctrine of universal prevenient grace finds firmer footing in Torrance's theology of ontological healing.⁷⁸ The "light that enlightens everyone coming into the world" (Jn. 1:9) is the Word who became flesh blind and deaf to God (Isa. 42:19) and awakened the human mind and will in himself to the good, the true, and the holy. Thus in Christ human nature has been made receptive to God, and it is this receptivity that the Spirit, now poured out on all flesh, grants to all who share humanity with Christ.⁷⁹ The hypostatic union is the hidden heart of prevenient grace.

In addition to the Atonement, Wesley and Torrance also concur that Christ's priestly office continues in his intercession for us. Torrance stresses Christ's heavenly priesthood as the nexus of orthodox — rather than Pelagian — worship. In our prayers and adoration, we do not "do it ourselves" but join the Son's ongoing

⁷⁵ Torrance, "Singularity," 244-45; *ibid.*, *Atonement*, 185-86.

⁷⁶ "Diluted" because for Wesley predestination is a secondary soteriological doctrine whereas for Arminius it is a primary, and primarily Christological, doctrine. Here Arminius is closer to Torrance. See W. Stephen Gunter, "The Loss of Arminius in Wesleyan-Arminian Theology" and Van Kuiken, "Convergence," in Stanglin, Bilby, and Mann, eds., *Reconsidering Arminius*, 71-90 and 113-35, respectively.

⁷⁷ Torrance, "Predestination in Christ," 110-11, 119, 125-26, 139n67.

⁷⁸ For recent attempts to ground the Arminian-Wesleyan doctrine, see W. Brian Shelton, *Prevenient Grace: God's Provision for Fallen Humanity* (Anderson, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 2014) and Ben Witherington III's review at *The Bible and Culture* (www.patheos.com/blogs/bibleandculture/2015/10/10/prevenient-grace-by-w-brian-shelton/).

⁷⁹ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 227-31, 248-51; *ibid.*, *Incarnation*, 121-26.

prayer and adoration of his Father.⁸⁰ Wesley speaks similarly: his *Notes* on Rom. 1:8 offer an epigram that would delight Torrance: "The gifts of God all pass through Christ to us; and all our petitions and thanksgivings pass through Christ to God." The continuing mediation of Christ plays a crucial role in Wesley's understanding of "Christian perfection." Such "perfection" is neither absolute, angelic, or Adamic, for Christians remain with minds and bodies damaged by the Fall and so inevitably come short of thinking or doing just as they should. Thus Wesley insists that even Christians in whom the mind of Christ is most fully formed must pray, "Forgive us our trespasses" and rely on Christ's continuing application of his atonement to them through his advocacy before the Father. The "perfection" for which Wesley contends is simply complete devotion to God, such that the love of God excludes pride, self-will, and other evil dispositions. But God's love filling one's life does not make a person infallible; consequently involuntary transgressions still occur and require Christ's mediation. In addition, the gift of holy love is inseparable from the Giver. One cannot have the mind of Christ apart from Christ! There is no stockpile of sanctity within ourselves on which we may draw. We only share experientially in Christ's love, mind, and holiness in a moment-by-moment manner as his constant mediation makes these blessings available to us.⁸¹

Conclusion: A Tree and a Triple Offer

We have suggested throughout this selective survey of Wesley's and Torrance's Christologies that Torrance enriches Wesley by stressing the objectivity and unity of salvation in Christ, especially in the doctrine of ontological healing. These emphases can help Wesleyans to put down deep dogmatic, theo-ontological, and Christological roots, finding nourishment and stability instead of rotting away from moralism or

⁸⁰ Torrance, *Atonement*, 271-76 and especially Thomas F. Torrance, "The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy," in *ibid.*, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 139-214.

⁸¹ Wesley, *Plain Account* §25, qq. 1-14, WJW 11:414-19.

blowing about in the winds of theological vagaries and spiritual neuroses.⁸² In return, Wesley offers gifts to Torrance. The perennial tendency of a strongly objective theological approach is to drift into intellectualism and spiritual lethargy, if not antinomianism — to become but a deep-rooted stump.⁸³ This is emphatically *not* to pin such charges on Torrance himself! Yet the tendency remains, latent and liable to emerge in a weaker soul or later generation.⁸⁴ Just as Torrance can save Wesley's descendants from doctrinal and spiritual subjectivism, so Wesley can warn Torrance's heirs off the opposite dangers. Wesley challenges his listeners ever to grow, to pursue Christlikeness of inward and outward life to the praise of God's grace, to put forth branches toward heaven and bear fruit. To conclude with a play on Christ's threefold office, let me sketch Wesley's threefold offer to contribute to spiritual growth among Torrancians.

First, Wesley's *prophetic (theological) offer*: One strength of Torrance's Edinburgh lectures in Christology is their rehearsal of Christ's personal history, the way of the Savior from heaven to Bethlehem to Calvary to heaven again. This *via salvatoris* tends to replace a *via* (or *ordo*) *salutis* in Torrance's thought. By contrast, Wesley has a well-developed *via salutis*⁸⁵ of prevenient grace, personal conversion, progressive sanctification, and "Christian perfection," an *ordo* honed over his lifetime of practical ministry and with much pastoral value as a general template for Christian experience. Fear of subjectivism may make one wary of Wesley's *ordo*. Well did Luther warn of the *incurvatus in se* of sin! But when the heartsore Wesley

⁸² Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, xviii, suggests that a deeper conception of the ontology of Christology as the ground of both "the moral imperative" and "the indicative of grace" could "help Wesleyanism correct a certain tendency toward moralism and thus actually strengthen its emphasis upon holiness in heart and life." See 37.

⁸³ Wesley had to confront antinomianism in his ministry. See his sermon, "The Lord Our Righteousness" 19-20, WJW 5:244-45; *ibid.*, *Plain Account* §25 q34, WJW 11:430-31.

⁸⁴ Already Torrance's allies have had to defend his views against such abuses: see Colyer, *How to Read*, 117-23; Habets, "Doctrine of Election," 348n76; Speidell, *Fully Human in Christ*. What Torrance's critics misperceive sooner, his followers are liable to later. All theologies struggle to maintain nuance and balance over time.

⁸⁵ Some Wesley scholars play the terms *via salutis* and *ordo salutis* against one another: see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 157-58, 330n2. For an apt rebuttal, see Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 307-310. My own use of the term *via salutis* is as a more dynamic-sounding synonym for *ordo salutis*.

heard Luther's preface to Romans read at Aldersgate, he pivoted away from himself toward Christ and found subjective peace and joy as the side effect of his turn to the objective. Gazing at Christ, we see ourselves reflected in his eyes and gain his perspective on us. Just so, the *via salutis* is best conceived as the reflection or transposition of the *via salvatoris* into our own lives.⁸⁶ Christ re-scripts our story to fit his. Thinking these *viae* together shields Wesley's way from subjectivism, for Christ's saga is the metanarrative to which our stories conform. Viewing the two *via-à-via* also keeps Torrance's way from so overwhelming us with Christ's story that we can only stutter or mutter when asked how it shapes our own in practice.

To single out one correspondence between the two *viae*: Torrance's theme of Christ's sanctifying assumption of sinful flesh parallels Wesley's motif of Christians' entire sanctification. Torrance stresses the forming of the "mind of Christ" in Christ himself; Wesley, its formation in us. These are correlatives rather than contraries. T. A. Noble recently has shown that the Torrancian doctrines of ontological healing and total substitution are bedrock on which Wesley's doctrine may be built.⁸⁷ As Torrance teaches, "all of grace" means "all of us" — both extensively and intensively. Wesley's "Christian perfection" merely works out the implication of that intensiveness.⁸⁸

Second, Wesley's *regal (organizational) offer*: Wesley and his Reformed colleague, George Whitefield, both saw remarkable spiritual revival under their preaching. Multitudes of irreligious Britons and Americans repented and embraced the Gospel. Yet Wesley's converts had a staying power that Whitefield's often

⁸⁶ Deschner, *Wesley's Christology*, 60, suggests briefly that Wesley parallels Christ's personal history with our experience of the *ordo salutis*. For a book-length exposition, see Timothy L. Boyd, *John Wesley's Christology: A Study in Its Practical Implications for Human Salvation, Transformation, and Its Influences for Preaching Christ* (Salem, OH: Allegheny, 2004).

⁸⁷ T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People. The Theology of Christian Perfecting* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

⁸⁸ Here I echo Scottish Methodist John Findlater, *Perfect Love: A Study of John Wesley's View of the Ideal Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Leith, [1914]; repr. Salem, OH: Schmull, 1985), 82-84, who argues that Wesley's doctrine of "perfect love" is the logical extension of the Reformed doctrine of divine sovereignty. See also Purves, *Exploring Christology*, 100-101, who wishes that Torrance had explored more the doctrine of progressive sanctification.

lacked. The reason was practical: Wesley organized his followers into discipleship groups. Wesley intended Methodism to be a renewal movement within Anglicanism rather than the rival that it later became, and so these groups supplemented the local Anglican churches — “little churches within the church,” as the Pietists who originated the idea had called them. He arranged the groups into an interlocking series, an *ordo societatis* patterned after his *ordo salutis*, with groups for “seekers” (to use today’s parlance), new converts, those pursuing entire sanctification, backsliders (anticipating today’s Alcoholics Anonymous), and so on. These groups preserved their members from subjectivism and promoted spiritual growth.⁸⁹ Just as the Savior himself passed through birth, childhood, and youth to adulthood, sanctifying each stage of development, so Methodists, supported by their groups, progressed from spiritual infancy to maturity. The *viae salvatoris*, *salutis*, and *societatis* form a cord of three strands not easily broken. Torrancians may adapt Wesley’s system to nurture spiritual growth rooted in Christ’s total substitution.⁹⁰

Third, Wesley’s *priestly (liturgical) offer*: Thomas Torrance and especially his younger brother James taught that Christ’s eternal priesthood makes him the great worship leader through whom we worship.⁹¹ Here as elsewhere the Torrancian theoretical framework may be filled in by Wesleyan practical content. John Wesley and especially his own younger brother, Charles, produced a wealth of hymnody that expresses orthodox, evangelical doctrine doxologically. As the Wesleys knew, the genius of the hymnic genre is that it transmits the faith memorably in a form accessible even to children, the blind, and illiterate adults, and all while inculcating not just truths about God but wholehearted worship of God. Torrancians will find the

⁸⁹ D. Michael Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Wilmore, KY: Rafiki, 2016). Matthew Nelson Hill, *Evolution and Holiness: Sociobiology, Altruism and the Quest for Wesleyan Perfection* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), relates the groups’ effectiveness nonreductively to sociobiological theory.

⁹⁰ I recommend Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting: Reclaiming a Forgotten (and Essential) Small Group Experience* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2013) and David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines That Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016). See also Grace Communion International’s spiritual formation program for ministers and church workers (<https://www.gci.org/foundations>).

⁹¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement*, 273-76; James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

Wesley hymns a rich resource for liturgical renewal. Not only may the hymns themselves be reused (preferably with careful updating of their language); they also may serve as a pattern for new songs that creatively combine sound doctrine, scriptural idiom, and current musical styles. A living orthodoxy demands doxology. Thus it is apt to end an essay on Christ's person and offices with a Wesley hymn:

O Filial Deity,
Accept my new-born cry!
See the travail of thy soul,
Saviour, and be satisfied;
Take me now, possess me whole,
Who for me, for me hast died!

Prophet, to me reveal
Thy Father's perfect will:
Never mortal spake like thee,
Human prophet like divine;
Loud and strong their voices be,
Small, and still, and inward thine!

On thee my Priest I call,
Thy blood atoned for all:
Still the Lamb as slain appears,
Still thou stand'st before the throne,
Ever off'ring up my prayers,
These presenting with thy own.

Jesu, thou art my King,
From thee my strength I bring:
Shadowed by thy mighty hand,
Saviour, who shall pluck me thence?
Faith supports, by faith I stand,
Strong as thy omnipotence.⁹²

⁹² Hymn 186, stanzas 1, 6-8 in John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of The People Called Methodists*, in Richard P. Heitzenrater, gen. ed., *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), 7:314-15. On this hymnal as an authoritative source of Wesley's theology, see 1-22 and Hopper, "Christ Alone for Salvation," 233-52.

GRACE AND ELECTION IN THE THEOLOGY OF

JOHN WESLEY AND T. F. TORRANCE

Thomas A. Noble, PhD

Senior Research Fellow at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester
Professor of Theology, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City

tanoble@nts.edu

Abstract: *The theme of grace is an important one in the theology of John Wesley and in the theology of T. F. Torrance. Since most readers of Participatio are likely to be less familiar with Wesley, we shall begin by looking at two contemporary studies of his thought which highlight the theme of grace, and then look back into the Arminian tradition in which he professed to stand. That will then allow us to look at the more specific characterization of Wesley as an evangelical Arminian (as opposed to other kinds), and we shall then in conclusion compare and contrast his doctrines of grace and election with those of T. F. Torrance.*

Grace: The Theme of Wesley's Theology

Two major works on the theology of John Wesley published in recent decades highlight his understanding of grace. Randy L. Maddox entitled his work on Wesley, *Responsible Grace*.¹ For Wesley, he argued, the aim of theology was a practical one. It was not the refining of an elaborate system of Christian truth claims, but "nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers' lives in the world."² What gives consistency to a theological tradition, Maddox argues, is not an unchanging doctrinal summary, nor a theoretical idea

¹ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1994).

² Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 17.

from which all truth is deduced, but a “basic orienting perspective or metaphor.” For Maddox, Wesley’s “orienting concern” was “to preserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity,” that,

Without God’s grace, we *cannot* be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace *will not* save.³

Maddox called this “responsible grace” by which he implied two things. First, it was grace that makes human response possible, but also, secondly, that the grace of God required the human response which it enabled. His book presents the argument that this orienting concern gives coherence to Wesley’s thought over the three phases of his ministry (the “early,” “middle,” and “late” Wesley) despite the tendency of some to present a “Protestant” Wesley and of others a more “Catholic” Wesley. He portrays Wesley as more influenced by what he calls the “therapeutic” view of grace in the Eastern Fathers than the “juridical” emphasis of Western Christianity.⁴

Kenneth J. Collins presented a somewhat different view in *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace*.⁵ He agreed in describing Wesley as a practical theologian, whose thinking is not characterized by a grand systematic principle, but by “what Outler has called an axial theme.”⁶ Wesley’s sophistication was to be seen in the way he held a diversity of truths in tension and it was therefore misleading to view him through the lens of one theological tradition – “Calvinism for Cell, Lutheran Pietism for Hildebrandt, Puritanism for Rupp, and the

³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 19.

⁴ See my critique of that polarization in Thomas A. Noble, “East and West in the Theology of John Wesley,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85.2 & 3 (2002), 70-87.

⁵ Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

⁶ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 3. The reference is to Albert Outler, who largely initiated the mid-century rediscovery of Wesley as a theologian.

Eastern Fathers for Maddox.”⁷ Rather he should be understood as a “conjunctive theologian” who preferred the “both/and” to the “either/or.” But while that was the “style” of his theology, what was more methodologically significant was his “axial theme.” Outler had suggested that for Wesley that was grace. Maddox refined this to “responsible grace.” But Collins argues that Wesley’s axial theme was the conjunction of “holiness and grace.”

Within that conjunction Collins sees two further conjunctions. First, the element of holiness was itself a tension or conjunction between holiness and love. Holiness could not be reduced merely to love in Wesley’s thought (as argued by some). Rather “holy love” involved “a conjunction between the ideas of separation for the sake of purity and communion for the sake of love.” This was particularized in a subsidiary conjunction between law and grace, for while salvation was by grace, this could quickly dissolve into antinomian licence unless it were held in tension with the continuing role of the law. Secondly, the other half of the axial theme, grace, was also a conjunction or tension between free grace and co-operant grace. Those who saw Wesley only within the Arminian tradition emphasized the element of co-operant grace so that salvation results from the synergism of God and the believer. But in Wesley’s thought, this was only half of the picture. He also contends for the role of “free grace.” Collins concludes: “Consequently, more accurate readings of Wesley’s theology suggest that a synergistic paradigm, which contains both divine and human acting, must itself be caught up in an *even larger conjunction* in which the Protestant emphasis on the sole activity of God, apart from all human working, is *equally* factored in.”⁸

It is clear from both of these analyses of Wesley’s thought that grace was an important theme, but also that his understanding of the grace of God was within the context of the debate which had been raging since the Reformation on the doctrine of election. It will help to grasp Wesley’s theological perspective therefore

⁷ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007) 4, referring to George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt), 1935; Franz Hildebrandt, *From Luther to Wesley* (London: Lutterworth, 1951); Ernest Gordon Rupp, *Methodism in Relation to the Protestant Tradition* (London: Epworth Press, 1954; and Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994).

⁸ Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 12-13: italics original.

if we briefly review his heritage in what came to be called the “Arminian” tradition in order to distinguish it from scholastic federal Calvinism.

The Arminians

Wesley was not directly influenced by the writings of Jacob Harmensoon (1560-1609), the Dutch theologian whose Latinized name was Jacobus Arminius.⁹ The “Arminian” tradition in the Church of England of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to which Wesley belonged, traced its origins back not to Arminius, but to contemporaries of Arminius in the Elizabethan church who rejected the new doctrines which were coming from Geneva. These came with the exiles from the Marian persecution who returned to be appointed bishops by Queen Elizabeth. In the seventeenth century (particularly after the Synod of Dort, 1619) the group opposing the new doctrines included Archbishop Laud, bishops Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor, and Thomas Ken, and clergymen such as George Herbert. They became known as “Arminians” because of their rejection of the new “federal” Calvinism favoured by most (though not all) Puritans.

The Dutch “Arminian” tradition similarly had its origins in the original adherents of the Reformation who resisted the new doctrines coming from Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Jerome Zanchius (1516-1590), and others of the generation after Calvin. The spokesman for these Dutch lay people and pastors was James Arminius, pastor in Amsterdam, and then professor at Leiden.¹⁰ Like others in this post-Reformation generation, Arminius adopted the notion of a series of decrees and covenants unknown to Calvin, but he resisted particularly the supralapsarian view that God had decreed first the salvation of the elect (and the rejection of the reprobate) before or “above” (*supra*) the decrees to create the world and the decree of the fall (*lapsus*). Not long before his untimely death he formulated his own version of the decrees in his Declaration of Sentiments, an

⁹ In English he came to be known as James Arminius.

¹⁰ For the classic biography, see Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971). See also Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

address given to the States of Holland at the Hague in October, 1608.¹¹ Rejecting the supralapsarian scheme of double predestination of elect and reprobate as contrary to Scripture and the Fathers, repugnant to the nature of God, dishonourable to Christ, and hostile to the ministry of the gospel,¹² Arminius proposed his own version of the decrees, beginning with Christ:

The first specific and absolute divine decree regarding the salvation of sinful humanity: God decreed to appoint his Son, Jesus Christ, as Mediator, Redeemer, Savior, Priest, and King in order that he might destroy sin by his own death, so that by his own obedience he might obtain salvation lost through disobedience, and by his power communicate this salvation.¹³

For Arminius, election began with Christ. The second decree was “to accept those who repent and believe in Christ, and for Christ’s sake and through him to effect the final salvation of penitents and believers who persevere to the end in their faith.” Simultaneously, God decreed “to leave in sin under divine wrath impenitent persons and unbelievers.” The third divine decree was to institute “the necessary means for repentance and faith.” The fourth was “to save and damn certain particular persons”:

This decree has its foundation in the divine foreknowledge through which God has known from all eternity those individuals who through the established means of his prevenient grace would come to faith and believe, and through his subsequent sustaining grace would persevere in the faith.

¹¹ See W. Stephen Gunter, *Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments: An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). For the older translation see *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. James Nichols (London: Longman et al, 1825), Vol. 1, 516-668. My copy of the three volumes of the Nichols edition of Arminius’ *Works* was given to me by T. F. Torrance from his own library.

¹² These are the most theologically significant of twenty objections to double predestination.

¹³ The translations are from Gunter, *Arminius* (2012), 135.

Following the death of Arminius in 1609, his followers drew up the Remonstrance of 1610, setting out their view that election to salvation was consequent upon God's foreknowledge of whether any one person would believe. In view of the doctrine of original sin asserting the "total depravity" of humankind since the fall, prevenient grace was required to give the freedom to believe.¹⁴ But notably, the Remonstrance shows that *the Christ-centred shape of Arminius's doctrine had already been lost*, and although their view was that election was consequent upon God's foreknowledge, it is worth noting that their *system was still one of double predestination*. As Arminius had said in his fourth decree, God pre-ordained each individual to salvation or damnation depending on his foreknowledge of their free response made possible by grace.

It was in response to the Remonstrants that, after their advocates in the Dutch state were defeated in the civil war with the triumph of the Prince of Orange, the Synod of Dort was called to establish the official doctrine of the church on election and predestination. The Synod formulated their doctrine in the famous five points which generations of students memorized according to the mnemonic, "Tulip": total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints.

The development of the tight logic of this system can be trace back historically to Augustine's twin doctrines of grace and original sin. It was in reaction to Pelagius's doctrine of free will that Augustine insisted on the priority of grace. Such was the nature of humanity's fallen condition in original sin that only God's grace could free or heal the will in such a way that the individual would believe (*voluntas praeparatur a deo*). But of course if the will was genuinely healed, then it would necessarily exercise its freedom to believe! That implied that, since not all believed, God must have chosen to give this saving grace preveniently to those who

¹⁴ See Keith D. Stanglin and Thomas H. McCall, *Jacob Arminius: Theologian of Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 189-92.

did.¹⁵ Calvin drew the conclusion that that implied *double* predestination. God had not only passed over those he did not choose, but by doing so, he in fact actively reprobated them to damnation.¹⁶ It was the generation after Calvin, including Beza, Zanchius, and others, who set out clearly the further conclusion in this logical development, the doctrine of “particular redemption” or “limited atonement,” that Christ only died for the elect. The key to the whole logical development of the system was the concept of grace as an influence or force from God acting internally within the individual.

The Dutch Arminians or Remonstrants were banned after the Synod but eventually tolerated and allowed to establish a theological college in Amsterdam with Simon Episcopius (1583-1643) as its first professor of theology. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the jurist who laid the foundations for international law, was their most influential intellect, but in the eighteenth century, under the leadership of Philipp van Limborch (1633-1712), the friend of John Locke, the tradition became deeply influenced by the thought of the Enlightenment. A distinction therefore has to be made between the “classical Arminianism” of Arminius himself and later developments.¹⁷ In England, the Puritan John Goodwin (1594-1665) was unusual in taking an Arminian position, and Richard Baxter was so appalled by the pastoral results of Calvinist preaching as a chaplain in Cromwell’s army that he rejected the antinomianism which seemed to him to be the consequence of the Calvinist system and tried to balance the virtues of the Calvinist and Arminian doctrines.¹⁸ The “holy living school” (as it is known) in the Church of England laid great emphasis on

¹⁵ This aspect of Augustine’s theology is developed in the Anti-Pelagian writings most easily accessible in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Volume 4, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974). For a brief introduction see J. Patout Burns, “Grace,” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Alan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 391-98; also Mathijs Lamberigts, “Predestination,” *idem*, 677-79.

¹⁶ *Institutes*, III, xxi, 5; III, xxiii, 1-14.

¹⁷ See the older history by A. W. Harrison, *Arminianism* (London: Duckworth, 1937) and more recent works such as Roger E. Olson, *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

¹⁸ For Wesley’s publication of extracts from Baxter and Goodwin, see Herbert Boyd McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley’s Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 161-166 and 231-34. I am indebted in this section to my colleague, Herbert McGonigle, for his exhaustive study of Wesley’s Arminianism.

Christian holiness, and it was that strain of Arminianism which shaped the theology and piety of John Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna Wesley. But after the Revolution of 1688, a new generation of "Arminian" bishops such as Burnet, Stillingfleet and Tillotson became associated with Latitudinarianism and the moralism of Deism and were regarded by Puritans and Nonjurors alike as semi-Pelagians and Socinians.

The Development of Wesley's Arminianism

The brief sketch we have just drawn of Arminianism in the seventeenth century is the necessary background to John Wesley's context in the eighteenth century, and particularly to understanding his doctrines of grace and election. We will trace briefly the development of his thinking on this through several controversies through the decade of his ministry from 1738 to his death in 1791.¹⁹

In the "great awakening" or evangelical revival of the eighteenth century, the Methodist leaders included both the "Arminians" John and Charles Wesley and the leaders of "Calvinistic Methodism," George Whitefield and Howell Harris of Wales.²⁰ Jonathan Edwards, heir to the Calvinist Puritan tradition, was the leading figure in the earlier revivals in New England and possibly the greatest theologian of the century.²¹ Whereas Puritan New England was uniformly in the Calvinist tradition at this point, in England a division emerged into open controversy right from the beginning of the revival movement, which is usually dated to Wesley's conversion at the meeting in Aldersgate Street in the old city of London on 24th May, 1738.

The first controversy began in 1739 when Whitefield (who had been a member of the "Holy Club" at Oxford, led by the Wesleys) invited John Wesley to take his place "field preaching" for the first time in Bristol while he went to New England. Wesley discovered a strong strain of Calvinism among Whitefield's Bristol

¹⁹ For the definitive biography of Wesley (also a history of early Methodism) see Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989).

²⁰ See Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (eds), *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²¹ See Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Methodists, and trenchantly denounced it in his provocative sermon, "Free Grace."²² What repelled him was the doctrine of the decree of reprobation: that God had created a certain portion of the human race in order to damn them. In the sermon he declared that the grace of God which brings salvation is "free in all" (not dependent on any previous "good work"), and "free for all" (not for only a select portion of humankind). In the course of the subsequent debate, it appears that his mother, Susanna Wesley, wrote anonymously to defend him, but in doing so denied that he was an "Arminian," a denial which has to be seen in the context that Arminianism was associated with Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.²³

The controversy stirred up in 1739 continued for several years. Wesley published extracts from the moderate Calvinist, Isaac Watts, who argued that Calvin taught that Christ died for all, and from the Quaker, Robert Barclay. He was opposed by Whitefield himself, and his assistant, John Cennick. In 1741, after reading Episcopius, Wesley published *A Dialogue between a Predestinarian and His Friend*.²⁴ Herbert Boyd McGonigle summarizes his purpose in this tract as "to show the deterministic nature of Calvinism and in particular the corollary he believed inevitable to this, viz. that God is the author of sin."²⁵ He finished by defining positively what he meant by election and reprobation:

First, God did decree from the beginning to elect or choose (in Christ) all that should believe to salvation. And this decree proceeds from his own goodness, and is not built upon any goodness in the creature. Secondly, God did from the beginning decree to reprobate all who should obstinately and finally continue in unbelief.²⁶

²² Sermon 110, in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 3, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 542-63. See also the context and analysis in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 107-119.

²³ The twenty-six page pamphlet, *A Letter from a Gentlewoman to Her Friend*, was almost certainly written by Susanna Wesley. See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 127-8.

²⁴ *Works*, Vol. 13, *Doctrinal and Controversial Treatises II*, eds Paul Wesley Chilcote and Kenneth J. Collins (Nashville: Abingdon, 2013), 227-38.

²⁵ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 137.

²⁶ *Works*, Vol. 13, 238.

This is the equivalent of the second decree of Arminius, and it includes both election and reprobation, but Arminius's fourth decree, to save and damn particular persons, does not appear here. It did appear however in a tract extracted from the writings of Henry Haggar, a seventeenth-century Baptist, and published by Wesley the same year. It included the words:

God from the foundation of the world foreknew all men's believing or not believing: and according to this his foreknowledge, he chose or elected all obedient believers, as such, to salvation; and refused or reprobated all disobedient unbelievers, as such, to damnation.²⁷

The same tract goes on to assert that Christ died for all, and refutes the objection that this doctrine implies that we are saved because of the exercise of our free will. Wesley rejects that:

We believe that in the moment Adam fell, he had no freedom of will left; but that God, when of his own free grace he gave the promise of a Saviour to him and his posterity, graciously restored to mankind a liberty and power to accept the proffered salvation.²⁸

Wesley was beginning to articulate his own version of what the whole Augustinian tradition called *gratia praeveniens*, prevenient grace. It was a gift of the *freedom*, not a compulsion, to believe. And it was given to all from Adam onwards.

Herbert McGonigle concludes that Wesley's position was not directly derived from Arminius or the Dutch Arminians. Although he had read Hugo Grotius in 1725, some extracts from Arminius himself in 1731, and Episcopius in 1741,

There is no evidence that these writings were important in formulating his theological convictions. Instead the entire evidence points to Wesley's anti-Calvinism stemming from the influence of his Epworth upbringing, his wide reading at Oxford between 1725 and 1735, especially in the Anglican theologians, and more latterly the congenial

²⁷ Quoted in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 141, referencing J. Wesley, *A Preservative Against Unsettled Notions in Religions by the Rev. John Wesley* (London, 1839), 181, originally published in 1758.

²⁸ Quoted in McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 142.

rebuttals of reprobation and the “horrible decree” he found in writers like Isaac Watts, Robert Barclay, and Henry Haggard.²⁹

In 1743, Wesley tried to modify his views to come as close as possible to his Calvinist allies.³⁰ He acknowledged that there was a scriptural basis for unconditional election and that grace was irresistible at the moment it brings salvation to the soul (though not before or after that point). He was prepared to say that there was “a state attainable in this life from which a man cannot finally fall.” We can see here that he was trying to find common ground on three of the “five points.” There were no concessions however on the extent of the Atonement, and no need to discuss original sin or “total depravity” since they largely agreed on that. That *eirenicon* was as close as Wesley ever came to a rapprochement.

The next year, Wesley held his first annual conference with four sympathetic clergymen. They did not discuss election and predestination, but agreed that faith, preceded by repentance, was the “condition” of justification.. The following year, 1745, the conference revisited this question and debated whether repentance and works as well as faith were conditions of justification. The problem, as McGonigle comments, was with the word, “condition.”³¹

Wesley had just published extracts from Richard Baxter’s *Aphorismes of Justification* in which Baxter was reacting against *Free Grace*, a book written by John Saltmarsh arguing that, for the elect, salvation is not even conditioned on faith. Baxter came to the conclusion that the kind of Calvinism he had earlier espoused encouraged antinomianism and he developed the doctrine that we must distinguish between first justification and final justification. The first was by faith, but the second was on condition of good works as well as faith. In Wesley’s apologetic work published the same year, *A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, he set out quotations from the liturgy, articles, and homilies and concluded that the doctrine of the Church of England was “that no good work, properly so called can go *before* justification”; “that as the *meritorious cause* of

²⁹ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 146.

