

Outline for discussion of Chapter Five of *The Trinitarian Faith* by T. F. Torrance

Created by Paul Molnar for Chapter 5 of *The Trinitarian Faith*

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The title of the Chapter, as you would all know, is “The Incarnate Saviour.” Torrance opens the chapter with a statement from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which states that for us and our salvation the incarnate savior came down from heaven, “was made man and was crucified for us.” He rose again on the third day, sits at the Father’s right hand, and will “come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead.” Also, “his kingdom shall have no end.”

So the chapter itself is a commentary and explanation of the implications of these credal remarks. Torrance begins by noting that the Nicene Fathers stressed “the oneness of the Son with the Father” because of their evangelical approach in order to “conserve the very essence of the Gospel” (146). However, Torrance made it a point to stress in this context that the *homoousion* referred here to the “*incarnate* Son, Jesus Christ, and the Father” with the result that both ends of that *homoousion* “had to be secured” (*ibid*). What was his main point? It was that the Gospel’s saving significance would be “emptied” of importance “if Jesus Christ were not fully, completely, entirely *man*, as well as *God*” (146).

These remarks are absolutely decisive for all of Torrance’s “scientific” theology because for him we could only begin a truly evangelical theology by acknowledging Jesus’ uniqueness in faith as enabled by the Holy Spirit. That is why he said in another context that the task of Christology was to “yield the obedience of our mind to what is given, which is God’s self-revelation in its objective reality, Jesus Christ” so that we discover that “the object of our knowledge gives *itself* to us to be apprehended” (*Incarnation*, 1). And this occurs by Christ himself coming into our experience “as a *novum*, a new reality which we cannot incorporate into the series of other objects, or simply assimilate to what we already know” (*ibid.*).

So, Torrance begins the Chapter emphasizing the soteriological importance of the fact that God really became man in Jesus Christ to forgive our sin, heal us and establish our communion with God the Father. He says Athanasius noted that when people were confronted by Christ’s acts of healing, raising the dead and forgiving sin, they questioned his authority when they should have asked: ““Why have you, being *God*, become man?”” (147).

But Torrance insists God did not become man in some “ideal or abstract sense, but actual historical man” (147). That meant of course that the Word assumed our sinful humanity to heal it.

That is why Torrance then insisted that God “comes *as man* and acts *as man*” since he rejected any notion of that Christ’s humanity “was merely instrumental in the hands of God” (150). This also meant that all of Christ’s human actions must be understood “in a thoroughly personal and *vicarious way*” (151).

With these important ideas in place, Torrance proceeds to firmly reject any docetic view of Jesus’ humanity by rejecting the idea that the eternal Son was changed into flesh and the idea that the heavenly mind of Christ takes the place of the inward man, as Apollinaris thought (151).

Torrance then spends time explaining