³⁰ See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 153-56.

³¹ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 161.

justification is the life and death of Christ, so the *condition* of it is faith, faith alone"; and "that inward and outward holiness are consequent on this faith, and are the ordinary stated condition of final justification."³²

The *Minutes* of Wesley's conference of 1745 strove to come as close as possible to the Calvinistic Methodists. The question, "Wherein may we come to the very edge of Calvinism?" received a threefold answer. First, they ascribed all good to the grace of God, thus rejecting any Pelagian notion of salvation by works. Secondly, they denied all natural free will: only the grace of God enabled us to make moral and spiritual choices. Thirdly, no merit is acquired from any good work.³³ In 1746, Wesley published a sermon, *The Righteousness of Faith*, which emphasized *sola fide* so strongly as to verge on language he had criticized as antinomian.³⁴

There the dispute between "Wesleyan" and "Calvinistic" Methodists rested from some years, but it was renewed in a second round of controversy when Wesley published *Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints* in 1751.³⁵ Seeing the Calvinist doctrine as an invitation to antinomian licence, he presented a fully biblical, exegetical argument for a doctrine of conditional perseverance. True faith must produce holy obedience. A reply defending the Calvinist doctrine came the next year from the Baptist minister, John Gill, and Wesley responded to that with a booklet of eight-three pages, *Predestination Calmly Considered*.³⁶ Faced with an uncompromising supralapsarian, there was a hardening in tone.³⁷ No matter how hard Calvinists tried to avoid it, the decree of unconditional election inevitably implied the unconditional reprobation of a portion of the human race.

Wesley outlined positively the doctrine of election which he saw in Scripture. There was the election of specific people (such as Cyrus) to complete specific tasks,

³² Wesley, *Works*, Vol. 11, ed. Gerald R. Cragg (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 115.

³³ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace* (2001), 168.

³⁴ *Works*, Vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 200-16.

³⁵ *Works*, Vol. 13, 239-57.

³⁶ *Works*, Vol. 13, 258-320.

³⁷ See McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 186-98.

and that election was absolute and unconditional. But election to salvation was conditional. Any doctrine of unconditional election necessarily implied unconditional reprobation.³⁸

Wesley addressed the fear of the Calvinists that letting go the doctrine of unconditional election will open the door to Pelagianism and “free will,” but asserted that he does not go even so far as the Westminster Confession in his doctrine of natural free will:

I only assert, that there is a measure of free-will supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which ‘enlightens every man that cometh into the world.’³⁹

McGonigle comments that this is an indication of Wesley’s progressive development of his doctrine of prevenient grace, “a key element in his *ordo salutis* by which he sought to subscribe to a near-Augustinian understanding of original sin, yet deny unconditional election on the one hand and universalism on the other.”⁴⁰

The controversy continued with a dispute about *Theron and Aspasio*. Written by a former member of the Oxford “Holy Club,” James Hervey, and published in 1755, this was a series of nine dialogues and twelve letters between Theron, a gentleman with scientific interests and broadly deistic views and Aspasio, a gentleman who espoused biblical Christianity. Although Wesley thought highly of it, Hervey was offended at his criticism of his doctrine of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Wesley affirmed the doctrine,⁴¹ but at the same time he was critical of the way it was used by antinomians to excuse sin. In a letter to James Hervey, he advised: “. . . do not dispute for that *particular phrase*: ‘The imputed righteousness of Christ.’ It is not scriptural: it is not necessary . . . But it has done immense hurt.” He had “abundant proof” that instead of “furthering men’s progress in vital holiness” it has made them “satisfied with no holiness at all; yea, and encouraged

³⁸ *Works*, Vol. 13, 268-69.

³⁹ *Works*, vol. 13, 287.

⁴⁰ McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace*, 193.

⁴¹ See his later affirmation of it in a later sermon of 1765, “The Lord our Righteousness,” *Works*, Vol. 1, 444-65.

them to work all uncleanness with greediness."⁴² A year later, Wesley further explained his views in *A Letter to a Gentleman at Bristol*, in which he distinguished between initial and final justification, and criticized talk of the imputed righteousness of Christ which was made a cover for sin and "a blasphemous Antinomianism."⁴³ Hervey died in 1758, but his *Eleven Letters* to John Wesley were published posthumously in 1765 and Wesley responded with *A Treatise on Justification*, including extracts from the Arminian Puritan, John Goodwin.⁴⁴

A third bout of controversy began with the publication of the *Minutes* of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference of 1770 at which the concern had been to emphasize the importance of good works.⁴⁵ This arose out of Wesley's increasing concern with the danger of antinomianism, but the minutes were so loosely worded that Wesley appeared to be endorsing some form of Pelagianism. The main contestants on the Calvinist side in this third phase of the controversy were Montague Augustus Toplady, vicar in Devon, and famous as the writer of "Rock of Ages," along with the Shropshire squire, Sir Richard Hill, and his brother, Rowland Hill. Toplady restated the predestinarian position of Jerome Zanchius. Wesley's views were defended by John Fletcher, the Swiss clergyman who was vicar of Madeley in Shropshire. Fletcher's contribution was his seven short treatises, *Checks to Antinomianism*, published from 1771 to 1775.⁴⁶

Wesley himself played a lesser role, but for the first time he identified himself as an "Arminian" in a little work of 1770, *Question. 'What is an Arminian?' Answered by a Lover of Free Grace*.⁴⁷ "To say, 'This man is an Arminian,'" he began, "has the same effect on many hearers as to say 'This is a mad dog'. It puts them in a fright." Some even confuse "Arminian" and "Arian." He asserts that Arminians do

⁴² *Works*, Vol. 13, 323-24: see Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* (2007), 174ff. on Wesley's doctrine of imputation.

⁴³ *Works*, Vol. 13, 359-66.

⁴⁴ McGonigle (2001), 235f.

⁴⁵ See Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast* (1989), 454-57, and McGonigle (2001), 267f.

⁴⁶ John Fletcher, *Five Checks to Antinomianism*, ed. Jeffry I. Wallace (Brookfield, MO: Apprehending Truth Publishers, 2011).

⁴⁷ *Works*, Vol. 13, 404-09.

not deny either original sin or justification by faith, but they do deny absolute predestination, irresistible grace, and affirm that a believer may fall from grace. Wesley did not reply to the vitriolic writing of Toplady, but in 1774 published *Thoughts upon Necessity*, replying to the claims of philosophic determinism which he attributed to Manichaeans, Stoics, and his contemporary, the Enlightenment philosopher, Lord Kames.⁴⁸ He found determinism too in the Westminster Confession and Jonathan Edwards. In 1776, he published a sermon "On Predestination" on Romans 8:29 and 30. He denied that these verses present a chain of cause and effect. The statement, "Them he did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son," he understands to refer to all who believe in Christ. This is by virtue of God's irreversible decree: "He that believeth shall be saved: he that believeth not shall be damned."⁴⁹ In 1778, Wesley fully adopted the term, "Arminian" when he launched the *Arminian Magazine*, which he edited until his death in 1791.

Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism: Summary and Assessment

From this brief synopsis of the development of Wesley's Arminianism over six decades of ministry, we may sum up his doctrine in the following points. First, it is clear that he was motivated by his horror at the doctrine of God which resulted from the scheme of scholastic "high" Calvinism. His initial response in the sermon of 1739, "Free Grace" could hardly express more trenchantly his opposition to the doctrine of double predestination, and particularly the supralapsarian doctrine that God created creatures in order to damn them:

This is the blasphemy clearly contained in 'the horrible decree' of predestination. And here I fix my foot. . . . You say you will 'prove it by Scripture.' Hold! What will you prove by Scripture? That God is worse than the devil? It cannot be. Whatever Scripture proves, it never can prove this. . . . No Scripture can mean that God is not love, or that his mercy is not over all his works.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *Works*, Vol. 13, 526-46.

⁴⁹ *Works*, Vol. 2, 413-21.

⁵⁰ *Works*, Vol. 3, 556.

Wesley reflected here the theology of his mother, in a letter of 1725, where she appears to be referring to the doctrine that God preordained the fall:

The doctrine of predestination, as maintained by the rigid Calvinists, is very shocking, and ought to be utterly abhorred; because it directly charges the most holy God with being the author of sin.⁵¹

Secondly, it is clear that Wesley was motivated like Richard Baxter by the fear of antinomianism. Here we are reminded of Randy Maddox's point that, for Wesley, theology was not merely the refining of an elaborate system of Christian truth claims, but "nurturing and shaping the worldview that frames the temperament and practice of believers' lives in the world."⁵² This was not merely a theoretical concern, but a concern arising from his own wide pastoral experience of the consequence of the rigid predestinarian doctrine. His concern was to be repeated in the next century by the pastoral concern of John McLeod Campbell at the fatalism of his parishioners.⁵³

Thirdly, the key to Wesley's doctrine of election is his doctrine of grace, and particularly of *gratia praeveniens*, prevenient grace. The phrase goes back to Augustine and the doctrine was an essential part of his response to Pelagianism. Original sin and prevenient grace implied each other. Only the concept of grace healing the will (*voluntas praeparatur a deo*) could rule out the notion that we were saved by the exercise of our own naturally free will. Wesley agreed in rejecting Pelagianism and the notion that we were saved by the exercise of our naturally free will.⁵⁴ He took the view of the Arminian tradition that, as Augustine insisted, we are saved by grace alone (*sola gratia*). But the grace of God did not compel us to believe: it *enabled* us by restoring that freedom.

⁵¹ *Works*, Vol. 25, ed. Frank Baker, 179.

⁵² Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (1994), 17.

⁵³ See the Introduction by James B. Torrance in J. McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, and Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁵⁴ Confusion has been caused by those who have argued for natural free will but have erroneously and falsely claimed to be "Arminians."

But we must note the limitations of Wesley's doctrine. We cannot blame him for being a thinker of the eighteenth century still caught in the debates of the seventeenth century. But like the whole Arminian tradition, his doctrine still reflected the logical shape of the supralapsarian Calvinism it was opposing. Like all the theologians of his day, and indeed like the whole Augustinian tradition, he thought of grace and election, and hence predestination, in individualistic terms. Whereas the Synod of Dort affirmed their belief in the absolute unconditional double predestination of the elect to salvation and the reprobate to damnation, the Remonstrants affirmed *conditional* predestination. Election depended on the faith of the believer, but since this was foreknown by God, both the elect and reprobate were predestined from eternity to salvation or damnation. In this they followed the fourth decree set out by Arminius, but this (as we noted) is also a system of *double predestination*, although it has to be said that that fourth decree is rather muted in Wesley's presentation.

Wesley did however affirm Arminius's second decree more clearly: the decree to accept those who would believe, and reject those who would not. This was his understanding of the vital role of faith: *sola fide* implied that faith was a *condition* of salvation. In Sermon 43, he addresses the question how we are justified by faith:

I answer, faith is the condition, and the only condition of salvation. It is the condition: none is justified but he that believes; without faith no man is justified. And it is the only condition; this alone is sufficient for justification.⁵⁵

He qualifies that a little by saying that faith alone is "immediately" necessary to salvation, but that the fruits of repentance are also necessary "if there be time and opportunity for them." But when he speaks of faith as the "condition" of justification, he does not mean that faith *merits* justification. The death of Christ is the only *meritorious cause* of salvation:

By affirming that this faith is the term or *condition* of justification, I mean, first, that there is no justification without it. . . . As 'there is no other name given under heaven than that of Jesus of Nazareth,' no

⁵⁵ Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation," *Works*, Vol. 2, 162.

other merit whereby a condemned sinner can ever be saved from the guilt of sin, so there is not other way of obtaining a share in his merit than 'by faith in his name.'⁵⁶

That raises the question whether this is a system of conditional grace, which would surely be a contradiction in terms. At this point Wesley employs the medieval scholastic view of "graces" revived by the post-Reformation Protestant scholastics. Preaching on the text, "Work out your own salvation" (Phil. 2:12), he sketches his view of the *ordo salutis*:

Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) 'preventing grace,' including the first wish to please God . . . Salvation is carried on by 'convincing grace,' usually in Scripture termed 'repentance,' which brings a large measure of self-knowledge . . . Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation, whereby 'through grace' we 'are saved by faith,' consisting of those two grand branches, justification and sanctification.'⁵⁷

The picture then is of a series of "graces." Elsewhere, Wesley denotes conscience as not a natural ability, but due to the prevenient grace of God.⁵⁸ Here he also attributes conviction of sin or repentance to prevenient grace. That is followed by the grace by which we are saved, effecting both justification and sanctification. This scholastic motion of a series of "graces" is highly artificial, but Wesley's point could be made without that. His point is simply that at every point, God in his gracious generosity is at work in us, drawing us so that we are without excuse, but never compelling us, to respond in faith.

⁵⁶ Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith," *Works*, Vol. 1, 195.

⁵⁷ Sermon 85, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," *Works*, Vol. 3, 203f. "Preventing," which has since changed its meaning, means the same here as "prevenient."

⁵⁸ See Collins, *Theology of John Wesley* (2007), referring to *Thoughts upon Necessity* (1774), *Works*, Vol. 13, 526-46, and Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" (1765), *Works*, Vol. 2, 153-69, and 156; also Sermon 105, "On Conscience," (1788), *Works*, Vol. 3, 479-490.

An Evangelical Calvinist

If John Wesley may be designated an *evangelical* Arminian, to distinguish him from the later Remonstrants, the Latitudinarians and other Pelagians and semi-Pelagians who have claimed the designation, then it is surely appropriate to designate T. F. Torrance as “an evangelical Calvinist.”⁵⁹ The implication is that he is to be seen within the tradition he himself traced in Scottish theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell in distinction from the scholastic federal Calvinist tradition.⁶⁰ It is a claim to follow in the footsteps of Calvin, but not of Beza, Zanchius, and the tradition of Dort and Westminster. Yet it is not simply a continuation and repetition of that tradition, for Torrance represents a great leap forward, which we can only indicate briefly under the following points.

First, Torrance wants to define grace carefully as “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” His published doctoral thesis documents the way in which the Pauline and New Testament understanding of grace had been largely lost already in the writings of the generation after the apostles, the so-called “Apostolic Fathers.”⁶¹ Again and again, they failed to grasp the centrality of Christ and the cross, and understood the Christian life only in terms of repentance and obedience. Instead of linking grace primarily with Christ as in the New Testament, they tended to link grace with a sub-personal language about the Holy Spirit, thought of apart from Christ as a kind of pneumatic power (*dynamis*). “At first it was thought of as a saving influence or effluence, but then its connexion with salvation become severed and it was regarded as pneumatic and divinising power, and at times was more or less hypostasized and made into a distinct divine or supernatural entity.”⁶²

⁵⁹ With reference to Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (eds), *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012).

⁶⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

⁶¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1948).

⁶² Torrance, *Grace*, 140f.

This tendency to hypostasize grace into a divine force or energy was further advanced in later centuries in the Augustinian theology of the West.⁶³ J. Patout Burns sees the theme of grace as central to Augustine, but it is conceived in terms of the Neoplatonic theory of emanation: "Grace is, therefore, the divine presence and power working and thereby present in the world, upon which the creatures' own operations are totally dependent."⁶⁴ This was the concept of grace which developed in the West in later centuries into the notion of a multiplicity of kinds or types of grace, but Torrance emphasized that this was not the biblical concept. In neither the Old nor the New Testament is "grace" an entity sent by God nor an operation of God in "the soul" supplanting the Holy Spirit, nor are there different kinds or types of grace as scholastic theology imagined. It is not a thing called "grace," nor different influences such as "prevenient grace" or "saving grace," which work within us. It is the Holy Spirit who works *personally* within us, and "grace" should rather be thought of more as an adverb than a noun, an action and not an entity. It is the character of God's action toward us. The rejection of this scholastic notion of grace also meant that grace was not to be construed in the "logico-causal" way characteristic of the Dort and Westminster system. Here the concept of contingency was a key one for Torrance.⁶⁵

Secondly, we need to note that the defining of grace as "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ" is really part of a much larger revolution affecting the whole shape of theology. For Torrance, as for Barth, grace and election are not to be seen as distinct self-contained doctrines, but have to be recast Christocentrically. It is true (as we commented earlier) that from his "conversion" at Aldersgate Street in 1738, Wesley's theology became much more centred on Christ. And yet Outler, Maddox and Collins all characterize his theology in terms of "grace" as the "axial theme." According to Maddox, Wesley's two truths "co-definitive of Christianity" are that without God's grace we cannot be saved, and without our response, God will

⁶³ See Barth's note on the "Romanist" notions of grace in *CD*, IV, 1, 84-88.

⁶⁴ J. Patout Burns, "Grace," *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, Gen. Ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 391-398.

⁶⁵ This is a major point which cannot be developed here. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981).

not save. But for Torrance, such abstract principles cannot define Christianity. Christianity is Christ. Grace is Christ. Election is Christ. Principles of “grace” and “faith” and doctrines of “sin” and “salvation” all have to be understood within the *solus Christus* and therefore within the Trinitarian shape of the gospel.

Torrance sets this out with reference to election in two sections in his Edinburgh lectures, published as *Incarnation*.⁶⁶ In a chapter on “The Mystery of Christ,” he addresses not only the meaning of *mystērion*, but also the significance of the word *prothesis*, referring to the eternal “purpose” of God (Rom. 8:28ff.; Eph. 2:22-23), but also having the meaning of “setting forth” (Romans 3: 24-25). He writes:

We may sum up the significance of *prothesis* by saying that it refers both to the divine election or eternal purpose in Christ who is in himself God and man, and it refers to the fact that the eternal purpose is set forth in the Incarnation, and continues to be set forth in the midst of the church in its *koinonia* through word and sacrament.⁶⁷

Later in the chapter in a section on the mystery of Christ and the Holy Trinity, he expands his comments on *prothesis* as election. Starting from 2 Timothy 1:9-10 and Ephesians 1, he states the thesis: “Election is the eternal purpose of God that is identical with Jesus.” He expands on that:

That *prothesis* is manifested or set forth in the Incarnation in which God himself has come to make our lot his own, to choose us and love us in our actual situation in spite of our sin and guilt. Election means, therefore, that Christ assumes our flesh, assumes our fallen estate, assumes our judgement, assumes our reprobation, in order that we may participate in his glory, and share in the union of the Son with the Father.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 168-171 and 177-180.

⁶⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 171.

⁶⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation* 178.

The implication then is that Jesus Christ “is identical with the eternal purpose of God that has gone into action in choosing to live and die for all, and in his life and death to set his love upon all humanity, and therefore to choose all men and women for himself by pouring out his love for all.” As in Barth, the only reprobation here is God’s reprobation of himself in Christ in the “wondrous exchange” which results in our election.⁶⁹

Election is therefore not an abstract principle. There is no “decree” apart from the One Word of God who demonstrates and enacts and embodies what the purpose (*prothesis*) of God is, and his purpose is that none should perish, but that all should come to a knowledge of the truth. Here at last *double* predestination and the decree of reprobation (whether Calvinist or Arminian) is denied and dismissed. God’s will and purpose and election is “to unite and sum all things (*anakephalaiōsasthai ta panta*) in heaven and earth” (Eph. 1:10). Every human being is elect in Jesus Christ. And that election is being carried into effect right now in the *koinonia* of the Church. Election is therefore to be thought of not in individualistic terms but in corporate terms in the body (*corpus*) of Christ.⁷⁰ Of course that does not mean universalism. There are those who deny their election, but “even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease.”⁷¹ So no one is lost because God has destined them to be reprobate, but only because they have rejected their election in Christ.⁷²

Would Wesley have been happy with such an understanding of election? It is of course impossible to say. But what to him would no doubt have been a breathtaking proposal certainly dispenses even more radically than he did with the notion of God as (in Torrance’s phrase) a dark predestinarian figure behind the back of Jesus. Where he might have been more prepared to disagree would have been with Torrance’s emphasis, developed in *The Mediation of Christ*, that Christ made

⁶⁹ Barth, *CD*, II/2, 94-194.

⁷⁰ See *Incarnation* (2008), 171-74.

⁷¹ Torrance, *Mediation* (1992), 94.

⁷² See the early article by Torrance in answer to the universalism of J. A. T. Robinson: “Universalism or Election?” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (1949), 310-19.

the perfect response for us.⁷³ Torrance contrasts two ways of preaching the gospel. One was the message of “conditional grace”: “Jesus Christ loved you and gave his life for you on the cross, but you will be saved only *if* you give your heart to him.” The other was to say: “Jesus Christ loved you and died for you and will never let you go even if you damn yourself in hell: therefore repent and believe.” Quite clearly, Wesley preached in the first way (rather effectively!), and insisted that faith, although it was a gift, and although it did not *merit* salvation (only the death of Christ did that), yet it was the “condition” of salvation. Wesley would have been afraid that Torrance’s way of preaching the gospel would result in antinomianism. But might he have viewed this similarly to his view of the imputed righteousness of Christ – accepting the theological legitimacy of Torrance’s emphasis, but being wary of its pastoral consequences.⁷⁴

Torrance would similarly have been moved by pastoral concerns, but in his case, the concern was that people would be “thrown back on themselves” and their own resources. For him, the “logic of grace” was to be seen in that the Word took our common (*anhypostatic*) humanity in such a way that he freely chose as a human being (*enhypostatically*) to trust and obey the Father.⁷⁵ Here the Augustinian language of “prevenient grace” appropriated by Wesley (but interpreted as freedom, not compulsion) is seen to have its Christological basis in the actuality of the Incarnation. May it not be said that beneath their differing emphases on invitation and warning in the preaching of the gospel there is fundamental theological agreement?

What may be true to say is that Barth and Torrance developed the Christocentric doctrine of grace and election which Arminius was pointing to in his

⁷³ Torrance, *Mediation* (1992), Chapter Four, 73-98.

⁷⁴ On the pastoral implications of Torrance’s theology, see Alexandra S. Radcliff, *The Claim of Humanity in Christ: Salvation and Sanctification in the Theology of T. F. and J.B. Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016).

⁷⁵ See Christian D. Kettler, *The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and the Reality of Salvation* (Lanham, MD: University of America Press, 1985), 139-42; and Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 117-123.

first “decree,” but which even *evangelical* Arminians (such as Wesley) subsequently lost.

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 writings¹ engage a variety of topics, including "enthusiasm"² and Catholicism,³ most important for our purposes are his writings against predestination⁴ and antinomianism,⁵ a topic Wesley understood to be deeply related to, and perhaps even implied by predestination.

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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!"⁸

⁶ Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 8:284-285.

⁷ 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).

⁸ 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.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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,'"¹¹ to argue that to affirm a doctrine of unconditional election seems to imply an affirmation of unconditional

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ 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.¹²

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.¹³

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.'¹⁴

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."¹⁵ That is to say, Wesley's concern

¹² Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:206-207.

¹³ Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210.

¹⁴ Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210.

¹⁵ Wesley, *Wesley's Works*, 10:210-211.

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

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

¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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,

¹⁷ 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).

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

¹⁹ 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.²⁰

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 . . . "²¹

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.²²

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

²⁰ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 196.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.”²³ 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.²⁴

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.²⁵

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

²⁴ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 96.

²⁵ 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.²⁶

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

²⁶ 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.²⁷

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

²⁷ 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!²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰

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

²⁸ Wesley, "Free Grace," 3:554-555. Original emphasis.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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."³¹ 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."³²

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.³³

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."³⁴

³¹ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 263.

³² Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 264.

³³ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 265.

³⁴ 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."³⁵

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?

³⁵ 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?³⁶

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?³⁷

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."³⁸

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.³⁹

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

³⁶ Torrance, *Atonement*, 181.

³⁷ Torrance, *Atonement*, 182.

³⁸ Torrance, *Atonement*, 183.

³⁹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 183.

humanity."⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹

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.⁴²

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

⁴⁰ Torrance, *Atonement*, 184.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 184-185.

⁴² 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.⁴³

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.⁴⁴

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 co-operate 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?⁴⁵

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.

⁴³ 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.

⁴⁴ Torrance, *Atonement*, 187.

⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶

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 2:12-13.⁴⁷ "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."⁴⁸

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."⁴⁹ This is the affirmation that traditionally leads to universalism (to which Limited atonement is the equally ill-founded response).⁵⁰ 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

⁴⁶ Wesley, "Free Grace," 3:547-548.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ Wesley, "On Working Out Our Own Salvation," 3:206.

⁴⁹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 188.

⁵⁰ 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.⁵¹

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."⁵²

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

⁵¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 189.

⁵² 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.

**JOHN WESLEY AND T. F. TORRANCE ON PNEUMATOLOGY,
THEOSIS, AND A BREATH OF LIFE FOR DYING DENOMINATIONS**

Jacquelynn Price-Linnartz, Th.D.

Independent researcher

jacki.price@gmail.com

Abstract: *Although John Wesley and Thomas F. Torrance are rarely put into conversation, they both develop creative theologies of theosis that have much to offer Christians, especially those in declining Wesleyan and Reformed communities. Both accounts of theosis combine the traditionally Eastern doctrine with Western Protestant concerns, both affirm the created world while speaking of its fulfillment, and both suggest humans become more fully human as they participate in the Spirit. This intersection in Torrance's and Wesley's theologies complicates their otherwise stark differences on matters of justification, sanctification, and human participation in the gracious work of God. Forming a theology of human participation in the Spirit with the guidance of Wesley, Torrance, and key contemporary interpreters of their work is more than an engaging academic exercise. Claiming such a theology compels Christians to embrace the New Creation here and now, and in the process, it might breathe new life into dying denominations that carry Reformed or Wesleyan banners.*

What might we gain from a conversation between John Wesley and Thomas F. Torrance? At first blush, Torrance and Wesley offer seemingly incommensurate theologies, the former representing Reformed theology in a Barthian key and the latter advocating Arminianism, progressive sanctification, holiness, and ultimate "perfection." Putting the two in conversation can feel like jamming a square peg into a round hole. Yet this volume of *Participatio* proves that the heretofore rare Torrance-Wesleyanism conversation is not only possible but productive.

When focusing narrowly on these theologians' pneumatologies through the lens provided by key interpreters, we discover how they both develop theologies of *theosis* that entail our "humanization" in the Spirit. According to both theologians, the Spirit moves in creation in a way that both affirms creatureliness and offers creaturely fulfillment, so that humans who participate in the Spirit are made more fully human. This intersection in Torrance's and Wesley's theologies complicates their otherwise stark differences on matters of justification, sanctification, and human participation in the gracious work of God. Although both Wesley and Torrance have attracted diverse interpretations, the work of Wesley scholars like Randy Maddox and Theodore Runyon and Torrance scholars like Myk Habets make this convergence startlingly clear when their interpretations are held side by side.

To make these arguments, this essay moves in three parts, considering the theologies of Wesley and Torrance in turn and then concluding with a direct comparison of the two. Forming a theology of human participation in the Spirit with the guidance of Wesley, Torrance, and these contemporary interpreters is more than an engaging academic exercise. Rather, claiming such a theology compels Christians to embrace the New Creation here and now, and in the process, it might breathe new life into dying denominations that carry Reformed or Wesleyan banners.

John Wesley on "Becoming" the New Creation

John Wesley's qualified version of *theosis* results from a creative combination of Eastern and Western theology; it entails humanization; it fully affirms the whole of God's creation; and it places this "process" squarely within the work of the Spirit. Although Wesley never uses the language of "becoming human" or "humanization" in the Spirit as Torrance does, both theologians affirm created reality so that "divinization" is *not* a rejection or dismissal of the created world's value but rather its fulfillment as the New Creation. Moreover, they both make sense of this mysterious process by appealing to creaturely "participation" in the Spirit, or human participation in divine activity and eschatological realities by way of the Spirit.

***Theosis* in a Western context**

Theosis, often translated as “divinization” or “deification,” is a theological concept most associated with Eastern Orthodoxy and its ancient antecedents, with an origin most accurately found in the Greek patristics.¹ Although contemporary Wesley scholars debate the extent to which John Wesley was directly influenced by Greek or Eastern thought,² one cannot deny the resemblances between the stereotypically Eastern theology of *theosis* and Wesley’s distinctive theology of sanctification. In *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today*, Theodore Runyon explains that for both the traditional Eastern formulation and Wesley’s own variant, *theosis* “should not be understood as becoming a god, but becoming more fully human, that is, becoming what God created humanity to be, the image reflecting God as that creature whose spiritual senses are enabled to participate in, to be a partner, and to share in (*koinonia*) the divine life.”³

John Wesley did not uncritically appropriate a purely Greek, patristic, or Eastern approach to *theosis* but instead combined elements typical of both East and West to create a unique and ultimately influential soteriology that hangs upon the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit. And as this essay explores in the next section,

¹ For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to these ancient antecedents as “Eastern” even though the label is somewhat anachronistic. These ancient antecedents include the works of the Greek patristics and those subsequent figures whose geographical and linguistic contexts — and whose stronger influence upon later Eastern Orthodoxy — merits the retroactive label of “Eastern.” As S. T. Kimbrough explains, although *theosis* predates and does not belong to Eastern Christianity, “the Eastern Church has been the primary harbinger of the doctrine of deification from the patristic era to the present.” In S. T. Kimbrough and Peter Bouteneff, *Partakers in the Life Divine: Participation in the Divine Nature in the Writings of Charles Wesley* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 4. See also Vladimir Kharlamov, “*Theosis* in Patristic Thought” in *Theology Today* 65.2 (2008): 158-168 for his tracing of the concept through the first several centuries of Christianity, fleshing out its complex origins.

² For example, Kenneth Collins suggests that Randy Maddox’s interpretation of Wesley’s *via salutis* overemphasizes a Catholic-styled cooperation between humanity and God, whereas Maddox considers Wesley’s notion of co-operant grace to be fully resonant with early Christian theologians, East and West. See Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 4, 14; and Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 19, 23, 220.

³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 81.

Torrance likewise draws upon patristic thought to craft a unique and compelling theology of *theosis* that likewise highlights the Spirit's sustaining presence.

As with Greek patristic theology, Wesley contends that humans need God to heal or restore the human "image" or "likeness" of God, defining salvation as "the renewal of our souls after the image of God."⁴ In Christ, the Creator "provides a means of being renewed" in that originally created image of God⁵ to the point that, in the eschatological kingdom, one's "state of holiness and happiness" far exceeds "that which Adam enjoyed in paradise."⁶

Wesley never sheds his Western belief that the atonement entails a juridical transaction — hence his soteriology that includes both human *justification* (by Christ in the atonement to pay for sins) and *sanctification* (driven by the Spirit as a process of restoration), considering these as sequential even if inextricably intertwined.⁷ As Randy Maddox puts it, "Wesley's understanding of human nature and the human problem gives primacy of place to therapeutic concerns like those more characteristic of Eastern Christianity, and integrates the more typically Western juridical concerns into this orientation."⁸ Runyon similarly argues that "Wesley places the encounter with divine grace and love in Christ, testified to in the Lutheran doctrine of justification, within the context of the Eastern understanding of the transforming power of the Spirit both *within* us and *through* us, making us participants in God's redeeming of all creation."⁹ According to Wesley, Christ came to restore "the image of God" by way of a "faith" working by "love" for all "inward and outward holiness" and the corresponding "destruction . . . of all sin," including

⁴ John Wesley, "A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion," Pt. I, 3, *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* [henceforth *Works*], ed. Frank Baker, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984—), 11:106. See also Wesley's Letter to Richard Morgan (15 Jan. 1734), *Works*, 25:369; Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Spirit," 15, *Works*, 1:309; and Sermon 44, "Original Sin," III.5, *Works*, 2:185; as compiled by Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 286n11.

⁵ John Wesley, "The Image of God," [4], *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. by Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 14.

⁶ John Wesley, "The New Creation," 18, *Works*, 2:510.

⁷ See especially John Wesley, "The Scripture Way of Salvation" in *Sermons*, 372-380.

⁸ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 67.

⁹ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 214.

that original sin of “pride” and “self-will” that caused Eve and Adam to see God as “an angry judge.”¹⁰

Was Wesley as influenced by Eastern thought or its ancient antecedents as Runyon and Maddox imply? After all, Wesley rarely if ever uses the word “*theosis*,” in favor of highly characteristic keywords like “sanctification” and “perfection.” However, Wesley was familiar with the Syrian theologian Macarius whose *Homilies* include relevant material on *theosis*, and in the translations Wesley read and passed along to his followers, *theosis* was typically translated as “sanctification” and “perfection.”¹¹ Runyon identifies this connection and, familiar with both Eastern theologies of *theosis* and Wesley’s own, forcefully argues that “the core idea of *theosis* — participation in, and transformation by, the creative energy of the Spirit — was central to Wesley’s understanding of regeneration and sanctification.”¹² In light of Wesley’s exposure to texts on *theosis* and the parallels between those accounts and his own, it makes sense to posit with Maddox and Runyon (and

¹⁰ John Wesley, “The End of Christ’s Coming,” I.8-10 and III.5-6 in *Sermons*, 445-446, 449-450.

¹¹ See “An Extract from the Homilies of Macarius” in John Wesley’s *A Christian Library: Consisting of Extracts from and Abridgements of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity which have been Published in the English Tongue*, vol.1 of 30, (London: Methodist Book Room, n.d.), 69-131. For more, see Ted A. Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1991), 66; Randy L. Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy: Influences, Convergences, and Differences,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, (1990): 29-53 in conversation with Howard Snyder, “John Wesley and Macarius the Egyptian,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 45, (1990): 55-60; John Cammel English, “The Path to Perfection in Pseudo-Macarius and John Wesley,” *Pacifica* 11 (1998): 54-62; David C. Ford, “Saint Makarios of Egypt and John Wesley: Variations on the Theme of Sanctification,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 33 (1988): 285-312; Mark T. Kurowski, “The First Step Toward Grace: John Wesley’s Use of the Spiritual Homilies of Macarius the Great,” *Methodist History* 36.2 (1998): 113-24; Hoo-Jung Lee, “Experiencing the Spirit in Wesley and Macarius” in *Rethinking Wesley’s Theology for Contemporary Methodism*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1998), 197-212.

For more on Wesley as influenced by Eastern thought, see Arthur MacDonald Allchin, “Our Life in Christ, in John Wesley and the Eastern Fathers,” in *We Belong to One Another: Methodist, Anglican, and Orthodox*, ed. Arthur MacDonald Allchin (London: Epworth, 1965), 62-78; Luke L. Keefer, “John Wesley: Disciple of Early Christianity,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19 (1984): 23-32; Albert C. Outler, “John Wesley’s Interests in the Early Fathers of the Church,” in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 55-74.

¹² Runyon, *The New Creation*, 245n35.

others'¹³) that Wesley's theology of sanctification and Christian perfection was influenced — whether directly or indirectly — by early Eastern accounts of *theosis* as the restoration of humanity's reflection of the image of God in Christ by the power of the Spirit.¹⁴

Creation affirmed in “divinization” and “humanization”

Wesley's affirmation of created reality may be missed by casual readers. For example, at times Wesley seems to undervalue the full humanity of Christ, resembling an almost gnostic or Manichean unease with physical, material realities that might reflect his cultural context in eighteenth-century England.¹⁵ This in turn may obscure the extent to which he affirms creation and our “humanization” by way of sanctification. That said, he holds fast to the creeds and orthodox doctrine on Christ's humanity as prescribed by his Anglican Church. Furthermore, his brother Charles not only embraced the theology of *theosis*,¹⁶ but Charles promotes a remarkable appreciation of the hypostatic union in his hymns (as in his *Nativity Hymns* and *Hymns on the Incarnation*), thereby balancing any potential lack in his

¹³ Wesley scholars debate how to interpret Wesley's inclusion of Macarius in his *Christian Library*, yet many admit the possible influence of such texts concerning *theosis* on Wesley's theology even if some prefer to downplay the presence or significance of *theosis* in Wesleyan theology. For more, see Matthew Friedman, *Union with God in Christ: Early Christian and Wesleyan Spirituality as an Approach to Islamic Mysticism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick [Wipf & Stock], 2017), especially 114-116, where Friedman thoughtfully engages Collins, Campbell, and Howard Snyder on the question of Wesley's inclusion of Macarius as well as other potential influences on Wesley's version of *theosis* embedded within his soteriology and doctrine of Christian perfection. See also footnote 7 above.

¹⁴ For his part, Maddox posits that Wesley's theology displays these “Eastern” qualities in part because he was an Anglican, and early Anglican theologians concerned themselves with the recovery of the church tradition as found in early Church fathers. See Maddox, “John Wesley and Eastern Orthodoxy,” 30.

¹⁵ Collins notes several ways in which John Wesley showed discomfort with the full humanity of Jesus, including removing the language of being the same “substance” as Mary from the *Thirty-Nine Articles* and criticizing familiar language of Christ, to avoid detracting from Christ's divinity (*The Theology of John Wesley*, 94-95). Maddox describes the same phenomenon and worries, with Collins, that Wesley here moves too far in the direction of monophysitism in Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 116. See also Donald Davie, “The Carnality of Charles Wesley” in *The Eighteenth-Century Hymn in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 57-70.

¹⁶ As argued by S. T. Kimbrough and Peter Bouteneff in *Partakers in the Life Divine*.

brother's approach as they together set the course for centuries of Methodism and its offshoots.¹⁷

Wesley bore an unmistakable love of the created world. This love shines forth in *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation; or, A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*, in which we find Wesley not so much offering "evidentialist natural theologies"¹⁸ as glorying in the perspective one gets of God's creation when seen in relationship to its loving creator, sustainer, and perfecter. Wesley proclaims, "The pure in heart see all things full of God," including the whole of creation, because from Jesus Christ we learn "that God is in all things, and that we are to see the Creator in the glass of every creature; that we should use and look upon nothing as separate from God."¹⁹ All of creation is "contained by God in the hollow of his hand, who by his intimate presence holds them all in being, who pervades and actuates the whole created frame, and is in a true sense the soul of the universe."²⁰ For Maddox, as for Runyon, this high view of creation as based on God's love for it, intentions for it, and actual presence *within* it is a resource for contemporary Wesleyans to appropriate (critically) for environmental stewardship.²¹

If Wesley thinks so highly of creation, then what do we make of his appeals to the New Creation? Wesley's theology of the New Creation evolved over time, transitioning from the amillennial and premillennial sympathies common in his context to a postmillennial perspective that values the present creation and its

¹⁷ E.g. see Charles Wesley, *Nativity Hymns* (1745), #5, reprinted in S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. as hymn 23, *The Lyrical Theology of Charles Wesley*, 134-35.

¹⁸ Maddox, "John Wesley's Precedent for Theological Engagement with the Natural Sciences," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 44, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 43.

¹⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 23, "Sermon on the Mount, III," I.6, *Works*, 1:513. John B. Cobb considers these claims of Wesley's in Cobb's *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 50.

²⁰ Wesley, Sermon 23, "Sermon on the Mount III," I.11, *Works*, 1:516-17.

²¹ Maddox, "Anticipating the New Creation: Wesleyan Foundations for Holistic Mission" in *Asbury Journal* 62, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 62-63 and "Nurturing the New Creation: Reflections on a Wesleyan Trajectory" in *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation*, ed. by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2004), 51. In both essays, Maddox further argues that we cannot simply rely on John Wesley's thoughts and attitudes, but that we must appropriate them for our current context.

ultimate fulfillment, inspiring Christians to share in creation's redemption in the here and now.²² Maddox calls Wesley's eschatology a "processive eschatology."²³ In this processive account, God's kingdom is already present as the "Kingdom of Grace," which is its "incipient expression in believers' lives" by the work of the Spirit; yet the "Kingdom of Glory" — or the kingdom's "eternal fullness in God's Presence" — still awaits us in the eschaton. As Maddox explains, it is "a *growing* reality, spurred on by the expectation of a penultimate fulfillment of that Reign prior to the New Creation."²⁴ In his mature theology, as in his sermon "The New Creation," Wesley preaches that God's redemption of the world is holistic, a "universal restoration" including animals, plants, and even the elements.²⁵ Wesley's theology suggests that God by the Spirit lovingly works in all of creation presently and eschatologically such that the New Creation does not replace humans, animals, plants, and elements, but represents their ultimate regeneration and fulfillment in God.

Participation via the Holy Spirit

According to Wesley, humans participate in the process of the New Creation — including our human recreation or creaturely restoration — by way of the Spirit. Wesley often quotes 2 Peter 1:3-4 on this point, stressing that, by God's grace, we may be "participants in the divine nature."²⁶ When God works in someone, that work

immediately and necessarily implies the continual inspiration of God's Holy Spirit: God's breathing into the soul, and the soul's breathing back what it first receives from God; a continual action of God upon

²² Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 238-239; 287-288. See also Collins, *Theology of John Wesley*, 316.

²³ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 235.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁵ Wesley, Sermon 64, "The New Creation," 7, *Works*, 2:502-3. See also Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 326, and Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation," 47.

²⁶ Wesley, *Works* 1:149, 150, 153, 320, 347, 435, 554, 658; 3:241, 597; 4:259. See also Runyon, *The New Creation*, 81, 245n34.

the soul, the re-action of the soul upon God; an unceasing presence of God, the loving, pardoning God, manifested to the heart, and perceived by faith; and an unceasing return of love, praise, and prayer, offering up all the thoughts of our hearts, all the words of our tongues, all the works of our hands, all our body, soul, and spirit, to be a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God in Christ Jesus. . . . And hence we may infer the absolute necessity of this re-action of the soul (whatsoever it be called) in order to the continuance to the divine life therein [sic].²⁷

This respiratory metaphor — which sketches the contours of Wesley's understanding of sanctification — extends beyond the relationship between the believer and God as the believer is renewed to participate in the divine life. For Wesley, humans are made for perfect love, reflecting God while remaining fully human as God redeems creation. In his 1734 sermon on "The One Thing Needful," he declares that humans were created "to love God; and to this end alone," to love God with all one's "heart, and soul, and mind, and strength." And "love is the very image of God," so that "by love" we are "not only made like God, but in some sense one" with God.²⁸ Love, then, is the essence of "divinization," the way in which we are like God and made one with God. This is the heart of "sanctification," that "ye may become partakers of the divine nature — Being renewed in the image of God, and having communion with [God], so as to dwell in God and God in you"²⁹ and thereby develop inward and outward holiness, or fruits of the Spirit that improve how we relate to the world around us.³⁰

The point bears repeating: the respiratory action of love by the Spirit flows and grows so that it reaches outward to include other humans and all of creation.³¹

²⁷ Wesley, Sermon 19, "The Great Privilege of Those that are Born of God," III.2-3, *Works*, 1:442.

²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 146, "The One Thing Needful," II.2, *Works*, 4:355.

²⁹ As discussed by Joseph William Cunningham, "John Wesley's Moral Pneumatology: The Fruits of the Spirit as Theological Virtues," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 24, no. 3 (2011): 276n4.

³⁰ Wesley, "The Signs of the Times," *Works*, 2: 527. See also Cunningham, "John Wesley's Moral Pneumatology," 278.

³¹ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 242.

When Wesley speaks of outward holiness, he has in mind works of mercy, for example, for fellow creatures in need. As we receive and return God's love by the Spirit, the Kingdom of Grace is spread in "individual lives, social structures, and creation at large"³²: believers do less harm and more good for the world, they engage social institutions for achieving God's purposes,³³ and they likewise adopt an ecological ethic.³⁴

According to Wesley, sharing in God's love of creation and our participation in its loving renewal is integral to our *telos*. Because we were made to share in this love, because we are to grow in love through sanctification by the Spirit, and because we are made to *reflect* God rather than *be* God, we can interpret the Wesleyan notion of sanctification or *theosis* as a form of *humanization*. In Runyon's words, in such sanctification by the Spirit we become "more fully human, that is, . . . what God created humanity to be."³⁵ Cunningham summarizes thusly: "The entirety of the Spirit's mission within the economy of salvation tends towards this end. Human beings are created to participate in the life of God, whose economic operation, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, fosters loving reciprocity and habitual devotion,"³⁶ enabling us to share in the New Creation as God makes all things new.

To summarize, Wesley's version of *theosis*, or becoming more human as part of the New Creation, takes singular shape in his theology of sanctification — a theology that emphasizes the ongoing, essential activity of the Spirit. By combining Western and patristic soteriologies, anthropologies, and theories of the atonement, Wesley at once imagines our need for Christ to redeem our sin-broken relationship with

³² Ibid., 243.

³³ Ibid., 246.

³⁴ Ibid., 247. His theology in general and his thoughts on animals in particular point in this direction.

³⁵ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 81.

³⁶ Cunningham, "John Wesley's Moral Pneumatology," 281. "To the same end are all the internal dispensations of God, all the influences of his Holy Spirit." Wesley, Sermon 146, "The One Thing Needful," II.5, *Works*, 4:357.

God and our need for the Spirit to restore us back to our *telos* as creatures meant to image, reflect, and share God's perfect love. As those justified by Christ, we may participate in the work of the Spirit, thereby participating in a love that renews all creation here and now even if we still await its perfect fulfillment.

With this outline of Wesley's theology of *theosis* in hand, those familiar with Torrance may already begin to see how the Wesley-Torrance theological convergence on *theosis* nevertheless contains within it a fault line between the two theologians and their traditions. As Runyon explains,

Wesley saw perfection in terms of love, and love cannot be encountered without transforming the person who receives it. While righteousness can be legally 'imputed' without being 'imparted,' love can only be received as it is imparted and participated in. Therefore, the perfect love of God inevitably changes the person who receives it.³⁷

Maddox makes the distinction yet clearer: Wesleyan sanctification does not entail a mere forensic imputation, and neither does it involve a direct infusion of virtues, but rather it is "a process of character-formation that is made possible by a restored participation of fallen humanity in the Divine life and power."³⁸ In short, the Wesleyan doctrine assumes growth and change on this side of eternity, so much so that living in perfect love — or "Christian perfection" — is assumed a real possibility. In this way, Wesleyan theology can lend itself to virtue theology.³⁹ Even if he never used the word, Wesley certainly offers a model of what it means to "become" more of what we are meant to be.

³⁷ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 228.

³⁸ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 112.

³⁹ As evident in the works by Randy Maddox and Stephen Long, e.g. Stephen Long's *John Wesley's Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness* (Nashville: Kingswood, 2005). Long's thesis connects Wesley's theology both to virtue theology (e.g. as stemming in part from Thomas Aquinas's work on virtue formation as habit formation) *and* to an emphasis on the primacy of union with Christ as foundational to all Christian ethical activity. In so doing, Long reveals a Wesleyan kinship with both Torrance and Dietrich Bonhoeffer when it comes to the centrality of union with Christ above all other ethical considerations, and, in the process, he might make "virtue theology" more palatable to those who follow Torrance on questions Christian ethics.

Torrance on “Becoming” the New Creation

***Theosis* in a Western context**

Like Wesley, Torrance draws upon early Eastern theology to formulate a unique and compelling account of *theosis* in a Western context. Greek patristic ideas influence Torrance’s own theology so explicitly that their indelible fingerprints do not engender the same degree of debate as they do for Wesley. It is telling that the section on the Holy Spirit in Torrance’s *Theology in Reconstruction* devotes one of its four chapters to the teachings of St. Athanasius and St. Basil in a volume that otherwise frequently frames its discourse in relation to Calvin and Reformed theology.⁴⁰ His undeniable fondness for Athanasius reappears in the companion volume *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*,⁴¹ whose apt subtitle alludes to the ways in which Torrance locates resources for contemporary ecumenism in early Eastern theologians and especially in the work of Athanasius.

Torrance longs for the Reformed tradition to incorporate an Eastern-inspired doctrine of *theosis*. He writes passionately and at length:

Let me plead for a reconsideration by the Reformed Church of what the Greek fathers called *theosis*. This is usually unfortunately translated *deification*, but it has nothing to do with the *divinization* of [humanity] any more than the Incarnation has to do with the humanization of God. *Theosis* was the term the Fathers used to emphasize the fact that through the Spirit we have to do with God in utter sublimity, his sheer Godness or holiness; creatures though we are, . . . in the Spirit we are made to participate in saving acts that are abruptly and absolutely divine, election, adoption, regeneration or sanctification and we participate in them by grace alone.⁴²

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996).

⁴¹ *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, OR: Eerdmans, Wipf & Stock, 1996).

⁴² Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 243.

Torrance continues his appeal by describing the ways in which such a doctrine functions as an antidote to human-centered and self-centered approaches to Christian existence that focus on our own abilities, capabilities, “creative spirituality,” “existential decisions,” and experience of divinization. Instead, *theosis* indicates how the Spirit frees humans from “imprisonment” to ourselves and lifts us “up to partake of the living presence and saving acts of God.” He concludes: “Is there anything we need to regain more than this faith in the utter Godness of God the Holy Spirit?”⁴³

Thus, Torrance is not only self-consciously influenced by early Eastern conceptions of *theosis*, but he brings them into a Western theological tradition known more for its distinctive emphases on election, justification, and adoption by “grace alone” than for patristic perspectives on “regeneration” and “sanctification.” Here we also see Torrance’s affirmation of “creaturehood” in his denial of its “divinization” *per se* in favor of explaining how human creatures instead are “lifted up” by the Spirit to “participate” in the divine triune life.⁴⁴

Creation affirmed in “divinization” and “humanization”

Torrance believes that those in Christ undergo “humanization” or “personalization” by the work of the Spirit. Like Wesley, Torrance combines typically Western concerns about human sin and the resulting alienation from God with the early Eastern concept of *theosis*. Because of our sin-induced alienation, human beings need *humanization* and *personalization* by the one true Human and Person: Christ.⁴⁵ “For us to be really human” and “really personal, therefore, is to be in Christ.”⁴⁶ As Myk Habets summarizes, those in Christ move from “human being, a

⁴³ Ibid. 243-244.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 67-72.

⁴⁶ Torrance, “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition,” *Modern Theology* 4, no. 4 (1988): 318. Note that being human and personal are mutually implicated in Torrance’s thought: “To be truly human is to be truly personal, and to be truly personal is to be truly human — that is the kind of human nature that God has embodied in Jesus Christ” (318).

biological fact, to human person, a moral, theological fact," which is "true personhood."⁴⁷ Therefore "men and women are persons-in-becoming."⁴⁸

Does this concept of "humanization" or "personalization" insult our humanity? Does it constitute a denial of humanity's creaturely goodness? Torrance is, after all, a Reformed theologian, and one could interpret Reformed theology's insistence on a clear distinction between Creator and creation as disdain for creation. Torrance refers to human creatures as lowly and limited,⁴⁹ befitting a tradition that famously likens human beings to worms. Yet maintaining the Creator-creation distinction does not require an all-consuming creaturely self-loathing — in fact, Torrance's concern in such passages is to ensure that our focus is *not* on the "self" at all, but on the Creator and the great goodness that the Creator bestows upon us as God's creatures. Torrance argues, "the human nature of the participant is not deified but reaffirmed and recreated in its essence as human nature, yet one in which the participant is really united to the Incarnate Son of God partaking in him in his own appropriate mode of the oneness of the Son and the Father . . . through the Holy Spirit."⁵⁰

God's plans for creation do not spell its utter rejection but its ultimate fulfillment in the New Creation. For Torrance, "the resurrection is the redemption of the old order of things, and is already the irruption of the new creation into the midst of the old."⁵¹ God's redemption does not destroy creation, but embraces it to transform it. Torrance writes:

In fulfilment of his eternal design God has acted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in such a way that, far from setting aside or infringing or interfering with the spatio-temporal order of the universe which he created (and which we try to formulate in what we

⁴⁷ Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁹ Torrance, "Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship," 243-244.

⁵⁰ Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 186.

⁵¹ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 177.

call 'laws of nature'), he accepts and affirms its reality, but he introduces into the situation a transcendently new factor which brings about an utterly astonishing transformation of it which is quite inexplicable in terms of anything we are able to conceive merely within the intelligible structures of the world.⁵²

God "accepts and affirms" creation while transforming it, and this transformation is the eruption of the new creation in the midst of the old. Through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Christ of Israel, God blesses, redeems, and transforms all humankind⁵³ and, indeed, the entire cosmos.⁵⁴

Participation via the Holy Spirit

Like Wesley, Torrance relies upon the language of "participation" in or by way of the Holy Spirit to describe how we relate to the New Creation in the midst of the old. By participating in the Spirit, we share in God's life and activity, which is God's teleological, eschatological will for us even in the here and now. By the Spirit, who makes all unity possible, our nature is "really united to the Incarnate Son of God," so that we share (in our "own appropriate mode") in the "oneness of the Son and the Father."⁵⁵ As he puts it elsewhere, "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 his triune being." The triune God enables us "to participate, creaturely beings though we are, in the eternal communion . . . of knowing and loving . . . him there

⁵² Ibid., 190.

⁵³ Torrance describes this as Israel's "destiny," as he does throughout "The Divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History," in *Witness of the Jews to God*, ed. David W. Torrance (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), e.g. 101. See also Ray S. Anderson, "Reading T. F. Torrance as a Practical Theologian," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 165.

⁵⁴ Torrance worries that Barth speaks too much of the redemption of just "man" and not enough on the cosmos itself. Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 61. See also Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 8.

⁵⁵ Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 186.

as one God in three Persons.”⁵⁶ Or again, “creatures though we are, . . . in the Spirit we are made to participate in saving acts that are abruptly and absolutely divine, election, adoption, regeneration or sanctification and we participate in them by grace alone.”⁵⁷

The question of sanctification

In the quote above, Torrance speaks of “regeneration” and “sanctification,” terms one might associate more with Wesleyan parlance than Reformed. He does not shy from their use, arguing that we witness “the sanctification of our human life in Jesus Christ, an elevating and fulfilling of it that far surpasses creation,” for Christ raises “up” people to “have their being in the very life of God”⁵⁸ as they are “raised into union and communion with God.”⁵⁹ Note that such sanctification is due to Christ’s work, takes place “in” Christ, and consists of an elevation into the life of God for the sake of communion with God. Torrance’s account of sanctification emphasizes Christ’s efficacious agency on our behalf — so much so that our sanctification (a.k.a. humanization and personalization) is a sharing in Christ’s perfect sanctification, humanization, and personalization — and it echoes Calvin’s description of what takes place during the sacrament of Communion, thereby taking on a distinctively Reformed flavor. This theology is decidedly christocentric, faithfully affirming Christ’s vicarious accomplishments at every turn.

Indeed, despite the many commonalities between Wesleyan theology and Torrance’s on the matter of *theosis*, “sanctification” marks a major point of departure when it comes to the role of human agency in the process. As seen above, a Wesleyan account of *theosis* lends itself to virtue theology in the form of “character formation.” Humans can and should pursue holiness by habituating their affections as wholly responsive to and part of God’s perfect love. The Wesley brothers, and countless Wesleyans after them, have devoted themselves to a long

⁵⁶ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 118-119.

⁵⁷ Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 243.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 66.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 223. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 159.

list of “means of grace” for just such a purpose. Although contemporary Wesleyans debate the extent to which we are “cooperating” with God and “responding” to God, and what the proper terminology and metaphors should be, it remains the case that human involvement, will, decision, response, reaction, or what Torrance might call our “subjective” response remain essential to a Wesleyan account of *theosis* in the form of sanctification by the Spirit.

In practice, this difference between Wesleyan and Reformed emphases has made the two traditions seem incommensurate. Yet the distinction on the level of theology can be more subtle. First, both take the “grace alone” or “by God alone” stance often considered a hallmark or keystone of the Reformed tradition. Wesley, too, stresses that sanctification can only take place in the Spirit, who enables our response to God’s prevenient grace in the first place. Second, both pioneering theologians acknowledge that humans participate in this process, *by the Spirit*, when *by the Spirit* does not deny our human agency but rather enables it to take proper form. To understand this, we must adopt a model of non-competitive agency. For Torrance, God enables humans to respond, to share in Christ’s obedience and sanctification, because “the fullness of grace creatively includes the fullness and completeness of our human response.” As Torrance often puts it, “All of grace really does mean all of [the human].” For “how could the unconditional grace of the Lord Jesus Christ . . . ever mean a depreciating of the very humanity he came to save?!”⁶⁰

The distinction, then, is uncomfortably subtle in theology even if marked in practice. When Wesley is willing to move from “grace alone” and “only by the Spirit” on to a litany of behaviors that humans should perform in response as they pursue holiness, share in God’s perfect love, and participate in the eruption of the New Creation, Torrance prefers to deflect our focus back to Christ alone. For Torrance, our “participation in grace” in Christ can only be understood eschatologically. It means “the real participation here and now in the new creation through the Spirit, and within the time of waiting for the redemption of the body at the *Parousia* of the Lord. [It] involves a real having of grace within our creaturely being and existence, but a having that is yet to be fulfilled or completed when Christ comes to make all

⁶⁰ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, xii-xiii.

things new.”⁶¹ Habets calls this an “eschatological mystery.”⁶² We do not activate or achieve our union with God, our humanization, or our sanctification by any human effort. Instead, the Spirit “realizes in us the recreative power of the risen and glorified Humanity of Christ” and unites us to Jesus’s obedience and faith so that, in our worship, the Spirit also raises “us up in Jesus to participate in the worship of heaven and in the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity.”⁶³ We are humanized — *sanctified* — by the Spirit as the Spirit unites us to Christ, the True Human, and we thereby enter more deeply into the triune communion.

Perhaps these differing impulses on behalf of the two theologians reflect their different concerns. Wesley scholars often dub him a “practical theologian,” whereas Torrance far more deserves the title of “systematic theologian.” More concerned with our human practices and “methods,” Wesley would naturally want to prescribe activities for his followers as he sought to renew the nigh-dead religion of eighteenth-century Anglicanism. Torrance, on the other hand, did not set out to spearhead a renewal movement, but made his lasting contribution to the church universal through his stunning insight as an intellectual, even if he engaged this calling in a pastoral, priestly, and even practical manner. Therefore, we are not surprised that Torrance develops a more thoroughly trinitarian theology with vast intricacies that seek to expound upon and weave together our creedal affirmations, including the hypostatic union and triune relations, whereas Wesley engages creedal theology on a far more *ad hoc* basis. Even if their differences as a “practical theologian” and “systematic theologian,” respectively, carries explanatory power, their divergence on an otherwise remarkable convergence of creative theology merits closer examination.

⁶¹ Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 186.

⁶² Habets, *Theosis*, 44.

⁶³ Torrance, “Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship,” 250. See also Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 201.

Productive Convergences and Divergences between Wesley and Torrance on Theosis: Receiving a Breath of Life for Dying Denominations

This essay has so far argued that John Wesley and T. F. Torrance offer remarkably similar theologies of *theosis*, made all the more remarkable given the relative curiosity of finding such developed accounts of *theosis* among Protestant theologians of prior centuries. Both accept the Western theological precepts concerning sin, alienation, and humanity's need for God's intervention to overcome that alienation in Christ, and both combine this understanding with the Greek patristic theological precepts of regeneration, sanctification, and of the healing of creation by the Spirit such that the New Creation both affirms the old creation while representing its incomparable improvement and fulfillment. Both theologians imply or state that "divinization" entails a form of "humanization," so that humans become more of what they are meant to be by participating in the divine life and thereby sharing in God's loving redemption of the world. Moreover, they both make sense of this mysterious process by appealing to human "participation" in the Spirit, or our participation in divine activity and eschatological realities by way of the Spirit.

When exploring Wesley's and Torrance's explanations and uses of the term "sanctification," we detect the fractures in their accounts that anticipate the rift that currently divides Wesleyan and Reformed thought and practice. Speaking as a Wesleyan, I would argue that although we are a diverse family, we tend to cling to our methods, our "Discipline," and our rules. Wesleyanism's historically largest branch, the United Methodist Church of the USA, has for decades been associated with *works* — works of piety and mercy through Bible studies and mission trips and vocal stances on issues of social justice and political ethics. Since the 1920s, US Methodism's members and leaders represent "evangelical" as well as "liberal" or "modern" camps; it played well with the Social Gospel movement; and it established itself as a mainline institution in the 1950s and 1960s that is now associated — whether justly or not — with do-goodery and keeping up appearances. Traditional Reformed theology, on the other hand, continues to stress not so much *human* actions but God's actions, casting suspicion on Wesleyan practices as bordering on Pelagian attempts to earn salvation. That said, many

Reformed denominations and churches face a similar situation as their Wesleyan siblings, such as the PCUSA and PCA, which are experiencing plummeting membership and funds as Western mainline churches together drift toward extinction.

Might examining the fracture between Wesley and Torrance on the question of sanctification clarify our contemporary differences? Might it even offer resources for Wesleyan and Reformed Christians as we contemplate the possibility of denominational death? Perhaps. Let us return to the question of sanctification and our human participation in it by way of the Spirit as seen in Wesley's and Torrance's versions of *theosis*.

Productive divergences: practices, means of grace, and relocating the focus from self to God

While Wesley is most certainly more of a "practical theologian" than a systematic one, Torrance is sometimes accused of being too impractical. That criticism has calcified into a bone of contention among Torrance scholars. For his part, Ray Anderson's "attempt at reading Torrance as a practical theologian" may take him far, yet he nevertheless concludes that Torrance "seldom ventures onto the turf where practical theologians ply their trade."⁶⁴ Torrance is not *wholly* impractical, and his theological offerings have many practical applications.⁶⁵ He contends that we are *eschatologically* empowered to serve, obey, and glorify the Father like the Son, by way of participation in the Spirit. Habets reads Torrance as further suggesting Christians undergo a progressive transformation as they are "continually bound to Christ by the Spirit" through "fellowship with the saints, corporate worship, the ministry of the Word, and partaking of the sacraments"⁶⁶ — all practical activities that subtly echo a few of the prominent Wesleyan means of grace that Wesleyans likewise believe aid one's progressive transformation. Nevertheless, there remains

⁶⁴ Anderson, "Torrance as a Practical Theologian," 176.

⁶⁵ See Todd H. Speidell, "The Soteriological Suspension of the Ethical in the Theology of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio: Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, 5 (2015): 56-90.

⁶⁶ Habets, *Theosis*, 195.

in Torrance's work a tendency to eschew practical concerns right when they are about to come into view.

Why? Torrance's driving concern is to point away from us and focus instead on Christ. Salvation — and sanctification and redemption and the eruption of the New Creation — is affected by the triune God by way of Christ's life, death, and resurrection as one who was fully God and fully human. As Paul Molnar explains, Christ has done all that needs to be done

so that we do not need to do anything to complete this work or to enable it; we only have to receive it gratefully as the very gift of grace, that is, of God himself enabling our lives as part of the new creation inaugurated by Christ's own life, death, resurrection and ascension and thus as the fully human beings God intended us to be.⁶⁷

Torrance answers Ray Anderson's gentle criticism directly, explaining that he repeatedly emphasizes Christ's vicarious humanity and unconditional grace because it is the truth of the Gospel and necessary for freeing us from our "deep seated bondage to the self."⁶⁸ We should hear in this both an Augustinian indictment of sinful humanity's *curvatus in se* and a diagnosis of modernity and its exaltation of the "Self" as the locus and arbiter of knowledge — a relationship to the self that prevents us from proper love and proper knowledge of that which necessarily lies beyond us. By God's grace alone are we freed from ourselves so that we are in turn

⁶⁷ Molnar, *Theologian of the Trinity*, 292.

⁶⁸ In response to Ray Anderson's article, Torrance writes, "I often find the Gospel of salvation by grace alone to be so difficult for people to understand and believe. In preaching and speaking about it to good people in their homes I have sometimes found the sharpest reaction, for it is unconditional grace that cuts so deeply into our life, and unconditional grace which strangely upsets so many evangelical Christians, as I have found in their reaction to my book, *The Mediation of Christ*. It is sometimes the case that would-be evangelical Christians shy away from the sheer truth of salvation by grace alone, and yet it is there, as I have so often found in my pastoral ministry and theological writing, that people feel so 'liberated,' as they say . . . it cuts deeply into the very quick of the soul and frees it from deep seated bondage to the self. It is when people think of salvation through what [Jesus has done through his whole life, death, and resurrection] that they can really understand the deep truth of the vicarious humanity of Christ and his unconditional grace." Torrance, "Thomas Torrance Responds," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 323.

free *for* God. Only in such freedom can we love God, love others, and be who we are meant to be as creatures who participate in the divine life of love.

Could Wesleyans learn from Torrance's quest for a singular focus on Christ and his concerns about our deep-seated bondage to the self? Perhaps it is time for us Wesleyans to re-examine the ways in which our gaze has slipped from God such that we too often remain self-absorbed, engaged in intense navel-gazing both individually and communally even as we nobly strive to be good Christians who do the right thing. If this description is at all true of Wesleyans, then we desperately need to hear the gospel message again, the good news that *God has done it for us in Christ by the Spirit*. While we are called to follow Christ and love our neighbors, which entails practical action on behalf of the world, we must first and always focus on the God of love who alone inspires and enables such activity to share in God's redemptive love. Wesley himself would affirm that works of mercy and works of piety are dead without the gracious Spirit, that they do more harm than good when not done in the right spirit.⁶⁹ We are called to love as God loves, yes, which requires our activity. But Jesus Christ — and not us — remains the one and only savior of ourselves and the world.⁷⁰

What might Reformed Christians — especially those who take Torrance seriously — gain from Wesley's account of *theosis*? We already see an independent convergence taking place in the work of Reformed theologian James K. A. Smith, whose Cultural Liturgies series presents a form of virtue theology that very much aligns with the angles of Wesley interpretation that Maddox and Runyon have offered. That is, they all converge on a call to character formation through the habituation of our affections, the primary difference simply being that while Maddox and Runyon hear this call uttered on Wesley's lips, Smith draws heavily upon philosophers like Pierre Bordieus and Merleau-Ponty to make his case.⁷¹ In both Torrance and Smith, then, we find Reformed intellectuals attracted to concepts that

⁶⁹ Wesley, "The Means of Grace," I.4. in *Sermons*, 159.

⁷⁰ Based on Stephen Long, *John Wesley's Moral Theology*, Long would argue that such a shift in focus would in fact bring us closer to true Wesleyanism.

⁷¹ As in James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

fall under the heading of *theosis*. Interestingly, Smith has not directly engaged his Reformed predecessor on *theosis* and formation. What would happen if he did? Bringing Torrance and Smith into conversation precisely on this question would be one fruitful line of inquiry going forward, especially for Reformed Christians. Likewise, Smith could also serve as an additional interlocutor as we explore this intriguing convergence of Wesleyan and Reformed scholarship on the topic of *theosis*.⁷²

Yet Reformed Christians, I suspect, have something far more immediately practical to gain from engaging the Wesleyan account of *theosis*. Just as Wesleyans stand to benefit from an interrogation of their “works,” motivations, and focus (or lack thereof) on the person and work of Jesus Christ, so too might Reformed Christians — especially those who take Torrance seriously — stand to benefit from the Wesleyan means of grace. What are these means of grace? Habets himself mentions a few when summarizing the practical applications he sees in Torrance’s account: “fellowship with the saints, corporate worship, the ministry of the Word, and partaking of the sacraments.”⁷³ For Wesleyans, these are all “means of grace,” or God-given ways in which the Spirit regularly moves us to encounter and receive God’s grace. Through these, God can graciously reform us and our desires onward along the path of sanctification. As Wesley puts it, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels” that God uses to convey to us “preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.” For Wesley, the “chief” means include prayer (individual and communal), engaging the Scriptures, and receiving the Lord’s Supper.⁷⁴ Yet Wesleyans also regularly add many others, including “holy

⁷² For reflection on a Reformed engagement of *theosis* as inspired by T. F. Torrance and J. B. Torrance, see Heleen E. Zorgdrager, “On the Fullness of Salvation: Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8, no. 4 (2014): 366-368.

⁷³ Habets, *Theosis*, 195.

⁷⁴ Wesley, “The Means of Grace,” II.1, *John Wesley’s Sermons*, 160.

conversations” with other Christians, and all works of mercy that are more outwardly directed in service to neighbor and the rest of creation.⁷⁵

Just because these means of grace can be abused or approached in the wrong spirit does not nullify their proper place in quotidian Christian life as Christians look to Christ to find greater union with him. In fact, the traditionally Reformed emphasis on “grace alone” was shared by Wesley himself, so that Wesleyans hear in Torrance’s version of *theosis* a heady reminder to recover that part of Wesley’s own teachings. In his sermon “The Means of Grace,” Wesley explores the potential conundrum between outward acts and the need for a singular focus on God. Although he does not wish to dismiss all forms of “outward religion,” he admonishes his hearers:

“By grace are ye saved:” Ye are saved from your sins, from the guilt and power thereof, ye are restored to the favour and image of God, not for any works, merits, or deservings of yours, but by the free grace, the mere mercy of God, through the merits of his well-beloved Son: Ye are thus saved, not by any power, wisdom, or strength, which is in you, or in any other creature; but merely through the grace or power of the Holy Ghost, which worketh all in all.⁷⁶

Wesley further affirms that “outward religion is nothing worth, without the religion of the heart; that . . . external worship is lost labour, without a heart devoted to God; that the outward ordinances of God then profit much, when they advance inward holiness, but, when they advance it not, are unprofitable and void, . . . an utter abomination to the Lord.”⁷⁷ Rather, the “value of the means depends on their actual subservience to the end of religion,”⁷⁸ and “all outward means whatever, if

⁷⁵ For a thorough introduction to the Wesleyan means of grace, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 192-228. Maddox walks readers through means like the Lord’s Supper, corporate worship and prayer, scripture lectionary, hymns, sermons, love feasts, special services, rules and measures for accountability, private devotions and prayers and readings of scripture, serving the needy and other works of mercy, catechesis, confirmation rites, and the Methodist Societies.

⁷⁶ Ibid., II.6, 161.

⁷⁷ Ibid., I.4, 159.

⁷⁸ Ibid., II.2, 160.

separate from the Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce, in any degree, either to the knowledge or love of God.”⁷⁹ The means contain no “intrinsic” or “inherent power,” but rather “God alone” gives “every good gift.”⁸⁰ Moreover, God can give the gift of grace without such “means” should God choose. Lastly, “the use of all means whatever will never atone for one sin,” because “it is the blood of Christ alone, whereby any sinner can be reconciled to God.”⁸¹

Wesley is adamant, then, that the means are not ways for us to earn atonement or salvation or even sanctification — they have no intrinsic power, and we merit nothing through them — but instead they are secondary to our devotion to God and must take place within the Spirit for us to receive grace through them. As “ordinances” of God that God offers us, we receive them as ways to “wait” on God’s grace.⁸² Just as we regularly celebrate the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper even though “it is finished” in Christ, so too may we attend these other ordinances in this time of the eschatological reserve. Therefore, Reformed Christians who seek practical applications of Torrance’s account of *theosis* need not fear a thorough exploration of the Wesleyan approach to the means of grace in the hopes of receiving God-given and Spirit-led growth in them.⁸³

Productive convergences: creation, ecumenism, & experiencing the Spirit

Both Reformed and Wesleyan Christians benefit from Wesley’s and Torrance’s accounts of *theosis* as the accounts converge on a few key themes. First, they together affirm the created world in ways that allow us to see both brokenness and promise, sin and healing, emboldening us to love ourselves and the rest of creation

⁷⁹ Ibid., II.3, 160.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., II.4, 161.

⁸² Ibid., IV.1, 166.

⁸³ Heleen Zorgdrager explains, “a Reformed understanding of sanctification or deification can never be an individualistic pursuit,” but Christians can nevertheless experience (as Julie Canlis puts it) “transformation” through “deepened *koinonia* with God and others,” most obviously in the Eucharist. Zorgdrager, “Tracking *Theosis* in Reformed Theology,” 381. Quoting Julie Canlis, *Calvin’s Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 252.

as God does. Second, both accounts themselves embody a productive form of theological ecumenism that plays out in practical ecumenism as well, which further deepens the third and perhaps most urgent benefit for contemporary Christians: their insistence on the Spirit's active presence and our graciously given participation in the Spirit. After all, this essay's title not only references soteriology and anthropology, but *pneumatology* as well. What does it mean to participate in the Spirit? Perhaps it really is an "eschatological mystery"⁸⁴ that resists additional probing. Yet surely it is also a lived reality, something to be experienced. Torrance himself as well as Wesley scholars like Theodore Runyon and Lyle Dabney all advocate ecumenism precisely based on the doctrine and lived reality of the Holy Spirit, yet the contemporary mainline iterations of Wesleyan and Reformed traditions continue to struggle on this count.

Theodore Runyon finds that Wesleyan pneumatology naturally extends into Wesleyan ecumenism. Wesley not only draws upon a diverse, ecumenical heritage, but Wesley argues that we partake in Christian fellowship with others who, despite their different opinions and expressions, experience the same Spirit and "cleave to God through the Son of his love."⁸⁵ In his sermon on the "Catholic Spirit," Wesley could not be clearer: no matter a fellow Christian's theological opinions or modes of worship, if she believes in the triune God and seeks to love God and others, then he begs her, "give me thine hand."⁸⁶ As Runyon points out, Wesley's doctrinal emphases on prevenient grace as the wide-ranging activity of the Spirit likewise readily lend themselves to Christian ecumenism, and, indeed, a more gracious and humble engagement with diverse cultural contexts.⁸⁷

Another Wesleyan scholar, Lyle Dabney, uses Wesley's pneumatology to launch a plea for ecumenism as a means of redressing contemporary struggles. In "Pneumatology and the Methodist Tradition," he argues that

⁸⁴ Habets, *Theosis*, 44.

⁸⁵ Wesley, Sermon 20, "The Lord our Righteousness," II.2-3, *Works*, 1:454. Discussed in Runyon, *The New Creation*, 218.

⁸⁶ Wesley, Sermon 39, "Catholic Spirit," *John Wesley's Sermons*, 299-309.

⁸⁷ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 218.

Wesley's contribution to the Western theological tradition consists in his striving towards what can perhaps best be termed a 'theology of the third article' of the creed. This was a theology of the transforming redemption of God's human creature and all creation in and through the Holy Spirit that begins in forgiveness and ends in holiness of life.⁸⁸

He concludes that Wesleyans must recover their "theology of the third article," which in turn demands a renewed commitment to the ecumenical movement. For Dabney, "Ecumenical theology, in this sense, would thus be best understood not simply as the task of resolving our 'internal' disputes concerning faith and practice, but rather as the common task of faithful living and thinking as disciples of Christ in the face of the challenge of the new 'external' situation in which we find ourselves called to pursue God's redemptive mission today."⁸⁹

Torrance likewise finds that his pneumatology compels him toward ecumenism, and that the two are intimately related. In "The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit for Ecumenical Theology,"⁹⁰ Torrance makes two connections between ecumenism and pneumatology. First, his presentation of the gospel, replete with its Torrancian version of *theosis* as inspired by both East and West, functions as a bridge for him to invite deeper communion and agreement between Eastern and Western Christianity. Second, he argues that Christians grieve the Spirit by way of endless, anti-ecumenical divisions.⁹¹

How might we take the invitation to ecumenism to heart precisely as we ask how to "wait" on or "participate in" the Spirit today in our dwindling congregations and denominations? First, we may receive a breath of life from the Spirit by succumbing to the outward, extrinsic, ecstatic orientation that ecumenism demands of us. Such an other-oriented stance reflects and shares in the movement of the Spirit of the triune God. This in turn aligns with Dabney's suggestion that the

⁸⁸ D. Lyle Dabney, "Pneumatology in the Methodist Tradition," in *Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham, *Oxford Handbooks* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 577.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 583.

⁹⁰ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 229-239.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

ecumenical movement should itself focus on the *mission Dei*, participating in God's love of the world through loving care and service.

Second, the essential role of the Spirit in Wesleyan and Torrance versions of *theosis* reveals yet another form of ecumenism, one that may likewise breathe a renewing breath of life into Wesleyan and Reformed communities. Namely, Wesleyan and Reformed Christians must learn from our Christian siblings about *experiencing the Spirit*. Torrance comes close to making just such a recommendation when he proclaims, "Is there anything we need to regain more than this faith in the utter Godness of God the Holy Spirit?"⁹² He makes this cry as he indicts both Western Protestantism and Roman Catholicism for "domesticating" the Spirit, as if humans control the Spirit of God. He continues:

If our worship and witness are conspicuous for their lack of Holy Spirit, it is surely because we Protestants, whatever we may confess in our creeds, have diminished belief in the transcendent power and utter Godness of the Creator Spirit, and have become engrossed in our own subjectivities and the development of our own inherent potentialities. Hence the first thing that must happen to us is a glad subjection to the lordly freedom and majesty of God the Holy Spirit, and a humble readiness for miraculous divine acts that transcend all human possibilities and break through the limitations of anything we can conceive. *Come Creator Spirit*, is a prayer of open surrender to the absolute creativity of God.⁹³

Those who bemoan the decline of "Christianity" from within the sanctuaries of mainline church properties fail to recognize the staggering growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic branches of the church universal. We can hear in both Torrance and Wesley a suggestion that we humble ourselves enough to *learn* from our siblings who actively and routinely welcome the Lordship of the Spirit in their spaces of worship and beyond, whether they be Pentecostal, Charismatic, or our Eastern Orthodox siblings from whom we have inherited much of the theological

⁹² Ibid., 244.

⁹³ Ibid., 245.

understanding of Spirit-led *theosis* in the first place. Perhaps we should imitate John Wesley, in the way he welcomed “enthusiasm” in his meetings and spaces of worship even if he himself felt uncomfortable with such emotional displays, admitting their plausible legitimacy in light of the Spirit’s activity within the otherwise highly methodical and structured organization of the Methodist movement.⁹⁴ Whatever our initial hesitations may be, surely we can learn from those who more readily embrace the experience of the Spirit, proclaim the Spirit’s utter Godness and Lordship, and cry, “Come, Creator Spirit” in open surrender.

Make no mistake: learning more from Eastern Orthodoxy and those branches of Christianity with growing numbers does not remotely guarantee that mainline congregations will ever rebound in popularity or avoid gradual extinction. Indeed, numerical count is not a measure of God’s work or will. And humble learning is but one step on a journey with no predictable path, as uncontrolled by humans as the wind that blows where it will. Yet what do we have to lose in giving ourselves to the Spirit? In our renewed attention to the one who first loved us, may we discover that all of our “means of grace” — including our denominational structures — are nothing when they do not serve their true end, edifying when they do, and always and everywhere contingent upon the Spirit who humanizes us, sanctifies us, and unites us to a loving God by any means necessary.

⁹⁴ For more discussion of Wesley’s relationship to Charismatic expressions of Christianity and his relationship to displays of supposedly spiritual enthusiasm, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 134-136, 320n128, and Howard A. Snyder and Daniel V. Runyon, *The Divided Flame: Wesleyans and Charismatic Renewal* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

A CATHOLIC SPIRIT:

John Wesley and T. F. Torrance in Ecumenical Perspective

Joel Scandrett, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of Historical Theology

Director of the Robert E. Webber Center

Trinity School for Ministry

jscandrett@tsm.edu

Abstract: *Grounded in common commitment to a Reformed catholicity, both John Wesley and T. F. Torrance proffer Christian unity as a desideratum necessarily predicated upon the Nicene faith, and issuing from a common love of the triune God made known in Jesus Christ. Yet Wesley's rational and relational approach stands in tension with Torrance's ontological and sacramental emphasis. This article delineates points of convergence and divergence between these approaches, and suggests the possibility of their mutual complementarity and support toward the goal of Christian unity.*

Some might consider a theological comparison of John Wesley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance to be an exercise in futility. Such assessment will be shown to be mistaken if Wesley and Torrance are examined in their own right. While a cursory comparison may identify obvious differences, close examination will reveal convergence of thought between Torrance and Wesley in several important respects. Such convergence is evident in their ecumenical thought, the demonstration of which is the burden of this essay.

Admittedly, this comparison is not without challenges. The chief challenge is that "ecumenism" was not a principal concern for Wesley, as it was for Torrance. Torrance was directly engaged in ecumenical dialogue on a global level in the latter half of the twentieth century. By contrast, Wesley's ecumenical posture was a

practical outgrowth of his concern for the renewal of the church in (and of) England in the eighteenth century. Consequently, Torrance's ecumenical corpus is extensive while explicit ecumenical discourse from Wesley is sparse. Nevertheless, there are a key texts in Wesley's corpus that grant us insight into his ecumenical approach. An examination of these alongside select writings of Torrance will show that their views, while in tension, may broadly complement one another. Wesley's ecumenism is essentially *doctrinal* and *relational* while Torrance's is *ontological* and *sacramental*; yet both are grounded in a common Nicene and Reformational orientation.

Before examining Wesley and Torrance's ecumenical perspectives, let us briefly identify some key features of this shared theological orientation.

A Reformed Catholicity

Perhaps the best phrase by which to capture the shared theological orientation of Wesley and Torrance is a "Reformed catholicity." There are clear differences of context in their theologies, as well as substantial differences of emphasis and development, yet both are committed to a principle of catholicity that is broadly Reformational in outlook.

For Wesley, this posture is congruent with his formation and training as an Anglican, and reflects a classically Anglican ecclesiology – though modified by Wesley's particular views over time. For Torrance, this posture appears to have been the result of the "mixed marriage" of his Anglican mother and Presbyterian father, his training in Scottish theology (with attention to the Church fathers), and Karl Barth.¹ Setting aside the question of influences, the following shared commitments contribute to a shared posture of Reformed catholicity. As we examine them, we will also see important differences emerge.

¹ See Alister McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999). See also Jason R. Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014) 163-166.

Scriptural Foundation

The most basic Reformational commitment that Wesley and Torrance share is to the priority and authority of Holy Scripture. To what extent their respective doctrines of *revelation* are in agreement is another matter. Yet both are fundamentally committed to the theological priority of Scripture as “God’s Word written” (39 Articles of Religion, Article XX), and the ultimate authority of Scripture over all human authority.

At the same time, both figures reject a reductive biblicism. Wesley stresses the importance of multiple perspectives in the responsible interpretation of Scripture.² And Torrance develops a sophisticated theology of Scripture that is “ordered from a trinitarian theology of revelation, through an ontology of the prophetic and apostolic texts to a hermeneutics of repentance and faith.”³ As such, though for different reasons, both can be seen to share a *prima Scriptura* approach in contrast to the *nuda Scriptura* of a rationalist biblicism.

In particular, while both figures affirm the trustworthiness and authority of Scripture, they do so with keen awareness of the mediated character of Scripture’s reception and canonical formation by the Church. Both acknowledge the complex relation between apostolic authority, the Rule of Faith, and the formation of the canon.⁴ As such, their commitment to Scripture is held within a broad understanding of normative ecclesial tradition that can also be seen in their shared creedal orientation.

Creedal Orientation

Wesley and Torrance differ in the ways they approach and appropriate the creedal legacy of the Christian tradition, yet the fact of their shared creedal orientation is

² See Randy Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope: John Wesley and the Bible” *Methodist Review*, Vol 3 (2011).

³ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 89.

⁴ For Wesley, see Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope: John Wesley and the Bible.” For Torrance, see “The Deposit of Faith,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36:1 (1983) 1-28.

vital to their shared Reformed catholicity. For Wesley, this orientation is of a piece with his Anglican ecclesiology. Article VIII ("Of the Three Creeds") of the 1662 Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion states, "The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture."

Wesley did not approve of the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque Vult*) and, likely for the same reason, he excluded Article VIII from the 25 Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church. Nonetheless, he was in complete agreement with the theological substance of the Creeds.⁵ Perhaps most important for Wesley is the fact that the Creeds "may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture" and serve as a normative summation of the teaching of Scripture – the Rule of Faith.⁶ As such, they establish the core "doctrines" of the Christian faith to which all orthodox Christians must subscribe, irrespective of theological "opinions" thereof. This distinction between "doctrine" and "opinion" is vital for Wesley, as we shall see.

Unlike Wesley's Anglican orientation, Torrance's creedal perspective stands in tension with the confessional ethos of his own Presbyterian tradition. Torrance sees the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as the *sine qua non* and theological touchstone of all Christian theological reflection, and evaluates all other perspectives in light of it. He elevates the Christological and Trinitarian implications of Nicaea's fixing of the *homoousion* as the theological lynchpin of the Christian doctrine of God, as well as its profound implications for Christian soteriology and ecclesiology. Thus, while Torrance also sees the Creeds as normative distillations of core Biblical teaching, his concern is relatively less with their function as declarations of faith, and more with their insights into the Being, Persons, and relations of the Triune God.⁷

⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialog* (Nashville: Abingdon 1995), 191.

⁶ Maddox, "The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope."

⁷ See especially *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1991).

Patristic Perspective

Integrally related to Torrance and Wesley's shared creedal orientation is a common commitment to the relative authority of the patristic legacy. Both accept the Reformation critique of the medieval Roman Catholic distortion of the catholic faith. And both follow the Reformers in prizing especially the first four ecumenical councils and first five centuries of patristic development as the theological root and touchstone of the Christian tradition. For both Wesley and Torrance, the patristic perspective and precedent weigh heavily in their evaluation of later ecclesial developments.⁸

However, here too we see a difference in emphasis and approach to this shared perspective. Beyond the framing of the cardinal Christian doctrines of Christology and Trinitarian theology, Wesley's principal appropriation of the church fathers is in the domain of ascetical theology and practice. By contrast, Torrance focuses on patristic Christology and Trinitarian theology as quintessential achievements, the implications of which have yet to be fully realized in respect to both substance and method.

Both figures also prize the eastern tradition over the western, though again for different reasons. While Wesley honors core doctrinal achievements, he especially prizes the synergistic soteriology and theotic orientation of figures like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as the later ascetics (both eastern and western).⁹ Torrance, by contrast, is drawn to the Christological and Trinitarian theologies of Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria, for reasons we have already mentioned.

Reformational Ecclesiology

A final common commitment that Torrance and Wesley share is a broadly Reformational ecclesiology. As Anglican clergy, Wesley subscribed to Article XIX ("Of the Church") of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion: "The visible Church of

⁸ For Torrance, see *The Trinitarian Faith*. For Wesley, see Ted A. Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers" *The Asbury Theological Journal* 51:1 (Spring, 1996) 57-70.

⁹ Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers."

Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." This statement virtually parrots Calvin's "notes" of the Church from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.1.9): "Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence."¹⁰ In this respect, both the Anglican Wesley and the Presbyterian Torrance were shaped by a Reformational ecclesiology.

As heirs of their respective Reformation traditions, Wesley and Torrance share at least three derived ecclesiological principles: First, "the visible Church of Christ" is not to be identified exclusively in terms of any particular ecclesial institution, but rather in terms of the faithful ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, second, the predicate of that faithful ministry of Word and Sacrament – i.e., "those things that are of necessity requisite to the same" – is the visible manifestation of the Church in concrete ecclesial structures of authority and ministry. Thus, while the Church is not to be identified exclusively with any particular church or denomination, the Church is necessarily a visible, corporate reality in human history. Third, and following from the first two, this entails that the "visible Church" is somehow manifest in and among a variety of churches and Christian communities.

How, and in what manner, is the Church manifest in and among the churches? Here Torrance and Wesley diverge, as we will see. However, both affirm that the Reformational "notes" of the Church are not to be understood independently of, or in contradiction to, the received Nicene faith. Rather, in contrast to more radical readings of the Reformation, both insist upon the normative foundation of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian tradition as the necessary predicate of a Reformational ecclesiology.

¹⁰ See also Augsburg Confession, Article 7: "[The Church] is the assembly of all believers, among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."

Much more could be said in regard to all of the above; however, these features outline a shared, broadly Reformed catholicity that frames the ecumenical perspectives of both Torrance and Wesley. By delineating these features, we are able to establish important points of convergence between our two figures while observing signs of substantial differences in approach. We will now turn to consider texts by each figure that will provide the basis for a more detailed for comparison.

John Wesley's Catholic Spirit

Written in the 1750 heyday of his "Methodist" movement, Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit" grapples with the question of Christian unity.¹¹ While Wesley believes that the true source of that unity is love, he laments the fact that Christians are not, in fact, united in love. Though they are called to obey the new commandment of Christ to love one another (John 13:34), says Wesley, "Daily experience shows to the contrary."¹² Christians are prevented from enjoying this unique, "peculiar" love for one another because of two basic barriers: First, they "can't all think alike," meaning that they have certain differences of theological judgment. Second, and consequently, "they can't all walk alike;" i.e., their differences are inevitably reflected in their practice. Wesley devotes the remainder of his sermon to addressing these problems.

Matters of Opinion

Wesley takes for his text 2 Kings 10:15, an interchange between Jehonadab son of Rechab and Jehu, king of Israel. Jehu asks Jehonadab, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thine heart? If it be, give me thine hand." Wesley sees Jehu's example as "well worthy both the attention and imitation of every serious Christian." It presents a portrait of Christian unity, a unity unrealized because of differences of opinion and liturgical practice. Wesley protests against this division:

¹¹ "Catholic Spirit," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, edited by Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996), 492-504. Wesley's 1740 "The Principles of a Methodist" articulates similar convictions, but "Catholic Spirit" provides the clearest explication of Wesley's ecumenical thought. See Wesley's 1749 "Letter to a Roman Catholic" for an excellent illustration of his ecumenical principles in action.

¹² Ibid, 493.

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.¹³

From the start, we see Wesley drawing a clear distinction between matters of opinion and matters of the heart. For Wesley, matters of opinion are matters of thought and understanding, while matters of the heart are matters of love. And it is in love that Christians are united, not necessarily in opinions or practices. However, lest we err by assuming that by this Wesley intends here a facile division between "head and heart" or the exaltation of sentiment at the expense of reason or doctrine, we should note a few important aspects of Wesley's idea of "opinion."

First, for Wesley, the use of the term "opinion" generally entails those intellectual conclusions or judgments that we draw through inferential reasoning from our perception of objects, whatever those objects might happen to be.¹⁴ In matters of Christian belief, Scripture and the doctrines of the Christian creedal tradition are the objects of the Christian's perception. Doctrines for Wesley are used "primarily to denote the authoritative teachings of the Christian religion *in their own right*."¹⁵ By contrast, theological opinions are the particular intellectual conclusions that one draws in reflection upon Scriptural doctrines. We see this attitude exemplified in Wesley's sermon "On the Trinity." In discussing the importance of accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, Wesley says:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Wesley's *Remarks upon Mr. Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding,"* Jackson 13: 455-464. Wesley reviews Locke quite favorably, though he still prefers the Aristotelian terms of apprehension, judgment, and discourse to describe mental operations. He seems to view Locke's epistemology as a more complex version of Aristotle (p. 456).

¹⁵ Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity" *Asbury Theological Journal* 47, 1 (Spring 1992): 64-65. Maddox points out that "this distinction between opinions and doctrines was essentially a theological expression of the emerging Enlightenment conviction of a disjunction between one's knowledge or ideas (opinions) and their objects (doctrines)."

I do not mean that it is of importance to believe this or that *explication* of these words. . . . I insist upon no explication at all; no not even on the best I ever saw; I mean, that which is given us in the creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius. . . . I would insist only on the direct words, unexplained, just as they lie in the text.¹⁶

As demonstrated by this appeal to the Athanasian Creed, there exists for Wesley a vital distinction between established Christian doctrines as the objects of our theological opinions, and those opinions themselves. In Wesley's view, doctrines are given, non-negotiables of Christian faith that stand independently of our opinions about them.

However, second, it is important to note that Wesley's use of "opinion" here also includes judgments that involve "smaller differences," i.e., theological differences that do not pertain to central matters of Christian faith. Differences of opinion about central doctrines *do* matter; indeed, to have a theological opinion that denies any of the central claims of the Christian faith is, *de facto*, a denial of that faith. However, "smaller differences" of opinion are tolerable if they do not undermine the cardinal doctrines of faith. Wesley affirms that this objective body of doctrine forms the "root" and "main branches" of Christian teaching. As Geoffrey Wainwright puts it:

Liberal Methodists [e.g.] isolate Wesley's dictum that "we think and let think" and make him the patron of sentimental ecumenism or even religious indifferentism. They forget that Wesley's magnanimity was limited to "opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity."¹⁷

Indeed, says Wesley:

[A] catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism*. It is not an indifference to all opinions. . . . A man of a truly catholic spirit . . . is fixed as the sun in his judgement concerning the main branches of

¹⁶ Jackson, vol. 6, 200-201.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialog*, 231. cf. also *The Character of a Methodist*, Jackson vol. 8, 340-347.

Christian doctrine.¹⁸

Third, Wesley holds that a diversity of human intellectual judgments – in this case, theological opinions about non-critical doctrines – must *necessarily* result from the limited inferential processes of human reasoning and the finite scope of human understanding. Note that Wesley says we “*can’t*” think alike; i.e., we are *incapable* of coming to entirely identical intellectual judgments because of the limitations of human reason. Yet it is necessary that we make judgments, that we draw conclusions. Differences of theological opinion on secondary matters are not evil, they are inevitable. Says Wesley:

It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that several men will be of several minds, in religion as well as in common life. Nay farther: . . . although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true . . . yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true.¹⁹

It is for this reason – the inevitability of the existence of differing theological opinions – that Wesley insists upon toleration among Christians concerning “smaller points” of theology. No person can or should think that his/her judgments – either in particular or as a whole – regarding theological matters are infallible. Moreover, because this kind of conformity is impossible, it is also impossible that unanimity of opinion should serve as a sufficient basis for Christian unity. Says Wesley:

Every wise man therefore will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question.

“Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”²⁰

¹⁸ “Catholic Spirit,” 502.

¹⁹ Ibid, 494-495.

²⁰ Ibid, 495.

Thus, for example, Wesley would not insist that a Dordtian Calvinist reject a predestinarian understanding of divine election before he could be in concord with him; neither would he feel obligated to give up his own theological construal of election. Neither of these interpretations of Scripture is essential to the matter of a right heart.

Matters of Practice

Wesley understands the relationship between opinion and practice – i.e., between theological conviction and mode of worship – as that between the intellect and the will, of putting opinion into action. Thus, “a variety of opinion necessarily implies a variety of practice.”²¹ As with the variety of religious opinions, so Wesley insists that a catholic toleration should be maintained in respect to religious practices. For Wesley, these include such matters as which church one belongs to, forms of church government, forms of prayer, forms of the Lord's Supper, various ways of administering Baptism (including ages of administration), or even the practice of Baptism and the Lord's Supper at all. In all of these, Wesley insists:

No man can choose for or prescribe to another. But everyone must follow the dictates of his own conscience in simplicity and godly sincerity. . . . I dare not therefore presume to impose my mode of worship on any other. I believe it is truly primitive and apostolical. But my belief is no rule for another.²²

However, Wesley also makes two important qualifications of this statement, lest the reader misunderstand his intent. First, as with religious opinions, religious practice is not a matter of indifference toward one's form or manner of public worship. Wesley describes such an attitude as *practical latitudinarianism* and rejects it by insisting:

But the man of a truly catholic spirit, has no doubt, no scruple at all concerning the particular mode of worship wherein he joins. He is clearly convinced that *this* manner of worshipping God is both

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 496.

scriptural and rational.²³

Second, Wesley is vehemently opposed to any sort of indifference to congregational affiliation. Wesley describes this as “another sort of latitudinarianism” that we might call *ecclesial latitudinarianism*. Implicit in this view is the denial that every Christian is obliged by the very character of Christian faith to be a member of a particular congregation. Says Wesley, concerning such an attitude:

But it is far from a man of a truly catholic spirit. He is fixed in his congregation as well as his principles. He is united to one, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship.²⁴

Summary

In light of the above, we begin to have a sense of the kind of unity that Wesley does *not* have in mind. In matters of theological opinion about non-essential doctrines, we see him attempting to walk a middle way between erroneous extremes. He seeks to avoid a demand for absolute dogmatic uniformity on the one hand, and a negligent indifference on the other. Thus, his notion of unity preserves the freedom of the believer's conscience within the bounds of orthodoxy. Likewise in matters of church practice, Wesley seeks to avoid the extreme of slavish conformity to on the one hand, and excessive individualism on the other.

In regard to ecumenical concerns, several inferences can be drawn: First, Wesley is clearly wary of any demand for organic or structural unification of churches. He would take issue with any assertion that Christians cannot be in real unity as long as the Church is not visibly, sacramentally one.²⁵ True Christian unity surpasses such ecclesial distinctions. C. S. Lewis famously observed that Christians

²³ Ibid, 502.

²⁴ Ibid, 503.

²⁵ See Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 4, 10; and *Methodists in Dialog*, 31. See also “Letter to a Roman Catholic.”

at the center of their respective theological traditions are actually closest to one another.²⁶ Wesley would concur with Lewis in this regard.

However, second, Wesley would most certainly object to any notion of unity that denies a commitment to historic Christian doctrine concerning the self-revelation of God as Jesus Christ. Indeed, true Christian unity takes a common commitment to creedal Christian faith as an essential prerequisite.²⁷ The notion in some contemporary circles that historic Christian doctrine is somehow a barrier to unity stands in diametric opposition to Wesley's perspective. Contemporary ecumenists who wish to represent him otherwise do so only by quoting him in a highly selective manner. In scathing rebuke of all such attitudes, Wesley says:

Observe this, you who know not what spirit ye are of; who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. . . . Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.²⁸

Third, Wesley would without question take issue with the radical autonomy and indifference displayed by many toward ecclesial commitments. Wesley assumes that serious Christians will be committed to a particular tradition because they are convinced of the merits of that tradition as a faithful way of service to Christ.

At this point, we may also summarize the mode of Wesley's approach to the question of unity and its ecumenical implications. Wesley's principal appeal is to *the rational apprehension and affirmation of the cardinal Christian doctrines* as the basis for ecumenical concord. This appeal is predicated upon an epistemological realism that regards the cardinal doctrines as given objects of knowledge, regarding

²⁶ "It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine." C. S. Lewis, preface to *Mere Christianity*.

²⁷ E.g., in "The Catholic Spirit: The Need of Our Time" in *Freedom and Grace*, edited by I. Jones and K. Wilson (London: Epworth, 1988), Ralph Waller distorts Wesley's intent in this sermon by stressing the inclusivity of the Church at the expense of its faithful witness to the unique revelation of God in Christ.

²⁸ "Catholic Spirit," 502.

which a variety of opinions is inevitable. Opinions that deny the substance of core Christian doctrine are to be repudiated; however, a variety of opinions regarding non-essential doctrines and practices should be tolerated.

Thus, for Wesley, the possibility of Christian unity is contingent upon the successful negotiation of a set of binary questions: 1) Does the other affirm the cardinal doctrines of the historic catholic faith? If so, then unity is possible; if not, it is not possible. 2) Does the other affirm a principle of toleration in regard to non-essential doctrines and practices? If so, unity is possible; if not, it is not possible.

Wesley's 1749 "Letter to Roman Catholic" is perhaps the best illustration of this approach in action. Having explicated his affirmation of the Nicene Creed and core Christian virtues, Wesley pointedly asks his Roman Catholic counterpart, "Are we not thus far agreed? . . . Let the points wherein we differ stand aside; here are enough wherein we agree, enough to be the ground of every Christian temper, and of every Christian action."²⁹

T. F. Torrance and the One Church

Turning to consider T. F. Torrance's approach to ecumenism, we immediately encounter a fundamental difference of emphasis. While Torrance also looks for a consonance of belief, the primary vector of his ecumenical approach is ontological rather than epistemological. Torrance might agree with the substance of Wesley's thought regarding doctrines and opinions; however, his consistent mode of argumentation is from the ontology of God's being and acts in human history and the real relations entailed therein. For Torrance, God's principal act, second only to Creation and the atoning economy of the Incarnation, is God's formation of the divine-human community in and of Jesus Christ – the Church.

This difference in approach is consistent with the whole of Torrance's thought. His "scientific" (kataphysical) and ontorelational approach to all theological matters consistently inquires first about the God-revealed ontology of his object of

²⁹ Wesley, "Letter to a Roman Catholic" in *A Wesley Reader: Writings of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. Ted A. Campbell (Dallas: Tuckapaw Media) 168-69.

theological concern, analyzes and correlates its real constitutive relations, and then seeks to extrapolate doctrinal and practical implications.³⁰

However, this difference also highlights a particular difference in sociohistorical context between Torrance and Wesley. Wesley's ecumenical concern is framed within the context of eighteenth century England and the various Anglican and Nonconformist parties comprised therein. While certainly aware of non-Protestants,³¹ Protestants are his principal interlocutors. By contrast, the scope of Torrance's ecumenical concern is broader, and arguably more focused on relations with Orthodox and Roman Catholics.³² Consequently, Torrance seeks a basis for Christian unity that ontologically precedes and cuts behind matters not only of theological difference but also of historical divergence.

In contrast to Wesley's few and occasional ecumenical writings, Torrance's are numerous and span the decades of the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we see a pattern of ecumenical reasoning that persists throughout. Torrance begins not by asking what it is that separates Christians from one another, but rather what it is that stands as the objective, ontological ground of Christian unity. For Torrance, it is clear that nothing less than the being of God can serve as a sufficient basis for such unity. And it is the union of human being with God, and the correlative reunion of humankind within itself, that is the essential redemptive purpose of God's saving economy accomplished in Jesus Christ and realized in his Body, the Church. Thus, for Torrance, the fact that the Church *is* one in Jesus Christ stands as the uniquely sufficient ground of its ecumenical unity. Let us examine how this is the case.

The Incarnation: God's Elected Ground of Human Unity

"The Church is grounded in the Being and Life of God, and rooted in the eternal purpose of the Father to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Head and Saviour of

³⁰ See *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

³¹ See "Letter to a Roman Catholic."

³² Though also engaging Anglican and Lutheran perspectives. E.g., Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, I: Order and Disorder* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959) 23-145.

all things.”³³ This essentially Pauline³⁴ understanding of the Church, Torrance argues, must be the starting point for all ecumenical theology. For it is the eternal purpose of God to save alienated and dying humanity by first uniting to himself, through his Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit, a covenant people conformed to his will and purposes.

Thus God’s eschatological purposes for the Church are bound up with God’s purposes for the whole human race, and indeed the whole of creation. Given that the fundamental problem of human existence is our alienation from God and the resultant alienation we experience within ourselves and in relation to one another, the reconciliation effected by God in human history must eventuate in the reconciliation of human beings with one another, resulting in a new united humanity grounded in God’s saving union with humanity in Jesus Christ. The Church of Jesus Christ is God’s chosen means and proleptic realization of this eschatological purpose:

What has been fulfilled intensively in the Church through the operation of the Spirit must be fulfilled extensively in all mankind and in all creation. As such, the Church is to be regarded as the new humanity within the world, the provisional manifestation of the new creation within the old. At its heart lies the mystery of the union between Christ and His Church, which presses out toward universal fullness.³⁵

However, continues Torrance:

The Church cannot share the life of Christ to the full, and cannot embody in itself the reconciliation He bestows, without fulfilling its mission to all mankind, in bearing the Gospel of reconciliation to all for whom He died, without seeking to embody in the midst of the world’s divisions the oneness of the fellowship of reconciliation.³⁶

³³ Torrance, “The Foundation of the Church,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 113.

³⁴ E.g., Ephesians 1:22.

³⁵ Torrance, “The Mission of the Church,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966): 138.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 140.

From the outset, then, the question of the unity of the Church in Torrance's thought is inextricably related to the larger question of the eschatological reconciliation and unity of humanity with and in God.

For Torrance, the germ and matrix of this re-union of humanity is the Incarnation of the eternal Word and Son of God as Jesus Christ. In his assumption of human nature in and through the saving economy of his earthly ministry, Christ the incarnate Son binds alienated and dying humanity to himself, reestablishing the ground of human being in the life of God and forging a way within himself for human beings to be reconciled and united to God. In the union of his divine nature with human nature, Christ establishes himself as the Head of the Church. Indeed, says Torrance:

Christ is the Church, for the Church is Church only in Him. Christ the Incarnate Son of God is the Church because He embodied Himself in our humanity and as such gathered our humanity in Him into oneness with God. He identified Himself with us, made Himself one with us, and on that ground claims us as His own, lays hold of us, and assumes us into union and communion with Him, so that as Church we find our essential being and life not in ourselves but in Him alone.³⁷

Thus, while Christ is the Church, Torrance simultaneously avers that the Church is *not* Christ. For the ground, source, and dynamic vitality of the Church's existence lies not within the Church but beyond itself in its divine, ascended and reigning Head, Jesus Christ, to whom the Church is united through the Gospel by His Word and Spirit. Rejecting all suggestions that the Church is somehow a continuation of the Incarnation, Torrance insists that the Church exists only by virtue of its union and participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. As such, *the Church is the Body of Christ*, but only through a relation of union and communion with Christ its Head. Yes, as the Body of Christ, united and conformed to Christ in its cruciform life, the Church is far more than another human community. Indeed, it is nothing less than "the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ."³⁸

³⁷ Torrance, "What Is the Church?" *The Ecumenical Review* 11 (1958) 9. Emphasis his.

³⁸ Torrance, quoting Karl Barth (CD 4.1) in *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1991) 276.

Nonetheless, the sole real, constitutive relation that grants the Church its life, vocation, and vitality is its union and communion with Christ. So Torrance:

That is what we need to learn again today . . . that when we think of the Church our eyes must travel at once to Christ the Lord Himself, for it is He who is the essence of the Church; it is only in Him that the Church is Church, only in Him that it coheres and has its principle of being and unity, and only in and through Him does it have its function and mission in the Gospel.³⁹

The One Church

Throughout his corpus, Torrance proffers this Christocentric ecclesiology as representative of the apostolic and patristic legacy of the Church leading up to and finding expression at Nicaea.⁴⁰ As with other aspects of his theology, he employs this line of argument in both a positive and negative manner. Positively, he uses it to articulate and flesh out the relations and structures of his own neo-patristic⁴¹ ecclesiology. Negatively, he uses it as a means of critiquing later ecclesiological developments in the history of the Church that he deems deficient.

In regard to ecumenism, Torrance employs this strategy to affirm the Church's union with Christ through the Holy Spirit as the sole, sufficient ground of Christian unity, while rejecting any attempt to appeal for Christian unity on the basis of a social or juridical understanding of the Church. He is especially critical of Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage for what became the dominant "Latin" understanding of the Church as a closed community under the authority of the bishop, which was "clearly influenced by Roman conceptions of society and law." This development played a determinative role in the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church as "a divinely instituted society in the world under the universal headship of the bishop of Rome, and with canonically defined structures of unity,

³⁹ "What Is the Church?" 7.

⁴⁰ See especially the chapter "The One Church" in *The Trinitarian Faith*, 252-301.

⁴¹ I intend this only as a description of Torrance's approach and do not identify him with any particular movement or school of thought. For further exploration see Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*.

continuity and authority.”⁴² By contrast, church authority and government in the East, while ordered according to conciliar canons and bishops, “were construed in terms of *κοινωνία* rather than in terms of hierarchical structure,” and the episcopate “was held to be subordinate to the apostolic foundation of the Church, as well as to the Lord Jesus Christ the one Head of the Church.”⁴³ Torrance clearly sees the Eastern tradition as preferable to the West in this respect.

Torrance is likewise opposed to any ecclesiology that would construe the unity of the Church as an essentially moral or conceptual unity. Such ecclesiologies presuppose that the Church’s chief mode of relation to Christ is moral or rational, not a real, personal and spiritual union. Whether in regard to Arianism or to modern ecclesiologies that relegate Jesus Christ to the status of moral exemplar, Torrance’s response is the same: the Church is not a community formed through the external, voluntary association of like-minded people; rather, the Church is constituted by a dynamic, internal ontological relation to Jesus Christ “through the reconciling and incorporating activity of the incarnate Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴

The vital point to underscore here is Torrance’s insistence that the ground of the Church’s unity in Jesus Christ *is ontologically prior to its ecclesial structures*. Such structures are necessary, but they are secondary to the real, transcendent ground of the unity of all Christians as the Body of Christ united to its living Head, who is continually establishing and extending his Church throughout the world. While necessary to the order, discipline, and ministry of the Church in its various sociohistorical contexts, all ecclesial structures and their distinctives are relativized by the Church’s fundamental unity with and in Christ, who is himself the Church’s *Esse*.⁴⁵

⁴² *The Trinitarian Faith*, 271.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 272.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 278.

⁴⁵ “Christ is Himself the essence of the Church, its *Esse*. That fact immediately relativises and makes ultimately unimportant these endless and tiresome discussions about what is of the *esse* or the *bene esse* or the *piene esse* of the Church. “I am Jesus whom thou persecutest,” said Jesus to Saul of Tarsus. . . . That is the place to begin in our understanding of the nature of the Church, and in all discussions with one another regarding reunion.” “What Is the Church?” 7-8.

Thus, for Torrance, the ground of the Church's unity is nothing other than the very relation of union with Christ through the Holy Spirit that constitutes its existence in the first place. Just as all believers are united to Christ, so all believers are united to one another in Christ. Christian unity is possible because Christians *are already one in Christ*. Says Torrance:

Jesus Christ alone is the ground of the Church's unity and the Holy Spirit establishes the Church upon that ground, gives it unity through union with Christ and continues to maintain and uphold the unity in the midst of diversity. There is only one Mediator between God and Man who makes all who believe in Him one Body with Him. There is only one incarnation and one atonement. There is only one Spirit, and therefore there is only one Body of Christ and one Church in Him. . . . Oneness thus belongs to the very nature of the Church in its inner and outer life. . . . As it is one in the Spirit, so it must live out that oneness in the Body.⁴⁶

In light of his elevation of the Church's ontological union with Jesus Christ as the singular basis and criterion for the unity of the Church, it stands to reason that Torrance elevates Baptism and Communion as the sacramental correlates of that union and unity. Baptism is the Christ-appointed means by which all believers are united to him by the Holy Spirit, in his baptism at the Jordan River, in the baptism of his death and resurrection, and in the whole of his vicarious reconciliation of humanity to God. And if Baptism is the sacramental means of our union with Christ, then it is also the means of our union with one another in Christ.⁴⁷

As Baptism is Christ's sacramental means of the Church's union with him, so the Lord's Supper (Torrance also uses "Communion" and "Eucharist") is his means of the continual renewal and strengthening of that union. In its repeated practice of participation through Communion in the life of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit, the Church continually receives into itself His indwelling presence and is

⁴⁶ "The Mission of the Church," 141.

⁴⁷ See *The Trinitarian Faith*, 290 ff. See also, "The One Baptism Common to Christ and His Church" in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 82-105.

renewed as His Body. And, like Baptism, if Communion is the sacramental means of renewing our union with Christ, then it is also the sacramental means of renewing our union with one another in Christ.

Thus, for Torrance, Baptism and Communion are Jesus' own appointed sacramental means and signs by which the unity of his Church is established, persists, and is made manifest within the life of the Church in the world. While Baptism is the sacramental entry point into union with Christ and ground of the Church's unity in Christ, it is Communion that especially stands as the visible sign of that unity. Baptism is inherently and unavoidably individual; Communion, by contrast, is the inherently corporate sacrament of union with Christ that most visibly manifests the unity of the Church in the world. Thus, says Torrance, "It is in the Eucharist . . . that the Church becomes visible as the Body of Christ in history, for it is there that it becomes a membered Body under the Headship of Christ."⁴⁸

Summary and Comparison

With the preceding in view, we can now summarize the distinctives of Torrance's ecumenical thought in order to draw comparisons with that of John Wesley. As we do, we can more clearly see points of convergence, albeit for divergent reasons.

First, like Wesley, Torrance is wary of predicated discussions of Church unity upon considerations of structural reunification. If the Church is already really and truly *one* in the ontological ground of its being in Christ, then questions regarding ecclesial authority, doctrinal distinctives or sacramental validity, while necessary, can never serve as proper starting points for Christian unity. However, in contrast to Wesley, Torrance *does* see visible unity – minimally in the practice of shared Communion and maximally in structural unity – as a desired goal of ecumenical discourse, which we will discuss further below.

Second, like Wesley, Torrance would utterly reject any suggestion that Christian unity might be achieved by setting aside or minimizing any aspect of the Nicene faith. Moreover, he would draw a bright, shining line between "ecumenism" as a uniquely Christian endeavor and "interfaith" dialogue. However, Torrance's

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, II: The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960) 194.

reasons for doing so would not be primarily because such would fail to remain within the bounds of an ecclesially sanctioned orthodoxy or to subscribe to the propositional content of its Creed. True as that may be, the even greater problem with such strategies is its their failure to apprehend and submit to the transcendent object of that faith: the risen, ascended, and reigning Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of his Body, the Church.

We should note in fairness to Wesley that he would share Torrance's concern for a real and personal apprehension of Jesus Christ as the object of Nicene faith. Nonetheless, Wesley's emphasis in his ecumenical writings is principally upon questions of doctrinal agreement, toleration of divergent lesser opinions, and mutual affection. In respect to his ecclesiology, Wesley tends to move alternatively between two views of the Church, sometimes complementing and sometimes conflicting. On the one hand, he affirms the historic institution of the church that persists in apostolic succession to the present age and preserves the doctrines and practices of the apostolic faith. On the other hand, he frequently describes the church as a fellowship of "the whole body of true believers" united in faith and love to God.⁴⁹ Insofar as these two views may represent an irreducible tension in Wesley's thought,⁵⁰ Torrance would likely see Wesley's ecclesiology as an iteration of the Western Latin dualism between the church as a juridical society and the church as a mystical body – a dualism which Torrance rejects on the basis of his Christocentric ecclesiological realism.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Howard A. Snyder, "Wesley's Concept of the Church" *The Asbury Journal* 33:1 (Jan, 1978) 34-59.

⁵⁰ David Lowes Watson argues that Wesley consistently holds these two emphases in tension – one of which derives from his Anglican formation and the other of which derives from Puritan influences – by positing his Methodist class meetings as "*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*." (Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985). However, Wesley's mode of argumentation in both "Catholic Spirit" and "Letter to a Roman Catholic" emphasize a fellowship of consonant belief and mutual affection.

⁵¹ *The Trinitarian Faith*, 275-77. Torrance sees this dualism as an unavoidable consequence of the general Western acceptance of the Latin notion of the church as a juridical society, which divides the visible, external structures of the church's historic existence from the invisible mystical unity of the church's spiritual existence.

Third, Torrance would utterly agree with Wesley in his condemnation of a modern autonomy that eschews ecclesial commitments, and he would agree that Christians should be convinced members of a local congregation. However, given his ecclesiology, Torrance would diverge from Wesley in regard to the breadth of liberty he would be willing to grant in ecclesial practice. In particular, Torrance would not so readily set aside questions of liturgical or sacramental practice. Just as his approach to doctrinal agreement would go beyond epistemological consensus to the shared apprehension of the singular ontological ground of the Church's being, so Torrance would expect that ecclesial practice be predicated upon a theology of real participation in the Person of Jesus Christ in Christian worship, and in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Any tradition that would reject some version of this understanding of the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church would have difficulty meeting Torrance's definition of catholic faith and practice.⁵²

What should be clear from the preceding is that Torrance's approach to Christian unity, while sharing key concerns with Wesley, is pressing for a basis not ultimately located in doctrinal consensus, though that is clearly entailed, but in a mutual apprehension of the Church as the visible Body of Christ, ontologically established beyond itself in the Incarnate Word of God and persisting through human history. Doctrinal formulations necessarily outline and describe church faith and order and are therefore required, but they cannot serve as a sufficient basis for unity – in part because they cannot agree on which doctrines are primary and which secondary. Rather, in Torrance's view, the singular basis and starting point for Christian unity must be *the mutual recognition among each of the churches of the one Church and Body of Christ subsisting within the others*. Thus, says Torrance:

If we ourselves are in Christ we cannot fail to discern His Body in others whom He is pleased to call His own and whose Sacrament He is pleased to honour with His own real Presence and Spirit. If we fail to discern it in others the first question we must ask is whether we have ourselves learned to regard the Church as Christ's very own Body, as

⁵² See Paul Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Surrey: Ashgate Publications, 2009), 265-323. See also George Hunsinger's appropriation of Torrance's thought in *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

the Body of which He is the Head and Lord and Saviour and Husband.⁵³

This contrast between Wesley's emphasis upon doctrine and Torrance's emphasis upon ontology evokes a feature of Torrance's theological approach that now comes to the fore. For Torrance, theological knowledge is kind of critical realism that necessarily includes what he identifies as three distinct but mutually informing levels of activity: (1) the evangelical/doxological, (2) the doctrinal/economic, and (3) the theological/ontological.⁵⁴ While all Christians inhabit (1) an experiential field of tacit theological knowledge formed by the concrete daily life of Christian faith and worship in Word and Sacrament, the Church's reflection upon this body of knowledge has resulted in (and continues to inform) a coherent body of doctrinal understanding (2) that identifies and organizes the key features and conceptual relations of God's creating and redeeming economy. The Nicene Creed is one such iteration of the Church's doctrinal/economic knowledge of God. However, this level of doctrinal reasoning in turn grants true disclosure, albeit limited, of (3) the actual ontological structure of God's being. This properly theological/ontological level of understanding has granted the Church profound insight into, for example, the triune character of God's being, persons, and perichoretic relations. In terms of ecclesiology, as we have been describing, the Church is rightly seen at the theological/ontological level to be constituted in real ontological union with Jesus Christ through the Word and Spirit of God.

What is vital to grasp in relation to this critical realist understanding of theology is that the interrelated levels of knowledge cohere with and mutually inform one another. Thus, key theological insights into, for example, the triune ontology of the Gods' nature, inform important doctrines such as the inseparable operations of the Persons of the Trinity in the divine economy. Such doctrinal formulations in their turn directly impact daily Christian life, such as how we interpret Scripture, our forms of liturgical action, the content of our prayers and hymnody, the forms and habits of our spiritual practices.

⁵³ "What Is the Church?" 8.

⁵⁴ See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985) 131-159.

I would suggest that Torrance's integrated model of theological knowledge offers a helpful way to correlate his and Wesley's convergent but distinctive approaches to ecumenism – and perhaps serves as a model for correlating ecumenical discourse in general. In our case, it is clear that Torrance would question whether Wesley has sufficiently considered the ontological ground of Christian unity. Is Wesley's emphasis upon doctrinal consensus and toleration of lesser opinions, not to mention practices, indeed a sufficient basis for unity? Or is it merely a strategy for agreeing to disagree which endorses a status quo of Christian schism? If Wesley truly grasped the transcendent ground of the Church as the earthly-historical form of Christ's existence, would he be content with an ecumenism that privileges matters of doctrinal belief over matters of church practice? Indeed, can we be content with an ecumenism that does not call all churches into greater conformity to the shape of Christ's own Person and Work – and ultimately toward visible unity? In short, Torrance would be concerned that Wesley is operating at the levels of the doctrinal and evangelical, without sufficient integration of the ontological.

However, while this critique of Wesley's ecclesiology and ecumenical theology *qua* theology may be accurate, it may also be partly anachronistic. We must recall the sociohistorical context of Wesley's endeavors and the purposes of his "ecumenical" writings, which are few. Wesley's chief concern was not for visible unity, which would have been a practical impossibility in the established church context of eighteenth century England. Rather, his concern was for a unity in spirit and cooperation among fellow Christians of various churches – which surely is a necessary aspect of ecumenical endeavor in any age. Consequently, Wesley's "ecumenism" is a grassroots ecumenism, which brackets questions of visible or sacramental unity and focuses on questions of personal relations between Christians across church boundaries. In this respect, Wesley's focus on the doctrinal and evangelical levels of theological reasoning is entirely congruent – even if ontologically deficient – with his practical approach to overcoming Christian division.

From this perspective, Wesley might also level his own criticism of Torrance's ecumenical thought. While he might admit to the need for Torrance's Christocentric

ecclesiological realism, he might also question whether Torrance has sufficiently considered the practices required for a concrete ecumenical unity among believers. Moreover, he might press Torrance to ask what Christians from various traditions are to do when visible and sacramental unity has not yet been – and may never be – achieved. Are actual relations of Christian love and cooperation impossible prior to such visible unity? Or could it be that this very kind of relation is a form of Christian ecumenism – a practical ecumenism – that is achievable in the interim? In this regard, could it be that Torrance is so focused on the ontological and doctrinal levels of his ecumenical reasoning, that he fails adequately to work out the concrete implications and forms of Christian life for a still-divided *oikumene*? Moreover, could it not be the case that something like Wesley's approach to Christian unity is a form – its ecclesiological deficiencies notwithstanding – of just such an interim and practical ecumenism?

Whether or not it is helpful to employ Torrance's three-tiered model of theological knowledge in regard to Wesley and Torrance's ecumenism, it does appear to clarify the relative strengths and weaknesses of their approaches and how they might serve to complement and even bolster one another. While Torrance's ontological/sacramental ecumenism offers a proper basis for mutual ecclesial recognition and movement toward sacramental and institutional unity, Wesley's practical/relational ecumenism offers a concrete strategy for ecumenical discourse and cooperation, especially at the grassroots level. The strength and profundity of Torrance's approach is that it discloses the proper ontological ground of what we might call a "Nicene ecumenism." The strength and practical utility of Wesley's approach is its ability to appeal directly and concretely to the daily life of the Church. We now turn to a brief consideration of the respective desired outcomes of Wesley and Torrance's ecumenism, which will further illustrate this comparison.

Wesley and Torrance on the Fruit of Ecumenism

Wesley – A Peculiar Love

Notably, both Wesley and Torrance affirm that the principal mark and measure of all ecumenical effort must be Christian love. In "Catholic Spirit," Wesley's discussion

moves from of the necessity of having right belief (*orthodoxia*) to the matter of having a right heart (*orthokardia*).⁵⁵ While right belief is necessary, it is not alone sufficient for a heart that is right, first and foremost with God. Wesley asks:

Is thy faith ενεργουμενη δι αγαπης -- filled with the energy of love?
Dost thou love God . . . "with all thy heart, and all thy mind, and with thy soul, and with all thy strength"? . . . Is God the center of thy soul?
The sum of all thy desires? . . . Hath the love of God cast the love of the world out of thy soul?⁵⁶

The Christian must *love* God. Faith without love is dead. And this love-filled faith in God must necessarily result in the love of neighbor; otherwise, it is not truly right-hearted. For Wesley, such right-heartedness is also the only sufficient ground of true Christian unity. Anything short of this is at best a unity of mere belief, not a unity rooted in a common faith alive with love for God and neighbor, a "faith filled with the energy of love." However, when such Christian *orthokardia* is present, it establishes a foundation of mutual Christian love, a "peculiar love" that transcends differences of theological opinion and ecclesial practice.

Wesley concludes this section of his sermon by describing what he means by "give me your hand." He reiterates that this has nothing to do with sharing common lesser opinions or common ecclesial/liturgical practices "I have no desire to dispute with you one moment any of the preceding [points]," says Wesley, "Let them never come into sight."⁵⁷ Rather, he says:

Love me. And that not only as thou lovest all mankind . . . Love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother; as a brother in Christ, a fellow-citizen of the New Jerusalem . . . Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint-heir in his glory.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See Gregory Clapper, "Orthokardia: The Practical Theology of John Wesley's Heart Religion" *Quarterly Review* 10, 1 (1990) 49-66.

⁵⁶ "Catholic Spirit," 497.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 500.

This is the "peculiar love" which for Wesley serves as the only sufficient basis for true Christian unity. Note that the love that forms the bond of unity between Christians is not "unconditional" – for the simple reason that unity requires mutuality. If Christian love is not mutual, then Christian unity is impossible. "Give me your hand" thus means both a mutual giving and receiving of Christian friendship and brotherhood, all of which are rooted in right belief and right affections.

Finally, "give me your hand" also means to cooperate with one another in the service of God. Says Wesley, "So far as in conscience thou canst, (retaining still thy own opinions, and thy own manner of worshipping God,) join with me in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand."⁵⁹ Cooperation in ministry is indeed a goal; however, it is the final result of a spiritual cooperation of mind and heart that is rooted in a common Christian faith and common Christian love.

We can see in this description of the love and cooperation which result from Wesley's "catholic spirit" that his approach is entirely consistent throughout. Note that for Wesley Christian love has nothing to do with shared lesser opinions or ecclesial forms of practice, but purely with a shared faith and love for God that overflows into love for one's fellow Christian. Likewise, Wesley's call to cooperation in ministry is entirely unrelated to any consideration of shared opinions or forms of worship. In all of these, we see continued evidence of Wesley's unmooring of the question of Christian unity from questions of ecclesiology. Rather, the locus of Christian unity is found precisely *in a relation of shared doctrine and mutual affection* between believers.

On a related note, it may also be observed at this point that Wesley's appeal to Christian unity is essentially an *individual* appeal. Christian unity is predicated on a relation of shared belief and mutual affection between individual believers. And Wesley's apology for Christian unity is intended to persuade and exhort individuals to believe and act accordingly for the furtherance of that unity in the Church – or perhaps more accurately, in Christian society.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Torrance – A Communion of Love

Like Wesley, we see in T. F. Torrance's thought an equally profound commitment to Christian love as the outcome of Christian ecumenical endeavor. However, unlike Wesley, Torrance consistently orients his understanding of that love to his Christocentric ecclesiology. For Torrance, the locus of Christian unity is the love of God poured into the world in and through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. And as Christ's Body, the earthly-historical form of his existence, the Church is the principal place in which that love is to be found:

This Church is a communion of love. . . . In the Christian Church there dwells the personal presence of Jesus Christ and it is His love that masters the community and binds them into unity, and this love was such a new and masterful thing, divine love in its overflow into the lives of men, that a rare word had to be used to describe it — *agape*.⁶⁰

Note, in similarity to Wesley, that Torrance understands Christian love to find its source in the love of God; however, note also in contrast that he emphasizes God's love for the Church as the ground of that love, and Christian love as the "overflow" of God's love. In this manner, Torrance consistently keeps his thought oriented toward the ontological ground of God's being and acts.

This overflow of divine love between Christians in the Church means that the Church is also a community of reconciliation, "a fellowship of those who have been reconciled to God in Christ and those who have therefore been reconciled with one another."⁶¹ This reconciling love is not limited to the interior life of the Church but is an ever-expanding center of the reconciling love of God in the world, coextensive with the proclamation of the Gospel and the Church's embodiment of the Kingdom of Christ in the world.⁶² Sin has corrupted the natural diversities of the world, distorting them into destructive divisions, but Jesus has sent his Body into the

⁶⁰ "What Is the Church?" 16-17.

⁶¹ Ibid, 17.

⁶² "The Mission of the Church," 138-140.

world “to overcome the power and divisiveness of sin, and so to provide healing for mankind, reconciling man to God and man to man in Himself.”⁶³

Thus, it is within the frame of the Church as a communion of love and community of reconciliation that Torrance locates Christian unity, the nucleus of the eschatological unity of humanity. Tragically, however, sin has also invaded the Church, bringing division where there should be unity, and presenting a divided Church to the world. While God graciously continues to use the Church to draw people to himself, this does not negate the “sin of division.”⁶⁴ And in Torrance’s view, the place at which the Church’s division is to be overcome is the Lord’s Table. Thus:

The discipline of the Lord teaches us that because the Holy Supper witnesses to our unity in Christ, we must first be reconciled with our brother before we bring our gift to the altar, but it also teaches us that it is here above all that we are renewed in our reconciliation with our Lord, and therefore that it is by this renewal that we can be reconciled to one another.⁶⁵

Consequently, Torrance insists that intercommunion between churches should not be the result of their reconciliation, but its starting point. If Communion is the matrix of Christian reconciliation, then it must be so not only among individuals, nor only within a given church or denomination, but also between separated ecclesial bodies. For the real, ontological union and unity we already share as the one Church of Jesus Christ precedes not only all ecclesial structures, but their divisions, as well. Thus, concludes Torrance:

If we are really ready to seek reconciliation in Christ we cannot but enter upon Intercommunion as soon as possible, and, in and through the forgiven and healed relation to Christ which it mediates, work together towards *fullness* of Communion between the Churches.⁶⁶

⁶³ “What Is the Church?” 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁵ “The Mission of the Church,” 143.

⁶⁶ *Conflict and Agreement in the Churches, II*, 10–11. Emphasis his.

In light of the above, we can see more clearly the contrast between Torrance and Wesley's approaches to ecumenism. While both see love as the chief characteristic of Christian unity, they diverge in their understanding of its locus and means of attainment. For Torrance, the locus of Christian unity is inherently, and therefore principally, in the relation between Christ and the Church before it is realized between individual Christians. It is therefore principally a corporate unity, which cannot be reduced to matters of individual relations – though it necessarily includes them. Moreover, it is a unity that is objectively real prior to any rational apprehension thereof or mutual affection among those who share in that apprehension – though such should be its outcome. Finally, it is precisely in and through the shared ecclesial practice of Holy Communion that, for Torrance, Christian unity should be undertaken and effected.

Conclusion

In concluding our comparison of Torrance and Wesley's ecumenical thought, we return to our earlier analysis. What appeared to be the case in our comparison of their approaches to ecumenism also appears to hold true in their visions of the fruit of ecumenism. Torrance envisions an ecumenism that flows out of the life of the one Church in its various traditions, while Wesley envisions an ecumenism that flows from a common faith and love between individual Christians. Torrance envisions a unity that is manifest in corporate reunion and sacramental intercommunion, while Wesley envisions a unity that is manifest in Christian friendship and cooperation in ministry.

Without question, these perspectives – both in their approaches and in their anticipated outcomes – are in tension with one another, and potentially at odds. However, what is equally clear is their potential to complement and potentially reinforce one another in important respects. While Torrance would likely not relent in his critique of Wesley's neglect of ecclesiology, he might well recognize the value of Wesley's relational approach as a grassroots ecumenical strategy, and the value of shared mission as a complement to sacramental practice. Conversely while Wesley might accuse Torrance of having too lofty and formal an understanding of Christian unity, it is difficult to imagine him not embracing Torrance's insistence that

the Church is already one in Christ as a more sure foundation for ecumenical endeavor.

As for the significance of our comparison for ecumenism in our time, at the very least we may acknowledge that Wesley and Torrance broadly typify two approaches that continue to appear in ecumenical discourse today. George Lindbeck characterizes these as “unitive” and “interdenominational” approaches. Like Torrance, unitive ecumenists ground their efforts in sacramental theology and patristic *ressourcement*, with emphasis upon the unifying efficacy of Communion. Like Wesley, interdenominational ecumenists are less interested in matters of ecclesial identity and practice, and instead ground their efforts in a common experience of new birth.⁶⁷ Insofar as this is the case, our comparison appears to support the suggestion that these two approaches need not be positioned in mutual opposition. Rather, especially when grounded in a broadly compatible Reformed catholicity, their principles may serve to complement and support one another toward the goal of Christian unity.

⁶⁷ George A. Lindbeck, “Two Kinds of Ecumenism: Unitive and Interdenominational” *Gregorianum* 70:4 (1989) 647-660.

BOOK REVIEW

Greg Cootsona

Mere Science and Christian Faith: Bridging the Divide with Emerging Adults

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2018

This is a well-written introduction to the relationship between science and Christianity. It seeks to engage “emerging adults,” a category taken from psychologist Jeffrey Arnett somewhat narrower than “millennials,” the term I am more familiar with. Essentially these are 18-30 year-olds and are “emerging” because they reach five milestones marking adulthood – leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having children – later than previous generations. It is a demographic looking for personal meaning and identity, frequently changing direction and open to many different futures, and with attendant anxieties; and it is a generation much less likely to be church-going than earlier generations. However, whilst recognising the narrative of conflict in the surrounding culture, emerging adults are, on the whole, more tolerant and open to alternative readings.

Cootsona tackles various issues which may present challenges, or in some cases apologetic opportunities, to Christian faith, though inevitably somewhat cursorily given the introductory nature of his text. The line he takes on these issues is generally moderate and reasonable, and he accommodates modern scientific understandings with a high view of Scripture. Thus, regarding neuroscience’s perceived challenge to the existence of an immaterial soul, Cootsona adopts the position, prevalent in the science-religion discourse, that we do not need to worry because the idea of an immaterial soul is Platonic not biblical anyway. However, this is not an unproblematic position. Yes, we are psychosomatic unities, as he says, but that word seems to convey the idea of both a psyche and a soma, not necessarily a psyche which is just an emergent feature of the complexity of the arrangement of matter in the soma and which will cease to exist when the soma dies. The main problem I see with this view is that, although of course we believe in the “resurrection of the body,” i.e. that we are embodied in the resurrection life as we are in this life, there seems to be a need for some part of us to continue in

existence when we die. On the other hand, Cootsona is surely right to see consonance between the cognitive science of religion's finding (notably in the work of Justin Barrett) that children are "born believers" with Calvin's notion of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Cootsona is cautious, where I would be somewhat bolder, in making arguments from the beginning of the universe at the Big Bang and, most especially, from cosmic fine-tuning. His philosophical argument, that we are in the only universe we know about, and the probability of its existence is one, is unconvincing. Yes, the *posterior* probability is one but the whole point of the fine-tuning argument is that the *prior* probability is, at least *prima facie*, very low. On the other hand, Cootsona is right to criticize Intelligent Design, the argument that biological structures such as the bacterial flagellum are too complex to arise through the natural process of evolution, as both scientifically and theologically flawed.

Cootsona does a good job in evaluating three options for the relationship of evolutionary science to theology: (i) Young Earth Creationism (YEC) according to which the science is plain wrong and a literalist reading of the early chapters of Genesis obligatory; (ii) a metaphorical reading of Adam as the paradigmatic human who turns away from God and is therefore in need of salvation; and (iii) the 'mediating' position which accepts evolution but still insists on a literal Adam as federal head of all co-existing humanity, presumably widespread throughout the globe during Adam's time. Cootsona has little time for the first but gives some space to each of the others, opting, rightly in my opinion, for (ii). He cites C. S. Lewis in support of a literary reading, important because of course Lewis was a literary scholar alert to differing kinds of literary genre. One problem he points to with option (iii) is the seeming inconsistency that, although Adam and Eve are treated as literal historical figures, it is still the case that much of the story is taken as non-literal, e.g. the man created directly from the dust of the ground.

For the emerging adults he is aiming at, Cootsona sees engagement of faith with technology to be more important than any of the other topics addressed. They are, after all, the generation that has been influenced by technology from the cradle. Here Cootsona sees both positives and negatives. Technology can be useful for evangelism and for helping the world's poor, but the project of strong artificial

intelligence raises the prospect of technology that is out of control with robots mimicking and transcending human capacities, including, as with Victor Frankenstein's monster, the propensity to commit evil, in a curious analogy with original sin. And at a more mundane level youth's obsession with screens is inimical to real-world relationships.

Other topics covered include climate change and, particularly bravely, sexuality. On the former, of course science doesn't provide an absolute consensus, as apparently demanded by some, but surely that of the body which matters most, namely the inter-governmental panel on climate change, with its huge number of international scientists qualified in the appropriate disciplines, is what needs to be heeded. The claim made by Lynn White that God's command to humans to have dominion over the earth has led to Christian theology being entirely negative for the health of the planet is well corrected and critiqued. And on sexuality, Cootsona's basic point that science can inform but not dictate our ethics is surely right. However, it is important to get what science does and doesn't say correct. For example, claims that there is a "gay gene" have not stood up to examination (see Eleanor Whiteway and Denis R. Alexander, "Understanding the causes of same-sex attraction," *Science and Christian Belief* 27:17-40). Also, one needs to maintain a clear distinction between inter-sex conditions, where sexual characteristics are ambivalent, from gender dysphoria. In the latter, the sexual characteristics are well-defined and all point one way, but the person's psychological perception is of being in the wrong body, a male trapped in a female body or vice versa – indeed, one could say, a disunited psyche and soma.

Cootsona closes with some useful guidance and resources. His book is an excellent starting point for the topics he considers. It will be especially valuable for church leaders and others concerned with how to engage emerging adults with a positive story about science and faith, and hence removing a possible barrier to their being open to the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ.

I noted a couple of minor factual errors in my reading: Georges Lemaître, father of the Big Bang theory, was a Roman Catholic priest but he wasn't a Jesuit (75); and it was in 1915 not 1916 when Einstein presented his general theory of relativity to the Prussian Academy of Sciences and thence to the world (75). Also, I

was surprised to read that Imre Lakatos maintained that Christianity was a scientific research programme with “hard core” teachings, such as the divinity of Christ, which are not easily jettisoned (95), and, presumably, auxiliary hypotheses which are less secure (Cootsona gives his own example of the latter, namely the historicity of Adam and Eve). My surprise was averted on learning that this error slipped in as a result of the publishers’ rewording at the editorial stage. Still, it is worth noting that Philip Hefner and Nancey Murphy in the science-religion field have presented Christianity as a Lakatosian scientific research programme somewhat like this, even if Lakatos himself did not. None of these quibbles detract from the excellence of Cootsona’s book.

The Revd Dr Rodney D. Holder

Emeritus Course Director, Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, Cambridge

Fellow Commoner of St Edmund’s College, Cambridge

RESPONSE TO ALEXANDER J. D. IRVING

"Natural Theology: An Impossible Possibility?"

Paul D. Molnar, Ph.D.

**Professor of Systematic Theology
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
St. John's University, Queens, N.Y. 11439**

molnarp@stjohns.edu

When I originally wrote my article, "Natural Theology Revisited,"¹ I drew a sharp contrast between Karl Barth's interpretation of natural theology and Thomas F. Torrance's view, which Torrance presented as his "new natural theology." After reading Alexander J. D. Irving's interpretation of Torrance's natural theology, I am beginning to wonder whether I did not draw the contrast between them sharply enough! According to Irving "Theological science is . . . found to be constituted by a synthetic structure in which natural theology and revealed theology combine to the end of theological knowledge that is determined by God's self-revelation."² In other words, "For Torrance, theology is a synthesis of natural theology as rational structure and the material content of our knowledge of God's self-revelation" such that "It is upon the natural co-operation of these two components that thought may be determined by reality."³

How could one possibly reconcile this view with Barth's insistence that "What is 'God' to the natural man, and what he also certainly calls his 'God' is a false

¹ Paul D. Molnar, "Natural Theology Revisited: A Comparison of T. F. Torrance and Karl Barth," *Zeitschrift Für Dialektische Theologie* 20/1 (2005), 53-83.

² Alexander J.D. Irving, "Natural Theology as the Intra-Structure of Theological Science: T. F. Torrance's Proposals for Natural Theology in the Context of the Synthesis of Rational Structure and Material Content," *Participatio, The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, vol. 7 (December 2017), 99-124, 99.

³ Ibid., 107.

god”?⁴ Indeed, according to Barth, “we cannot allow that it [natural theology] says anything about God at all, or that it is one of the assertions which have to be made in the Christian doctrine of God” (CD II/1, 84). Moreover, in Barth’s view, the logic of natural theology in whatever form “demands that, even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A natural theology which does not strive to be the only master is not a natural theology” (CD II/1, 173).⁵ The answer concerning how the definition of theological science offered above and Barth’s unequivocal rejection of natural theology with the idea that natural theology ceases to be natural theology when it functions within revelation clearly has to do with how one defines natural theology.

Natural Theology Defined

To my knowledge, natural theology has always been defined in one way or another as referring to “a theology based on the natural light of reason, the dictates of conscience, or purported evidences of God in the processes of nature or the events of history. Natural theology is independent of God’s revelation attested in Scripture

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., *The Doctrine of God*, Vol. II, The Doctrine of God, pt. 1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, H. Knight and J. L. M. Harie (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964), 86, hereafter referred to in text as CD.

⁵ In a podium discussion in Chicago in 1962 Barth responded to a Father Cooke who said that while there was an “essential difference between the knowledge of God arrived at in faith and that knowledge about God attained in natural theology (i.e., a philosophical approach to a transcendent being), is it not possible to bring these two knowledges to bear on one another and so enter into an integrated act of theologizing?” *Barth in Conversation: Volume 1, 1959-1962*, ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. The Translation Fellows of the Center for Barth Studies Princeton Theological Seminary, Karlfried Froehlich, German Editor, Darrell L. Guder, English Editor, David C. Chao, Project Manager (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 175. Barth noted Cooke’s stress that there was an *essential* difference between the knowledge *of* God in faith and *about* God via natural theology, saying that was not accidental and that he loved him for that. He then said: “Yet you presuppose the identity of the Gods perceived by these two methods. My counterquestion is [this]: Are they identical?” If so, then why is there conflict between “knowledge of gods, deities . . . and so forth, and the revealed and faithful knowledge of those to whom God has spoken as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob . . . who is not the god of the philosophers?” (ibid.). Interestingly, Barth went on to say that since there is this distinction “it excludes identity” and that means that “natural theology (as it is called and as you call it) and Christian theology cannot be integrated in one system” because one cannot attempt to serve Yahweh and Baal at the same time (ibid., 176).

and God's decisive self-communication in Jesus Christ."⁶ This is certainly how Karl Barth understood it when he wrote that "Natural theology is the doctrine of a union of humanity with God existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ" (CD II/1, 168). It is "a theology which grounds itself on a knowability of God distinct from the grace of God, i.e., on a knowability of another God than Him knowable only in his grace" (CD II/1, 143). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* natural theology is described as follows: "starting from movement, becoming, contingency, and the world's order and beauty, one can come to a knowledge of God as the origin and the end of the universe."⁷ Indeed, it is said that "The Church teaches that the one true God, our Creator and Lord, can be known with certainty from his works, by the natural light of human reason (DS 3026)."⁸ In their *Theological Dictionary* Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler claim that natural theology is "a term applied to metaphysical ontology insofar as the general doctrine of being necessarily includes some statement about the absolute being of God."⁹ What all these statements have in common is that they present natural theology as an activity of human reason, untouched by explicit faith in revelation as attested by the church in its confession of the Nicene faith, that is capable of understanding God by virtue of its own power, at least as the origin and end of the universe or as absolute being, however understood.

⁶ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 459. See also James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991 Delivered in the University of Edinburgh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), who writes: "Traditionally, 'natural theology' has commonly meant something like this: that 'by nature', that is just by being human beings, men and women have a certain degree of knowledge of God and awareness of him, or at least the capacity for such an awareness; and this knowledge or awareness exists anterior to the special revelation of God made through Jesus Christ, through the Church, through the Bible . . . it is this pre-existing natural knowledge of God that makes it possible for humanity to receive the additional 'special' revelation. The two fit snugly together," 1.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, O.P., trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 307.

Torrance's "New" Natural Theology

So, the question that faces us here is this: did Torrance embrace such a knowledge of God in any sense at all, even with his "new" natural theology? If he did, then even his "new" natural theology contains a residue of this more traditional understanding which he was at pains to reject on scientific grounds, as Irving rightly contends. If he did not, then in reality, his theology is exclusively shaped by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and not at all by some naturally known God understood apart from revelation and faith. In that case, it would be confusing and indeed mistaken for him to describe human knowledge of God determined by revelation as natural theology since, even in his own understanding, theology based on revelation needs God's reconciling grace to be rightly ordered to its unique object (which of course is the triune God who meets us in his Word and Spirit).

Put another way, natural theology, even according to Torrance's own understanding of theological science, cannot properly claim to know the one true God of Christian faith because he states, "we are prevented by the whole cast of our natural mind from apprehending God without exchanging His glory for that of a creature or turning His truth into a lie."¹⁰ This leads him to argue that the Gospel requires of us a "radical change even in the inner slant of our mind, and in the structural capacities of our reason."¹¹ And, importantly, in his dogmatic work, he regularly cited Athanasius' statement that "'It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name God from his works alone and call him Unoriginate'"¹² in order to stress that "the possibility of our knowing God is grounded in His divine freedom to cross the boundary between Himself and us and to give Himself to be known by us within the conditions of our

¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 49.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996; reissued London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 117 and *The Trinitarian Faith: Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; reissued London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 49.

frailty on earth . . . in an adaptation of humanity to God in which man is lifted up to know God above and beyond his natural powers.”¹³

This takes place for us in the Incarnation so that any attempt to know God that proceeds from his works alone will never acknowledge the unique deity and humanity of the Son and indeed will bypass God himself as he comes to us in the Incarnation to reconcile us to himself from the divine and human side in Christ himself. It will, in other words, engage in an unscientific theology precisely because its thinking will not be “appropriate and adequate to the nature of the object of his knowledge.”¹⁴ Moreover, the Incarnation itself, Torrance insists, “reveals that as a matter of fact man stands outside that relation with God in which true knowledge of Him is actualized, and cannot get inside it because in his very existence he is imprisoned in the closed circle of his own estrangement and self-will.”¹⁵

Natural Theology: Natural to its Object?

Given these assertions, it is at the very least confusing for Torrance to claim we need a natural theology that is natural to its object (God) since according to his belief that a proper natural theology can only function within revelation this cannot happen except on the basis of our justification by grace and by faith. What he really presents us with therefore is not a natural theology at all but very definitely a theology of human nature based on grace and revelation and therefore an understanding of nature as it appears in light of our reconciliation in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ Hence,

In Him [Jesus Christ] there has already been fulfilled what we are unable to achieve, the reconciliation and adaptation and union of man with God, without which there is no true knowledge of God, so that in

¹³ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 49-50.

¹⁴ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ This is one reason why I agree with Colin Gunton that, while there may be parallel rationalities in the sciences of God and created realities and that “created and uncreated intelligibility” may be viewed together, it is preferable to speak in this context of a theology of nature rather than a transformed natural theology, Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 63.

Him, in His true and obedient humanity, the Truth of God has been given and received for all men.¹⁷

Of course Torrance's goal is to show that when nature is indeed perfected by grace it is not destroyed but rightly related with God,¹⁸ without destroying our human powers of reasoning. Indeed, he quite properly argues that faith itself is "the orientation of the reason toward God's self-revelation, the rational response of man to the Word of God."¹⁹ "Faith" he says "is the behaviour of the reason in accordance with the nature of its divine Object."²⁰ But, as soon as faith and revelation are brought into the discussion, as they must be in order to do scientific theology, then that theology ceases to be a natural theology and becomes instead a theology of revelation which includes human nature now living its reconciliation in Christ as this is actualized in us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Difficulties in Torrance's "New" Natural Theology

It was my contention in that original article and later to say simply that there were at least three difficulties present in Torrance's effort to develop what he calls his "new" natural theology: the first, as just noted, is that it is confusing because natural theology by definition is a theology that functions without necessarily relying exclusively on revelation and grace; second, natural theology, relying as it does on what can be known of God without revelation, knows nothing of the need for the radical repentance that Torrance also believes is necessary to rightly understand God and ourselves; and third, even Torrance's "new" natural theology, which is supposed to function exclusively within revelation contains residual

¹⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 51.

¹⁸ Torrance cites Barth in this regard who held that when natural theology "is included and brought into clear light in the theology of revelation (*theologia revelata*); in the reality of divine grace is included the truth of the divine creation. In this sense it is true that 'Grace does not destroy nature but completes it' (*Gratia non tollit naturam sed perfecit*). The meaning of the Word of God becomes manifest as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation," *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith, Introduction by Thomas F. Torrance (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 342.

¹⁹ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 33.

²⁰ Ibid.

elements of “traditional” natural theology, and this opens the door to inconsistency because he thinks that it is possible to bracket natural theology from its proper object (revelation) for purposes of clarity. This possibility follows his use of the analogy of geometry which leads him to a view of natural theology that is benign in the sense that it could be characterized as being merely incomplete without four dimensional geometry;²¹ the implication then is that natural theology is merely incomplete without revelation and grace when in fact he also believes that our natural knowledge is not just incomplete but that it is “diseased,” “twisted,” and “in-

²¹ See Molnar “Natural Theology Revisited,” 60 where I noted that Torrance thinks geometry can function independently of physics in a certain limited way and that he uses the analogy that our human understanding of God “apart from the divine side of the bi-polar relationship which knowledge of God involves” amounts to an artificial methodological separation akin to “converting four-dimensional geometry back into three-dimensional Euclidean geometry, or physical geometry back into *a priori* geometry” [*Reality and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 59]. Torrance claims this approach can only have a “quasi-validity” because of these artificially imposed limits (ibid., 60). On this basis Torrance argues that geometry when properly understood would not function independently of physics but instead would function as the “epistemological structure in the heart of physics, although considered in itself it would be *incomplete* without physics” [*Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 33 and *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 39, emphasis mine]. It is this analogy that leads to Torrance’s inconsistency because on the one hand he claims (rightly) that our natural knowledge is twisted and in-turned and cannot function accurately at all without reconciliation and grace. On the other hand, with his “new” natural theology, he thinks it is incomplete without revelation and only needs to be completed beyond itself to be accurate theology. That is the inconsistency. His entire theology of nature which is built upon the doctrine of justification by grace and by faith demands that we see that we are self-willed and always use our natural reasoning in opposition to God. Furthermore, he insists that this cannot change unless and until we live as part of the new creation in and from Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. My point then and now was and remains that a definite choice between these two opposing options is required even according to Torrance’s own scientific theology and his new natural theology is an example of an approach that suggests that epistemologically that choice is not absolutely necessary because natural theology does have a “quasi-validity” in spite of our self-will and sin. I contend that it does not, and that while both Barth and Torrance clearly saw this, Barth’s thinking was more consistent on this point than was Torrance’s. So, by introducing his “new” natural theology, I would say that far from this providing the “necessary but insufficient intrastructure of theology” (Alexander J. D. Irving, “Does the Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit Mean the End for Natural Theology? A Response to Paul Molnar with Reference to Thomas F. Torrance’s Reconstruction of Natural Theology,” *Trinity Journal* [2107], 225-45, 243), Torrance has damaged his own pivotal insight that that “intrastructure” is itself damaged and cannot function rightly [*continued next page]...

turned” and needs God’s grace to be put right.²² For Torrance “we cannot truly know God without being reconciled and renewed in Jesus Christ. Thus the objectivity of our theological knowledge is immutably soteriological in nature.”²³

²² Hence, Torrance writes: “Face to face with Christ our humanity is revealed to be diseased and in-turned, and our subjectivities to be rooted in self-will” (*Theological Science*, 310). Indeed, Torrance insists “it was our diseased *mind* that our Lord assumed for our sakes. In assuming it, however, far from sinning himself or being estranged and alienated from the Father, even when he penetrated into the fearful depths of our alienation — ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ — he converted it from the very bottom of our disobedient human being, from the roots of our estranged mental existence, into perfect oneness with the mind of God — ‘Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit’” *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 441. This is why Torrance speaks of modern persons as afflicted by a deep seated mental disease which leads them into subjectivism and false objectivism as well (see Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* [Farnham: Ashgate, 2009], 191) referring to Torrance, “The Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, (London: SCM Press, 1965), 231. This compares exactly to Barth’s view that the cross and resurrection disclose us as enemies of grace and friends only in Christ’s having overcome this (CD II/1, 140-57).

²³ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 41.

* [Footnote 21 continued from previous page]: ... except through the power of the Holy Spirit. So at the crucial moment where grace would actually rule, Irving insists that “God’s self-revelation must be cognized by us through the development of an appropriate rational structure through which the inherent Trinitarian structure of God’s self-revelation is cognized. In this sense, it can be seen that Torrance’s natural theology is about bringing human modes of thought and speech into coordination with God’s self-revelation” (ibid., 244). While this may sound right to the untrained ear, what is said here is problematic because even according to Torrance’s own theology, the only way we can “cognize” God’s self-revelation is when through grace God himself enables that; it is not by developing an appropriate rational structure. That development follows an acknowledgement of grace as grace — it cannot provide the basis for that recognition at all since God alone in his reconciling movement toward us in the Incarnation is the only basis for that. Thus, natural theology is not necessary here and in reality it must give up this self-willed attempt to be the necessary but not sufficient presupposition of theology proper. Otherwise, the door is opened for a scientific theology that is not exclusively faithful to the unique object which is the triune God himself. Irving tellingly speaks of a “collaboration of divine act and human act” in this regard while paying lip service to the idea that the human act is “subordinate to and dependent upon the divine act” (244). But, to the extent that natural theology can still function with any “quasi-validity,” then according to Torrance’s trinitarian theology as it is based on reconciliation as this has occurred for us in Christ, the triune God simply cannot be the exclusive starting point and criterion for theology as he contends it must be because of our sin and self-will and the need for grace.

Enemies of Grace by Nature

Consequently, as Barth repeatedly asserted, and as I think Torrance would agree, we are shown to be enemies of grace by nature in light of revelation. As Barth put it, in light of our "real determination by the judgment and grace of God, the fact is that finally and in the last resort man is always to be understood as the enemy of grace" (CD II/1, 145). That of course is not the end of the story here, because Barth also claimed that our life of faith, which is enabled by the Holy Spirit since "the Holy Spirit is the temporal presence of Jesus Christ who intercedes for us eternally in full truth," refers to our "new birth from God" (CD II/1, 158). Thus,

Faith extinguishes our enmity against God by seeing that this enmity is made a lie . . . expiated and overcome by Jesus Christ . . . and destroyed. Our truth is not the being which we find in ourselves as our own. The being which we find in ourselves as our own will always be the being in enmity against God. But this very being is a lie. It is the lie which is seen to be a lie in faith. Our truth is our being in the Son of God, in whom we are not enemies but friends of God, in whom we do not hate grace but cling to grace alone, in whom therefore God is knowable to us (CD II/1, 158-9).

Torrance's understanding of our knowledge of God is quite similar to this:

God's Truth is His Person turning to us and condescending to become one with us that He may turn us to God in revelation and reconciliation. God does not have to do this. He is entirely free to live His own Life apart from us, but in His freedom He chooses to turn to us and give Himself to us to be known and loved . . . It is out of pure Grace that He gives Himself to us to know and think as the Truth . . . This communicating of the Truth in Jesus is not for God's sake, but for our sake. . . Therefore in all our knowledge of the Truth we have to look beyond ourselves, to appeal to what transcends us for justification . . . the Truth reveals that we are not in the Truth and delivers us from the vicious circle of our own untruth, reconciling us to the Truth and putting us in the right with it beyond us. That is the movement of

God's Truth as Grace . . . which is the ultimate secret of the truth of our knowledge of God. It is because the Truth of God is His Grace that justification by Grace alone belongs to true knowledge of God — that is to say, the verification of theological statements is to be undertaken in terms of justification by Grace alone.²⁴

In Torrance's view then

Theological truth . . . has its essential *form* in the Life of Jesus in which He laid hold upon our mind and will and bent them back in Himself to perfect love and confidence in the Father . . . Unless theological statements participate in that glorification of the Father in Jesus, and so take the form of humble inquiry . . . they cannot be credited or sealed with a genuine *Amen*.²⁵

Thinking along these lines, Barth insisted that

we cannot ascribe to man as such any readiness corresponding to the readiness of God . . . If we try to presuppose any such thing we are treading on air. Man does not lend himself to the fulfilling of this presupposition. The knowability of God is not, therefore, to be made intelligible as the predicate of man as such (CD II/1, 145).²⁶

²⁴ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 157-8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁶ In his response to Brunner, Barth wrote: "Freedom to know the true God is a miracle, a freedom of God, not one of our freedoms. Faith in the revelation of God makes this negation inevitable. To contradict it would amount to unbelief . . . How can man ever in any sense know 'of himself' what has to be known here? He may know it *himself*, yes! But 'of himself,' never!" Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply 'No'! by Dr. Karl Barth*, introduction by The Very Rev. Professor John Baillie, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002, first published in 1946), 117.

It is for this reason that Barth rejected the idea that there could be some sort of cooperation with grace from the human side,²⁷ as is certainly implied in the above statement from Irving that “natural theology and revealed theology combine to the end of theological knowledge that is determined by God’s self-revelation”. In Barth’s words:

Though God could compete and co-operate with the creature — if He did not do this he would not be its Creator — there could not be even the remotest possibility of the creature competing and co-operating with God . . . The reason is this. God is God and the creature is creature . . . there can only be God’s competition and co-operation with the creature, but not the reverse. An inversion would compromise and abrogate the very presupposition of the relationship: the character of God as God, and of the creature as creature (CD II/1, 580).

²⁷ Referring to the coming of the kingdom of God for which we pray in the second petition of the Lord’s prayer, Barth makes two decisive remarks: 1) “As it is prayed for in the second petition, the kingdom is not a kind of continuing, prolonging, excelling, and completing of what people may, as commanded, attempt and undertake in a more or less rich understanding . . .” *CD IV/4 Lecture Fragments*, 240; 2) “The Lord does not reason or discuss or debate with either demons or the men to whose help he hastens in doing what he does here. He does not have to explain himself to them or justify himself before them. *He does not link up with their own achievements. He does not concur or collaborate with them.* He simply goes his own way, the way of his own honor and our salvation. That he should and will act thus is the promise that is given to Christians and it is as such the summons and command to call upon him and to pray ‘Thy kingdom come,’” (ibid., 235, emphasis mine). This thinking surely excludes any idea that knowledge of God’s kingdom rests upon some sort of natural co-operation between empirical and theoretical components of knowledge since the truth of our knowledge of the kingdom rests exclusively upon God’s grace and thus God’s promise and command. Thus, while Irving is correct to say that for Torrance knowledge is “devoted to and bound up with its object” (ibid., 107) and that “to know objectively is to allow the structure of the object to determine the structure of human thought” (ibid., 108), he neglects to mention that for Torrance we are incapable of knowing God as he truly is apart from God’s own atoning action in his Holy Spirit enabling this knowledge. That means of course that true knowledge of God is not the result of our human cooperation and God’s revelation, but only the result of a knowledge that takes place in obedience to Christ himself. In his discussion of “ontologic” all that is mentioned is how human logic relates to empirical reality within creation — he leaves out Torrance’s all important discussion of the logic of grace.

Complementarity? Natural Theology/Revealed Theology

The real issue here concerns the question of whether or not one can maintain that there is a "complementarity between the synthesis of natural and revealed theology and the synthesis of the logic of empirical form and the logic of systematic form" without fundamentally subverting Torrance's own insistence on the priority of the "Logic of Grace" which, according to Torrance, refers to

the unconditional priority of the Truth as Grace and the irreversibility of the relationship established between the Truth and us. The Logic of Grace is the way the Truth has taken in His disclosure to us. Because He does not cease to be Grace in our knowing Him, all our thoughts and their interrelations must reflect the movement of Grace.²⁸

Because there is what Torrance calls an "epistemological inversion of our relation to God"²⁹ he insists that there is "no formal-logical relation between the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross and the forgiveness of our sins"³⁰ even though there certainly is a relation. But that relation "is established by divine action and discerned through faith."³¹ Thus, our knowledge of God is grounded in God's knowing us such that "our act of faith is grounded on God's decision of Grace to give Himself to us and to choose us for Himself."³²

For Torrance, then, our decisions for God are rooted in "election" which for him means "the prevenient movement of God's love that is so incarnated in Jesus Christ that in Him we have both the pure act of divine Grace toward man and the

²⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 214. This is why Torrance insists that "I cannot love God through loving my neighbour. I can love my neighbour truly and only through loving God. To love God through loving my neighbour is to assert that the Incarnation is not a reality, the reality it is, that relation to God is still a mediated one. To love God through my love to my neighbour is to move toward God. It does not know a movement of God toward man," (*The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002], 88-9).

²⁹ Ibid., 215.

³⁰ Ibid., 214.

³¹ Ibid., 215.

³² Ibid.

perfect act of man in obedient response toward God's Grace."³³ In other words, because Christ lived a life of perfect obedience, appropriating God's grace for our benefit by standing in for us before God the Father, he "actualised in Himself the Truth of God translating it into His human life, that we may know the Truth in and through Jesus Christ."³⁴ For this reason, Torrance can say that "Every theological doctrine must reflect in its way, directly or indirectly, the unconditional priority of the Grace of God if it is to be faithful to the Truth."³⁵ That of course must mean that in reality, in light of a proper theology of human nature, there is no "quasi-validity" to any independent natural theology, as Torrance claimed there was based on his analogy between natural theology and geometry.

The key question raised in this response to Irving's thought-provoking but problematical article then concerns whether or not Torrance's reconstructed natural theology is natural theology in the traditional sense described above at all. According to Irving, the answer seems to be no because Torrance insists that natural theology must be natural to its proper object, namely, the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. But, as noted above, if theology begins and ends with faith in Christ as God's self-revelation, then in truth it is a theology of revelation based on grace and not nature; it is a theology that is determined exclusively by the unique object of Christian faith and not by any naturally known God either as absolute being or as the origin and end of the universe or perhaps as an "imperious constraint from beyond" as Torrance himself once claimed. We will return to this in a moment.

Either/Or Choice

For now, it seems clear that an either/or choice is required here. But, just as certainly, it seems from this presentation, that Torrance's "new" natural theology can still be called natural theology because it is supposed to be seen as the "infra-structure"³⁶ or as Torrance also called it, the "intrastructure" of revealed theology.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 215-16.

³⁶ Irving, *Participatio*, 105.

This means that Torrance “had in view a rational structure that had been transposed into the material content of theology.”³⁷ But, if that is true, then by his own definition, this is no longer natural theology as traditionally understood. It is a theology based upon and shaped exclusively by revelation and grace. The problem we are concerned with here then is that either a theology is based on revelation and grace or it is based on some sort of natural knowledge that is confirmed by and then clarified by revelation; in which case the exclusive criterion of truth ceases to be grace and, in some sense, becomes nature which, according to both Barth and Torrance needs to be reconciled and was indeed reconciled in Christ, but now must live from and in that “new” humanity that is ours in Christ, *before* we can think theologically.

This is an extremely important and often overlooked issue. Can we view natural theology benignly simply by thinking of it as incomplete (as Torrance does) apart from revelation, so that it is completed in revelation? Or must we think of natural theology as the attempt by sinful human beings to know God without actually relying on revelation as grace from start to finish? This is made all the more difficult by the fact that natural theology, even as the “new” natural theology envisioned by Torrance might claim to be subordinate to revelation, but notwithstanding that claim, it would not in reality be truly subordinate to the revelation of God in Christ to the extent that it could still be described as natural theology.

I am arguing that natural theology is not the necessary presupposition of revealed theology; rather that presupposition is our “new” humanity that has been restored in the humanity of the incarnate Word so that the infrastructure of a theology of grace itself can only be seen and described in faith as it is tied to Christ and enabled by the miraculous action of the Holy Spirit. Undoubtedly, Torrance also affirms this when in his important book, *Space, Time and Resurrection* he rightly claims that we would have no objective knowledge of the true God without Christ’s own resurrection from the dead. Thus,

The resurrection is therefore our pledge that statements about God in

³⁷ Ibid.

Jesus Christ have an objective reference in God, and are not just projections out of the human heart and imagination . . . The resurrection demonstrates not only that all division has been removed in atoning reconciliation, but that atoning reconciliation has achieved its end in the new creation in which God and man are brought into such communion with one another that the relations of man with God in being and knowing are healed and fully established.³⁸

When, with Irving, one depicts scientific theology as cooperating with revelation and thus suggesting that natural and revealed theology *together* make up what Torrance called theological science then the heart of theology as a creaturely act within the *new* creation is compromised.

It is Torrance's somewhat inconsistent answer to these questions that has led some who embrace his "new" natural theology to think that "the human mind possesses the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such [which all would of course agree with], and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order [which Barth firmly and consistently rejects and Torrance firmly rejects, except on occasion, when relating theological and natural science to each other]."³⁹ In his consideration of "natural revelation" Barth freely admitted that God had made himself objectively known in creation, but because of sin and self-will human beings could not actually understand that natural revelation except through Christ and the Spirit. This view by Barth may have been what Torrance was after with his "new" natural theology;

³⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998; reissued London: T&T Clark, 2018), 72-3.

³⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume I Nature*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 299. Also, McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology: The 2009 Gifford Lectures*, (Louisville, KY: The Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) where instead of realizing that when Colin Gunton said everything looks different in light of the Trinity he meant to offer a proper theology of nature, McGrath mistakenly assumes he was supporting his (McGrath's) view of natural theology. Thus, McGrath concludes, with Moltmann, that "we must learn to think of the 'world of nature as bearing the prints of the Triune God,'" 70. Of course if this is in any sense true, then we can look to nature as well as to revelation to understand the mystery of the Trinity. And that is exactly what both Barth and Torrance vigorously rejected!

but again for both theologians the fact is that even this “natural revelation” is not natural theology in any recognizably traditional sense.

Alister McGrath

Consider also the following statement from Alister McGrath, who claims to be developing his thought on the basis of Torrance’s “new” natural theology within the ambit of revelation:

There is an essential harmony between the Christian vision of the world, and what may actually be known of it. In developing this point, we would argue that Christian theology provides an ontological foundation which confirms and consolidates otherwise fleeting, fragmentary glimpses of a greater reality, gained from the exploration of nature without an attending theoretical framework. A traditional natural theology can be thought of as drawing aside a veil briefly, partially, and tantalizingly, eliciting an awareness of potential insight, and creating a longing to be able to grasp and possess whatever is being intimated. What is transient and fragmentary is clarified and consolidated from within the standpoint of the Christian tradition, which is able to affirm whatever can be known in this tantalizing manner, while clarifying it and placing it upon a firmer foundation in the divine *logos*.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 248. Strangely, while this position clearly depicts Christian theology as affirming what can be known of God through natural theology in the traditional sense, and carrying it forward, in another context, McGrath recognizes that this approach could be questioned in light of a proper trinitarian theology. See *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 63. Yet, even that does not stop McGrath from proposing a “Trinitarian natural theology” in which he claims to be following Barth and says “Revelation is thus not limited to the divine self-disclosure, but to the matrix of actions and frameworks which enable this self-disclosure to be recognized as such and appropriated as revelation” (ibid., 72). Accordingly, this “matrix” includes “social embodiments . . . such as worship, the recital of creeds, and the public reading of Scripture — and the influence of God” (ibid., 72). For Barth the only one who could enable God’s self-disclosure to be recognized is God himself and not any framework. Thinking this way, however, McGrath claims that nature can indeed “render the character of God to a limited extent” and claims, following Gerard Manley Hopkins, that created entities have the “capacity to signify their creator” and [**continued next page] ...

There can be no doubt that Irving's inadequate reading of my analysis and critique of Torrance's "new" natural theology will further the confusion embodied in Alister McGrath's problematic construction of his own natural theology. Here it should be noted that McGrath's thinking goes beyond anything that Torrance himself would countenance with his apologetic intent to appeal to those with or without faith in the Christian God. He argues that the apologetic value of a "legitimate natural theology" will allow us to see that "the Christian evangelist will have a number of 'points of contact' for the gospel within the created order."⁴¹ This assertion is directly antithetical to the view of Torrance and Barth that there is in reality only one point of contact for the Gospel and that is Jesus Christ himself. That is why Torrance insisted that "The Humanity of Christ is thus crucially significant for the saving knowledge of God by man . . . It is the human form and reality of Jesus of Nazareth which is the necessary 'point of contact' or *Anknüpfungspunkt* for our Salvation . . . the bridge between God and man, and man and God."⁴²

⁴¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Volume I Nature*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 299.

⁴² Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 136-7.

****[Footnote 40 continued from previous page]:** ... from this he embraces Emil Brunner's idea that "God has bestowed upon his works 'a permanent capacity for revelation . . .' which can be discerned through human contemplation of the 'traces of his own nature which [God] has expressed and made known in them'" (ibid., 74). All of this is what Barth explicitly rejected in rejecting natural theology. But it is this kind of problematic thinking that ensues when one supposes that Torrance's "new" natural theology authorizes this type of understanding of revelation. This is why Torrance's "new" natural theology is so problematic: it leads those who think he was embracing a "benign" natural theology to ignore at least half of his theology which, with Barth, forcefully asserted that the only way to truly know God is through God himself and not through reflection on nature. It leads McGrath to state that his more modest and realistic natural theology is "based on the idea of a resonance or 'empirical fit' between the Christian worldview and what is actually observed. The Christian faith, grounded ultimately in divine self-revelation, illuminates and interprets the natural world; the 'Book of Scripture' enables a closer and more fruitful reading of the 'Book of Nature'" (ibid., 218). Here it is worth noting that for Barth the creation of world-views is just another indication of what happens when our actual reconciliation in Christ himself is ignored or marginalized. Creating world-views represents an active human attempt to come to terms with revelation and reconciliation by incorporating God's act of grace into a view of reality which then becomes the criterion for the grace itself. A world-view Barth says "is the glorious possibility of evading" the offensive nature of revelation as grace. He says "so long as man, viewing the world, is observer, constructor and manager, he is safe, or at any rate thinks he is safe from this offence [namely, that we can only say yes to ourselves but only] as "an answer to the Yes said to him" (CD IV/3, 257).

McGrath also believes that all acts of understanding are based upon some pre-understanding. Thus he claims that "Nature has to be seen in a certain way before it has revelatory potential" and this "depends upon the assumptions which the observer brings to the act of observation." Therefore "the act of the interpreter is based upon a *Vorverständnis*, a 'pre-understanding' which is brought to this act by the observer on account of his or her standing within a tradition of discourse."⁴³ While certain interpretative frameworks do not allow "any significant connection between the world as we observe it and the nature of God," McGrath alleges that a connection can be asserted only if three conditions are met. First, "The created order is held to be the work of the Christian God, not any other entity"; second "The act of creation was not determined or significantly influenced by the quality of the material which was ordered through this act"; and third "That the human mind possess the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such, and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order."⁴⁴ He then claims that these three insights were "secured through the Christian revelation."⁴⁵

But that is exactly the problem. Neither Torrance nor Barth are willing to admit that any pre-understanding that we bring to the encounter with God in Christ can be allowed any determinative function here at all since it is only God who can heal our minds such that they may know the truth. When that happens, they claim, it is the result of God's forgiving grace actualized through the Holy Spirit in us enabling our freedom and is not at all the result of any capacity of ours to draw conclusions about God from the world. Here is where McGrath has introduced a version of traditional natural theology that is clearly at variance with the thinking of both Barth and Torrance. McGrath mistakenly believes that it "is wrong to treat natural theology and revealed theology as being opposed to each other, *provided* that nature is construed in a trinitarian manner as the creation of the self-revealing God."⁴⁶

⁴³ McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 298.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 296.

But according to both Barth and Torrance we know from God's self-revelation, as seen above, that we are enemies of grace, that our minds are diseased and twisted apart from Christ the reconciler. And human nature is what it is as fallen and as justified by grace alone whether we construe it in a trinitarian or some other manner. In other words our construal of nature does not make our vision of nature true to what it actually is. That our vision is true depends entirely upon the nature of creation as created by God and as fallen, justified and sanctified by God in Christ and through his Spirit. McGrath thinks "Natural theology cannot become a *totally* autonomous discipline, independent of revelation, in that it depends for its credibility upon the revealed insight that God is creator of the natural order."⁴⁷ But Barth and Torrance based their entire theologies on the fact that natural theology has *no* autonomy at all because, as Barth bluntly put it: "If we look past Jesus Christ, if we speak of anyone else but Him, if our praise of man is not at once praise of Jesus Christ, the romance and the illusions begin again" (CD II/1, 149). Then

we fall back again into the aspect under which it is impossible to see, or with a good conscience to speak about, the man who is ready for God in life and truth . . . in the doctrine of the knowledge and knowability of God, we have always to take in blind seriousness the basic Pauline perception of Colossians 3:3 which is that of all Scripture — that our life is our life hid with Christ in God. With Christ: never at all apart from Him, never at all independently of Him, never at all in and for itself. Man exists in Jesus Christ and in Him alone; as he also finds God in Christ and in Him alone. The being and nature of man in and for themselves as independent bearers of an independent predicate, have, by the revelation of Jesus Christ, become an abstraction which is destined only to disappear (CD II/1, 149).

There is not one word here of what Barth says that Torrance would disagree with and thus he himself would respond to McGrath's affirmation that "there is an intrinsic capacity within the created order to disclose God" rather negatively. McGrath claims that this capacity within the created order is somehow grounded in

⁴⁷ Ibid., emphasis mine.

the covenant and thus is not an assertion of an *analogia entis*. He even cites Torrance's view that creation

cannot be interpreted or understood out of itself, as if it had an inherent likeness or being to the Truth, but only in light of the history of the covenant of grace . . . Reformed theology certainly holds that God reveals himself in creation, but not by some so-called 'light of nature', and it certainly holds that God's revelation makes use of and is mediated through a creaturely objectivity, but it does not hold that an examination of this creaturely objectivity of itself can yield knowledge of God.⁴⁸

And yet his basic thesis for his new natural theology that supposedly functions exclusively within revelation hinges on his assertion that "That the human mind possess the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such, and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature and character of God from the created order."⁴⁹

To put this matter rather uncompromisingly, the issue that I am raising here concerns the consistency of Torrance's own belief that God himself is the only one who can make us aware of who he truly is; and this happens only as God himself through his Holy Spirit and thus through union with Christ and on the basis of reconciliation itself enables our proper knowledge of who he is and who we are in Christ. Can traditional natural theology actually draw aside the veil and elicit an awareness of the triune God, as McGrath thinks? Can revealed theology be correctly grasped if it is conceptualized as simply clarifying some sort of fragmentary knowledge of God which McGrath thinks is available to us in our natural theology and then placing it on a firmer foundation as McGrath believes?

Barth's answer to these questions was an unequivocal no because he very consistently maintained that all of our knowledge of God was enabled by the grace of God in its identity with God's act of revelation and reconciliation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Torrance clearly followed Barth in this since both argued

⁴⁸ Torrance, *The School of Faith*, cited in McGrath, *ibid.*, 297.

⁴⁹ McGrath, *Scientific Theology*, 299.

that true knowledge of God could only occur on the basis of our justification and sanctification by grace and through faith. Those who embrace Torrance's "new" natural theology also espouse the seemingly innocuous statement that this natural theology must function within revelation. But perhaps this is not so innocuous after all. For even on Torrance's own reckoning, there is no way from human logic to the logic of grace (which is never mentioned by Irving but which is decisive in Torrance's book *Theological Science* in a way which places his theological perspective much closer to Barth's at that point, as indicated above). According to Torrance, our minds need to be reconciled through the action of the Holy Spirit (which is also not featured in Irving's article) *before* we can truly know God from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. He spells this out in his *Theological Science* and in *God and Rationality*. The question that Barth raised is whether natural theology in *any form* (new or old) really can allow revelation to be its *exclusive* source for understanding who God is. We have just seen that McGrath's thinking also demonstrates that a choice is required here. Therefore, I would say things are not as clear as Irving makes them out to be.

Artificially Separating Revealed and Natural Theology

While Irving mistakenly claims that I have misinterpreted Torrance for bracketing his "new" natural theology from revelation for purposes of clarification, the fact is that I have understood exactly what he was attempting to do; he was attempting to hold that the "logic of empirical form has a nascent coherence owing to its determination by the material context of reality," as Irving puts it, so that "natural theology 'still retains the imprint of its empirical origins and foundations.'" Thus, natural theology's propositions can be properly evaluated "by artificially separating revealed and natural theology."⁵⁰ We are thus told that this artificial and temporary separation will allow us to "test its coherency and verify the connection between natural theology and revelation."⁵¹

Yet, according to Torrance's own theology as it is shaped by revelation, he claims, together with Barth, that no analogies or concepts are true in themselves and that

⁵⁰ Irving, *Participatio*, 106-107.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

theological propositions simply cannot be verified except through revelation and grace, as discussed above. In Torrance's words:

justification by putting us in the right with the Truth of God calls in question all that claims to be knowledge of the truth on our part and calls into question our theological statements in so far as they claim to have truth in themselves, and directs them away from themselves to Christ as the one Truth of God . . . in so doing justification establishes us in certainty [by grounding all our knowledge and action upon] the divine Reality in Christ.⁵²

This is why he insists that Jesus is an "ultimate." This means that who he is and the truth that he reveals cannot be verified on any other ground than that which he himself provides. But that ground, in Torrance's view, is the revelation of God attested in Scripture and given in the deposit of faith. It is not to be found in natural theology at all. Here then once again is the real problem that is never adequately addressed by Irving: how can natural theology possibly be considered as a cooperative feature of our knowledge of revelation without actually reversing what Barth and Torrance considered to be an irreversible relationship, that is, the relationship between nature and grace as discussed above?

An example of the difficulty being discussed here can be seen in the following statements once made by Torrance:

Justification by the grace of Christ alone, does not mean that there is no natural knowledge — what natural man is there who does not know something of God even if he holds it down in unrighteousness or turns the truth into a lie? But it does mean that the whole of that natural knowledge is called into question by Christ who when he comes to us says: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.' The whole man with his natural knowledge is therefore questioned down to the root of his being, for man is summoned to look away from all that he is and knows or thinks he

⁵² Torrance, *Theological Science*, 201. In fact Torrance insists that "our ideas and conceptions and analogies and words are twisted in untruth and are resistant to the Truth," *ibid.*, 49.

knows to Christ who is the Way the Truth and the Life; no one goes to the Father but by him.⁵³

Two comments are in order. First, Torrance is certainly claiming some sort of natural knowledge of God here in the traditional sense while also acknowledging that as

⁵³ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 163. Torrance explains this in a similar way in *Theological Science* when he explains that justification by grace “is not a factual denial of natural goodness” or “a metaphysical denial of natural theology,” but rather it sets a person “upon a wholly new basis in Grace” (102-3). It is thus a “methodological, not a metaphysical, rejection of ‘natural theology’” (103). Natural theology, Torrance thus claims is excluded by “scientific theology as a sort of ‘foreign body’ (however useful within its own limits, e.g. in helping to remove the grounds of rational doubt)” (103). He explains this further by saying that “‘natural theology’ is a sort of mixture pursued by men of faith reasoning within the natural realm, *remoto Christo*, as it were. It is not something that can stand on its own feet, purely as *natural* theology erected on natural grounds, but is, taken at its best, a form of rational argumentation on natural grounds in which a believer attempts to elaborate chains of reasoning which will remove from skeptical minds that which obstructs direct intuitive apprehension of the living God” (104). The problem I am identifying in Torrance’s thought, however, concerns the fact that he thinks natural theology can be of any use at all in removing obstructions to knowledge of God “by men of faith,” since according to his own scientific theology only God himself in his grace and mercy can, as we acknowledge the Father, through union with his Son and by his Spirit, remove grounds for rational doubt and obstacles to knowing him. Inasmuch as natural theology, according to Torrance, “seeks to move toward God” and thus comes “into conflict with natural science and with pure theology” my question is: how can such a theology (natural theology) possibly remove rational doubt about God since on the one hand, within this understanding, it cannot really know the God known by pure theology at all. On the other hand, any understanding of God by persons of faith, in order to be true knowledge of God, would have to take place by grace and through revelation, according to Torrance’s own stated theological position. Thus, it simply could not result in knowledge of the true God without one taking up one’s cross and turning to Christ who is the way, the truth and the life. Karl Barth’s understanding of “natural revelation” as depicted by George Hunsinger comes close to what Torrance is saying here. But by designating this “natural revelation” the confusion that follows from designating it “natural theology” is avoided. And the point is made clear. For Barth, “natural revelation was not absolutely ruled out, but it was reinterpreted from a center in Christ” (*Evangelical, Catholic and Reformed: Doctrinal Essays on Barth and Related Themes* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015], 99). Importantly, however, for Barth “God could not be known, even through natural revelation, without God’s bringing the human subject into living union with himself (II/1, 105)” (ibid., 99). That bringing into living union is what is marginalized by all world-views.

sinner we cut ourselves off from the Truth.⁵⁴ Could this perhaps explain why he can also say that created intelligibility points beyond itself “with a mute cry for sufficient reason”⁵⁵ so that “the fact that the universe is intrinsically rational means that it is capable of or open to, rational explanation — from beyond itself”?⁵⁶ While this may be so, one wonders how the universe can offer a mute cry as nature since, as Torrance insists, nature in itself is dumb and needs us as priests of creation to bring to light its intelligibility.⁵⁷ In any case Torrance reasons that since the universe is intrinsically rational and open to explanation from beyond, therefore this

*suggests, or directs us to, a transcendent ground of rationality as its explanation. It is the objective depth of comprehensibility in the universe that projects our thought beyond it in this way . . . To be inherently reasonable the universe requires a sufficient reason for being what it is as an intelligible whole.*⁵⁸

⁵⁴ McGrath himself side-steps this issue claiming that the “extent to which the human mind and will have been affected by sin is contested within the Christian tradition” (*Scientific Theology*, 292). But he argues that “there is widespread agreement that the human situation is characterized by some such diminution in the human epistemic capacity to discern, and subsequently to respond appropriately to, God” (ibid., 293). Barth and Torrance are both claiming that, in light of revelation, we know that our ability to know God in truth apart from Christ is not just diminished but is impossible. Of course he speaks of atonement in *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, but for him that means a transformed vision in which we see things differently (39, 218) while for Torrance and Barth it means recognizing our utter dependence on the living Christ to empower us to know the Father through the power of his Holy Spirit.

⁵⁵ This statement of course conflicts with Torrance’s own remark that creation as such is dumb and needs us as priests of creation to bring to light its intelligibility. See Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1997), 41 and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 26f. See also Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 5-6.

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 52.

⁵⁷ See Molnar, *ZDTh*, 55, n. 11. Torrance writes: “Nature after all is dumb; she cannot talk back to us. Hence we must not only frame the questions we put to nature but also put into the mouth of nature the answers she is to give back to us” (*God and Rationality*, 41).

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 53.

An Imperious Constraint from Beyond/An Active Agency

Therefore, in the process of reasoning, Torrance claims that “we are aware of coming under an imperious constraint from beyond”⁵⁹ with the result that this “would seem to *suggest* that there is an *active agency* other than the inherent intelligibility and harmony of the universe, unifying and structuring it, and providing it with its ground of being.”⁶⁰

However, the critical question raised by Torrance’s own understanding that theology can only be done within revelation and by the power of grace itself leads me to wonder exactly how he can transfer that power to the objective depth of comprehensibility in the universe that is supposed to be able to project our thought beyond it so as to suggest an active agency or an imperious constraint from beyond. More importantly, however, the ideas of an active agency or imperious constraint from beyond can only lead us to a god of our own making and have no power to lead us to the true God.

Here another problem surfaces. Whereas Barth rightly insisted that we either know God in his entirety as Father, Son and Holy Spirit or not at all,⁶¹ this thinking implies that some knowledge of that one true God is attained as the intelligibility of the universe drives our thought toward these twin ideas. This is confirmed by Torrance’s question: “Does it [an independent natural theology] not really miss the mark, by abstracting his [God’s] existence from his act, and so by considering one

⁵⁹ Ibid., 54 and *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 26.

⁶⁰ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 56.

⁶¹ Thus, “God is who He is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, supreme, the one true Lord; and He is known in his entirety or He is not known at all. There is no existence of God behind or beyond this entirety of His being . . . there can be no knowledge of God in time or even in eternity which will lead us beyond this entirety of His being . . . God exists in this entirety of His being and therefore not in any kind of parts” (CD II/1, 51-2).

aspect of his being apart from other aspects?"⁶² When and if through faith we actually acknowledge the truth of God's grace as described by Torrance himself then we may interpret the intelligibility of the universe as pointing to the true God. But an active agency or imperious constraint from beyond cannot really be identified with God as Christians know God through his Word and Spirit. That would mean that one could only think truly about God in faith, by grace and through revelation, even on Torrance's own understanding. One would then be engaging in a theology of revelation and not a natural theology; and that theology of revelation might include what George Hunsinger described as "natural revelation" as it was made intelligible through revelation alone in its identity with Christ himself.⁶³

Unfortunately, none of these important issues are addressed by Irving in his article because he did not seem to appreciate the full difficulty that I raised in my original article discussing Torrance's new natural theology in 2005.

This leads to my second point, namely, that it is imperative that this reasoning be seen for what it is because there can be no doubt that here Torrance's thinking is opposed not only to Barth's view as explicated above, but to his own view that human knowledge needs to be reconciled by the actualization of

⁶² Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 151. This problematic assertion is heightened when Torrance claims that there is an "ultimate openness of being and its semantic reference" *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 47 and that "we find our human being opened up and disclosed to us as there strikes at us through the blank face of the universe a mysterious intelligibility which takes us under its command in such a way that we feel we have to do with an undeniable and irreducibly transcendent reality which becomes intensely meaningful as the inward enlightenment of our own beings," *ibid.*, 58. This is a far cry from Torrance's often repeated insistence that we have no true knowledge of God except as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and it is in conflict with his own assertion that "since there is no likeness between the eternal being of God and the being of created reality, God may be known only out of himself," *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52. Hence, "when we approach God as Father through the Son, our knowledge of the Father in the Son is grounded in the very being of God and is determined by what he essentially is in his own nature," *ibid.*, 53.

⁶³ See n. 53 above.

atonement in our minds before we can truly know God.⁶⁴ This is the case because, for Torrance, God can only be known by God, that is, from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves.⁶⁵ In other words, as Torrance applies the doctrine of justification to human knowledge of God, he really does believe and consistently holds to the fact that the whole person is questioned down to the root of his or her being in that we, as sinners who are justified by grace and thus by Christ alone, are summoned to look away from ourselves and only to Christ. Indeed, he insists in other contexts that this ability to follow Christ itself is enabled only by the Holy Spirit actualizing the atonement in us and thus uniting us with Christ so that we may actually share in the Son's unique knowledge of the Father (Matt. 11:27).⁶⁶

None of these problems are addressed by Irving and in fact we are only led into further confusion with the idea that as theologians we can and should find a place for natural theology as it functions within revelation. The only problem is that natural theology really does cease to be natural theology when our thinking is actually determined by who God has revealed himself to be in his Word and Spirit. That, I have argued, is precisely why one never sees a word about this "new" natural theology when one reads Torrance's books on the Trinity or when one reads about the fact that grace cannot be separated from the Giver of grace. That is

⁶⁴ A very clear and decisive example of this can be seen in Torrance's book on Atonement. He insisted to his students that the Gospel must have its way with them so that "you will find the very shape and structure of your mind beginning to change." This will involve "a radical repentant rethinking of everything before the face of Jesus Christ" so that repentant thinking means taking up one's cross and following Christ with the result that "you cannot separate evangelical theology from that profound experience of the radical changing and transforming of your mind that comes through dying and rising with Christ" (*Atonement*, 433). From this Torrance instructively concludes that "divine revelation conflicts sharply with the structure of our natural reason, with the secular patterns of thought that have already become established in our minds through the twist of our ingrained mental alienation from God. We cannot become true theologians without the agonising experience of profound change in the mental structure of our innermost being" (433). See also Molnar, "The importance of the doctrine of justification in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance and of Karl Barth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70 (2): 198–226 (2017).

⁶⁵ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 52 and *Theological Science*, 29.

⁶⁶ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 58–9. See also Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 77–8 and Torrance, "The One Baptism," *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 101–102. See also Molnar, *Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, 305ff.

because, in his dogmatics proper, Torrance's thinking is generally quite consistently a theology grounded in grace and understood in faith on the basis of revelation alone just because he really applies the *sola gratia* to the whole realm of human knowledge, as Karl Barth himself did. I say generally because whenever Torrance uses the analogy from geometry as described above this thinking does not remain consistent with his avowal of a theology of *sola gratia*.

So in his book, *Space, Time and Incarnation* he says that "four-dimensional geometries . . . involve a profound correlation between abstract conceptual systems and physical processes" and that this "has considerable epistemological implications for theological as well as natural science, if only because it yields the organic concept of space-time as a continuous diversified but unitary field of dynamic structures, in which the theologian as well as the natural scientist is at work." This, Torrance says "gets rid of the old dualisms between material existence and absolute space and time, or between nature and supernature." Therefore, "it is no longer possible to operate scientifically with a separation between natural theology and revealed theology any more than between geometry and physics" because geometry must be pursued "in indissoluble unity with physics" and not independent of it in a way that is detached from knowledge of "physical processes." It is then seen as "its inner rational structure and as an essential part of empirical and theoretical interpretation of nature."⁶⁷

This leads him to conclude that natural theology, like geometry, must be "undertaken in an integrated unity with positive theology in which it plays an indispensable part in our inquiry and understanding of God. In this fusion 'natural' theology will suffer a dimensional change and will be made natural to the proper subject-matter of theology."⁶⁸ Notice what has happened here. Gone is any mention of the fact that we are enemies of grace, that our reason is twisted and distorted and that we need reconciliation and repentant thinking brought about by the Holy Spirit changing the structure of our natural thought. I suggest that the reason for this is that Torrance's analogy from geometry, which he took from Einstein,⁶⁹ led

⁶⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 69.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁹ See Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, 91ff.

him to conclude that natural theology, like geometry could be bracketed from revelation and, like geometry bracketed from physics, it could still make sense but it would be incomplete and need completion beyond itself. However, elsewhere in his thinking, as it is shaped by the grace of revelation, Torrance insists that we need a complete metanoia and total change in that we must take up our cross and follow Christ if we are going to think rightly as theologians. The analogy from geometry you might say leads to a bloodless death to self and an all too smooth transition to a theology of revelation. This is the “continuity” between nature and grace that both Barth and Torrance opposed on scriptural grounds.

Now, one could dismiss this discussion with the idea that these are rather abstruse ideas being debated by Torrance scholars with little practical relevance for theologians today. That would be a serious mistake because unfortunately whenever it is thought that there must be mutual cooperation between natural theology and a theology based exclusively on revelation, then serious problems arise. We have already noted that in Barth’s view such thinking blurs the distinction between creator and creature and we have seen that Alister McGrath has been led beyond anything that Torrance would countenance with his portrayal of a supposed trinitarian natural theology. Let me give one further example.

Ray S. Anderson

Let us consider how Ray Anderson employs Torrance’s “new” natural theology. He attempts to construct a “new” natural theology as a basis for moral theology following Torrance’s approach and he deliberately endeavors to harmonize Barth and Brunner in the process. Hence,

We have attempted to bring the concerns of Brunner for a viable *theologia naturalis* into closer proximity to Barth’s concern for the ‘single task of theology.’ We have sought to establish a new direction for natural theology within Barth’s trajectory of evangelical theology through closer attention to the structure of Barth’s theological anthropology. The natural goodness of humanity continues to be a

matter of divine determination, despite the effects of the fall.⁷⁰

In this context Anderson uses this natural goodness as a common ground for discussing Christian ethics: "One could paraphrase Barth by saying that all persons can be presumed to have moral openness, but not moral readiness. This would seem to allow for a natural theology which takes into account a common ground for moral responsibility which finds its criteria in the natural goodness of humanity."⁷¹ However, this is exactly the thinking that Barth rejected in rejecting natural theology:

Calvin did not, any more than St. Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, draw . . . the systematic conclusion that a 'natural' knowledge of the law of God is to be ascribed to us and that this knowledge has to be put to a positive use in theology *either* antecedently *or* subsequently ('in faith'). On the contrary, he plainly denied that knowledge of the ethical good is gained by means of an ability (*facultas*) of man.⁷²

For Barth of course this was the case because

The doctrine of the point of contact and the whole of Brunner's teaching on nature and grace . . . has to be most categorically opposed on the score that it is incompatible with the third article of the

⁷⁰ "Barth and New Direction for Natural Theology," in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth May 10, 1886*, ed. John Thompson (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 241-66, 261.

⁷¹ Anderson, "Barth and New Direction," 260f. It should be noted that Barth explicitly rejects any such approach when he insists that "Grace which has from the start to share its power with a force of nature is no longer grace, i.e., it cannot be recognised as what the grace of God is in the consideration and conception of that divine act, as what it is in Jesus Christ" (CD II/2, 531). Barth says "It is because the grace of God, as it is defined in relation to Jesus Christ and therefore to that divine act [God's love of us in Christ], is His free gift to man, because revelation includes the creation of the God-knowing subject, because the love of God and that love alone accomplishes and is the co-ordination of man with God, that we have to deny to man the aptitude to co-operate with grace, revelation and God" (CD II/2, 531-2). For Barth "it is quite impossible to see how" if one co-ordinates moral philosophy and moral theology "based on the basic view of the harmony which is achieved in the concept of being between nature and super-nature, reason and revelation, man and God . . . grace can really emerge as grace" and God's command as his command (CD II/2, 530).

⁷² Barth, *Natural Theology*, 108.

creed. The Holy Ghost, who proceeds from the Father and the Son and is therefore revealed and believed to be God, does not stand in need of any point of contact but that which he himself creates. Only retrospectively is it possible to reflect on the way in which he 'makes contact' with man, and this retrospect will ever be a retrospect upon a *miracle*.⁷³

This is why Barth also insisted that any point of contact within us, such as the continuing existence of our good nature, in spite of the fall

could never signify conformity to God, a point of contact for the Word of God. In this sense, as a possibility which is proper to man *qua* creature, the image of God is not just, as it is said, destroyed apart from a few relics; it is totally annihilated. What remains of the image of God even in sinful man is *recta natura*, to which as such a *rectitudo* cannot be ascribed even *potentialiter*. No matter how it may be with his humanity and personality, man has completely lost the capacity for God (CD I/1, 238).

Barth also believed that one could not speak both theologically and philosophically about this point of contact but only theologically because it can be discussed only in faith and thus through the grace of revelation (CD I/1, 239). Barth insisted that theological ethics must be "on its guard against a retrospective reinterpretation of the fall, as though the presumption of man in wishing to know of himself what is good and evil were only a natural inclination to do the will of God" (CD II/2, 523). For this reason Barth would never allow our ethical responsibility to be dictated by criteria found in the "natural goodness of humanity." The divine command, in Barth's understanding, comes to us from God himself in our encounter with Jesus Christ: "Ethics as the doctrine of God's command, and therefore as the doctrine of the sanctification given to man by God, is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus

⁷³ Ibid., 121. Importantly, at appropriate points in his reflections, Torrance also thought, with Barth, that *how* our knowledge came about was a miracle which could not be explained from the human side but only acknowledged as an act of the Holy Spirit and then understood: "As knowledge of God actually arises, however, we know that we cannot attribute it to ourselves and know that we can only say something of how it arises by referring beyond ourselves to God's acts upon us . . ." *God and Rationality*, 166.

Christ. It can be attained and developed only as the knowledge of Jesus Christ" (CD II/2, 777). Thus,

It [our sanctification in the form of the divine command that meets us in Christ] does not exist as one of the facts which we seek and can discover because it is we who are searched and discovered in our existence by it. It cannot be grounded because it is itself the basis which is our starting-point for all our demonstrations . . . It speaks always as the voice from above. That is why we wait in vain for it to speak in any voice from below . . . It is the voice of the Good Shepherd which speaks to us in this unique way . . . Jesus Christ is the completed fact of our sanctification, the fulfilled and realised purpose of God in God's judgment, just as He is also its presupposition and its execution (CD II/2, 777).

Importantly, T. F. Torrance also opposed the idea that Christian ethics could find its criteria in any sort of moral responsibility found in the moral law or our natural human goodness. In fact he argued that all of that was called into question by God's judgment and grace in Jesus Christ in a manner similar to Barth. Torrance argued that "From the point of view of ethics we see that human moral awareness tends to sever its connection with God . . . to establish itself on an autonomous or semi-autonomous basis."⁷⁴ Thus, in ethics people "relate themselves to God, consciously or subconsciously through duty to their neighbour — that is, they relate themselves to God indirectly through the medium of the universal [the idea of the moral law] . . . and do not relate themselves to God in particular."⁷⁵ But Torrance maintains that when this behavior is understood from the vantage point of faith, what we see here is that sin "is seizing the ethical imperative of God, making it an independent authority which is identified with human higher nature, so escaping God and deifying humanity — 'you will be like God'.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 112-113.

Sin, Torrance holds uses the law of God by falling back on observance of the law (perhaps the moral law) and thus yields formal obedience to the law without actually committing us to responsible action under God. It is in this situation that Jesus himself fulfilled the law for us and justified us, thus setting us "free not only from the bondage of external law but from [our] own self-imprisonment in the condemnation of [our] own conscience . . . he made our judgement of ourselves acquiesce in God's complete judgement."⁷⁷ Consequently, Torrance says the "act of grace in justification which breaks through to us apart from law is spoken of as 'revelation.'"⁷⁸ It is the "revealing of a righteousness that could not be known otherwise. It is revelation that is grounded upon its own act as a breakthrough in sheer grace."⁷⁹ Indeed, and most importantly, this "new righteousness that forgives and justifies the sinner could not be inferred logically from the abstract order of law or ethics. From that point of view forgiveness is impossible — it is legally speaking immoral or amoral. And if it is a fact, it is a stupendous miracle."⁸⁰ This is what led Torrance to speak of what Kierkegaard called a "'teleological suspension' of ethics. Because it entails this suspension, justification or forgiveness is not something that is demonstrable from any ground in the moral order as such. It only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us."⁸¹

Conclusion

Let me conclude by saying that Irving's argument that Torrance's "reconstructed natural theology as the rational structure of theological cognition, which is determined by God's self-revelation"⁸² is thoroughly unconvincing first because Torrance himself insists, as we have seen, that "divine revelation conflicts sharply

⁷⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Irving, "The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit," 225.

with the structure of our natural reason.”⁸³ Second, when our rational structure does operate within faith and revelation by grace, it is what it is as part of the “new” creation as reconciled in the person and work of the one Mediator. Thus it is no longer natural theology in any sense since it is a theology shaped from beginning to end by grace alone and thus in faith alone. Even to say, as Torrance does, that it is natural to its object when that object is the God who justifies the ungodly, conflicts with Torrance’s frequent insistence on the priority of grace. Nature is true to what it is as part of God’s “new” creation only by grace and as Barth frequently insisted not at all by nature after the fall. So, when Irving writes that “Torrance’s reconstruction of natural theology, therefore, takes its place within his understanding that God’s self-revelation is a ‘self-contained’ *novum*,”⁸⁴ that remark opens the door to utter confusion. Why?

Because Torrance’s own understanding of revelation to which Irving here refers is taken from CD I/1 and is defined by Torrance as follows: “it has its reality and truth wholly and in every respect within itself and so can be known only through itself and out of itself.”⁸⁵ If revelation is a self-contained *novum*, then in Torrance’s own understanding that rules out any natural knowledge of God just because he also claims there is no analogy in human experience on the basis of which we can know the truth since that comes to us only from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit as a miracle. So, “when we encounter God in Jesus Christ, the truth comes to us in its own authority and self-sufficiency. It comes into our experience and into the midst of our knowledge as a *novum*, a new reality which we

⁸³ See n. 64 above.

⁸⁴ Irving, “The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit,” 225.

⁸⁵ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, citing CD I/1, 306.

cannot assimilate to what we already know.”⁸⁶ Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of Barth, Torrance insists that “we cannot deduce the fact of Christ from our knowledge of other facts” and it “is a new and unique fact without analogy anywhere in human experience or knowledge.”⁸⁷

If that is in any sense true, then Torrance’s claim that the knowledge of God given in his self-revelation “is a mystery so utterly strange and so radically different that it cannot be apprehended and substantiated except out of itself”⁸⁸ rules out the idea advanced by McGrath and Irving that natural theology provides us with some reliable knowledge of God that then links up with God’s revelation to constitute theological science. It rules it out just because, as Torrance himself argues, “In point of fact it actually conflicts sharply with generally accepted beliefs and established ideas in human culture and initiates a seismic reconstruction not only of religious and intellectual belief but of the very foundations of human life and knowledge.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 1. This thinking of course rules out any attempt to fit what we know from revelation into a Christian world-view and then claim that such a view can be equated with the life of faith since the life of faith requires utter dependence on Christ from beginning to end. Thus Barth said “in faith we abandon . . . our standing upon ourselves (including all moral and religious, even Christian standing), . . . for the real standing in which we no longer stand on ourselves [including our faith as such] . . . but . . . on the ground of the truth of God . . . We have to believe; not to believe in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ” (CD II/1, 159). Torrance similarly claimed that our very act of faith was seen to rest “upon Christ and his faith, not upon my faith or my need for this or that answer, and hence the assurance was unshakable, because it was grounded in the solid faithfulness of Christ,” “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,” in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 160. Contrast these views of faith with McGrath’s: “Faith is about the transformation of the human mind to see things in a certain manner, involving the acquisition of certain habits of thinking and perception,” *A Fine-Tuned Universe*, 39. While Torrance and Barth insisted that faith meant having the mind of Christ and thus obedience to Christ alone in all things, here we are thrown back on our transformed views of reality and not exclusively upon Christ. That remains the inherent problem in the natural theology offered by both McGrath and Irving.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 19.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

In light of Barth's understanding of sin as an impossible possibility, I think it is appropriate to conclude this discussion by saying, using Barth's terminology, that natural theology is and remains an impossible possibility⁹⁰ employed by those who are either unwilling or unable to allow their thinking to be exclusively and completely reconstructed in subordination to God's grace and revelation and in faith. It is employed by those who do not allow Jesus Christ himself to be the first and final Word in our knowledge of God and in our ethical behavior. That is the choice required here. In light of this, I still think, with Elmer Colyer, that Torrance may well have regretted calling what really amounts to a theology of human nature functioning within revelation, a new natural theology, and probably should have called it a theology of nature.⁹¹ Even that, however, cannot resolve all the difficulties, as seen above, since there is definitely a residue of the old natural theology which Torrance himself theoretically rejected at work in his thought that comes to expression in his analogy drawn from geometry. That analogy prohibits him from consistently noticing that in light of revelation we are all sinners who stand in utter need of grace in its identity with the Giver of grace in order to speak truly of God and of ourselves.

⁹⁰ It is impossible because the creature can never really be the Creator. But it is possible because "a creature freed from the possibility of falling away would not really be living as a creature. It could only be a second God," (CD II/1, 503). Sin, Barth says, places us in opposition to God and to our own existence. This is why Barth held that "In face of the cross of Christ it is monstrous to describe the uniqueness of God as an object of 'natural' knowledge. In face of the cross of Christ we are bound to say that knowledge of the one and only God is gained only by the begetting of men anew by the Holy Spirit, an act which is always unmerited and incomprehensible, and consists in man's no longer living unto himself, but in the Word of God and in the knowledge of God which comes by faith in that Word" (CD II/1, 453).

⁹¹ Elmer M. Colyer, *How To Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 192.

BOOK REVIEW

Travis M. Stevick

Encountering Reality: T. F. Torrance on Truth and Human Understanding

Emerging Scholars, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016

This is the best book yet on T. F. Torrance and his views about theology and natural science. It not only displays a sure grasp of Torrance's ideas, but also relates them to seminal voices in the philosophy of science and in the field of modern quantum physics. Unlike previous ventures in this area, Stevick does not make the reductionist move of judging Christian dogmatic theology by alien scientific norms in order to bring the two disciplines into relationship. He grapples with major proposals in epistemology on the scientific side such as those of Lakatos, Putnam, Quine, Tarski, Van Fraassen, Feyerabend, and Feynman. At the same time he allows Torrance's theology to hold its own as representing a field of knowledge with its own independent integrity. Torrance's views are explicated, modified, and sometimes corrected with great insight and ingenuity. No future study that wishes to relate the trinitarian faith to modern scientific inquiry can afford to ignore this work.

The book falls into five chapters. With great care Stevick examines the epistemological quandaries of modern science while also relating Torrance's proposals to them. Stevick's deft summaries of the epistemological issues on the scientific side are alone worth the price of the book. At the same time he unpacks any number of ambiguities and obscurities on Torrance's side without dismissing him out of hand. Many promising lines of inquiry for the future are opened up in the process.

In Chapter 1, "What Is (Authentic) Knowledge?", Stevick explores Torrance's critique of dualist, positivist, and reductionist ways of thinking. He defends Torrance against charges that his own positions are somehow dualistic in themselves. The core idea -- that "the nature of the object prescribes the mode of rationality we have to adopt toward it" (3) -- is introduced and then carried forward as Torrance's basic epistemic intuition. The idea that to know something means to know it

"according to its nature" (*kata physin*) is at the heart of Torrance's theological and scientific realism. Stevick draws some surprising implications from it. For example, he argues that "epistemic access" need not be complete nor infallible in order to be reliable (6-7). Nevertheless, he notes that "an analysis of *kataphysic* knowledge is entirely absent from Torrance's own writing" (7). Whereas in the hands of a lesser critic this kind of shortfall might lead to dismissing Torrance out of hand, Stevick goes on to fill in the gaps. Along the way he offers a most illuminating account of why Torrance is neither "realist" nor "antirealist" in epistemology while overlapping and transcending each. Again and again Stevick puts his finger on ambiguities and inadequacies in what Torrance says while also explaining why his lines of thought remain cogent and fruitful when read with critical sympathy.

Chapter 2, "Ultimate Beliefs," defends Torrance against charges of "foundationalism" and "fideism." It turns out, arguably, that no epistemological proposal can proceed without at least some background beliefs that can be neither verified nor falsified. Torrance calls these "ultimate beliefs." They are "by their very nature irrefutable and unprovable." They "have to be assumed in any attempt at rational proof or disproof," and they involve "a relation of thought to being" that cannot be logically demonstrated, but without which no inquiry can move forward (43). The object under consideration always remains significantly beyond our ability to grasp it in thought and word, even though thought and word cannot be dispensed with. Stevick relates this claim to the insights of Kuhn, Duhem, Quine, Lakatos, and others (44). In the end Stevick concludes that Bhaskar [an anti-positivist] and Torrance are approaching "the same or similar concerns from different directions" (60). Plantinga is then used to explain why Torrance is not a "fideist" in any pernicious sense (62), while Thiemann's unfortunate charge that Torrance is a "foundationalist" is overturned by an exercise in careful conceptual analysis (65-71). In conclusion, the provocative Torrencian claim is advanced that "the final court which can decide the truthfulness of a proposition or conviction is not reason but reality" (71).

The question of "Objectivity" is taken up in Ch. 3. "Torrance's concerns push us to conceive of objectivity primarily in terms of the object we seek to know, rather than in terms of the knowing subject" (ix). Objectivity does not mean

neutrality. "It is not possible to describe any phenomenon from a neutral coordinate system.... Every observation is bound up with a particular coordinate system, or point of view, which must be assumed in scientific description" (74). Torrance follows Polanyi in arguing that objectivity means attending to the rationality inherent in reality, and in the object under investigation (80). From this standpoint "objective knowledge can never be treated as final, for there may always be more to learn" (82). At the same time the knowing subject can never be abstracted from "the knowing relation" (82). As Polanyi suggested, it is finally the informed community of inquiry that keeps the knowing relation from collapsing into mere subjectivity (85-87). This position is in line with Kuhn when he argues that "scientific knowledge is not theory-neutral but always relative to a particular paradigm or scientific perspective shared by the community of scientists" (94). But how can a collapse into "corporate subjectivity" be avoided on these terms? In an acute way the question of objectivity thus evolves into the question of truth.

How to relate the question of truth to the idea of knowing something "according to its nature" (*kata physin*) is discussed in Ch. 4. "Torrance stresses that the truth of our statements must always be secondary to the reality to which they refer" (ix). This is perhaps the key chapter of the book. Torrance is said to reject both a "strong correspondence theory" and a "strong coherence theory" (106). The former emphasizes the objective pole of the knowing relation at the expense of its subjective pole, while the latter does exactly the reverse, emphasizing the subjective pole at the expense of the objective pole. A real relation exists between our statements and reality. Our statements are true or false based on what is the case independently of them. Intelligibility, moreover, is always relative to the framework or paradigm that is being used in order to know something (108-109). One and the same statement can have a very different meaning depending on the paradigm that is being used. A strong correspondence theory is therefore ruled out (112).

How science deals with this situation is discussed with reference to both Popper and Lakatos, neither of whom is regarded as being fully satisfying (112-17). Pure coherence alternatives, such as the Duhem-Quine thesis, are also found wanting (120-21). Stevick has to undertake some major critical reconstructions in

order to get Torrance into a position to respond to such dilemmas (121-24). These critical revisions are at once ingenious and sympathetic, precisely at points where previous analysts of Torrance might be tempted to throw up their hands. Torrance -- the spirit if not the letter of Torrance -- is then ably contrasted with Aquinas (126). Stevick interprets Torrance to claim that "being is more basic than our statements about being" (126-27). This leads to more or less Polanyian idea of a "stratified relationship" between "created realities and our statements about them" (127). Although Torrance may not be entirely consistent at this point, Stevick reads him charitably and fruitfully. Because Torrance is concerned with "the truth of being" (129), he can be read as holding that "reference may be partial and broken, and yet still be genuine" (128). "This focuses the notion of truth primarily on being and only secondarily on statements" (131) -- a fairly astonishing claim indeed.

Stevick then turns to Tarski to move the discussion forward (131-32), while Polanyi is also drawn upon. Tarski has realized "that the goals of a correspondence theory of truth only make sense if we have a way to speak and think on more than one level simultaneously" (132). Stevick then creatively and "rationally reconstructs" what Torrance seems to intend so that Torrance ends up with a "correlation theory of truth" (133) that at once overlaps with and yet also transcends both correspondence and coherentist theories. It is not a matter of individual statements taken in themselves but of "entire systems" of statements "cohering together *in the object they are attempting to represent*" (136, italics original). After navigating among ambiguities and unaddressed matters in Torrance, the result according to the creative reconstruction assembled by Stevick is "a dynamic and flexible notion of the truthfulness" of theories that "enables Torrance to avoid the problem of reference with his empirical correlates and account for how theories which have proven inadequate to reality are not to be treated as 'false' merely because of that" (142). I think this is a remarkably provocative interpretation. It invites careful examination in any future discussion.

"It is not clear that Torrance fully understood the significance of his own position" (144). Indeed it seems fair to say that Torrance did not have nearly the philosophical sophistication and erudition that Stevick brings to the subject of

modern epistemology in science and theology. Nevertheless, Stevick makes Torrance interesting and relevant in ways that lesser interpreters could never manage to do. "Once it is granted," writes the author, "that there is a stratification of truth and that theories are not to be judged true or false based on whether they provide a literally true account of reality, but by whether they are rooted in reality that can reveal itself in new and surprising ways, a host of questions can be raised" (144). These questions would apply with equal relevance in the field of modern science as well as in that of dogmatic Christian theology. A fascinating discussion ensues about how Torrance so interpreted may then be related to Bhaskar, Van Fraassen, and Wittgenstein (145-57).

Chapter 5 takes up "the role of theory" in relation to the idea of "knowledge in accord with its object" (*kata physin*). Torrance's idea of "disclosure models" is related to his "scientific realism." Stevick makes a case that Torrance's "correlation theory" is superior to "realist" and "antirealist" theories because it can avoid the traditional problems that they have generated. "While Torrance's realism makes it clear that our theories change due to the fact that reality far exceeds the ability of our theories to describe or explain them, antirealism has difficulties explaining why our theories ought to change over time. To do so, it would seem that there would need to be some theory-independent reality that can challenge our theoretical constructions. However, if it is affirmed that such a reality exists and that we have access to it, it would seem to imply something not altogether unlike Torrance's realism" (194-95). Stevick concludes that Torrance leaves us with a "robust and consistent" interpretation of how our theories may be related truly to reality.

In this entirely admirable and stimulating book, Stevick has provided us with a model of careful interdisciplinary work -- one fully informed about epistemological quandaries as they arise in current scientific discussion. Stevick shows how the historic Nicene faith as understood so incomparably by Torrance may well yet have a signal contribution to make to our better understanding of theology, science, and their mutual conceptual interrelations.

George Hunsinger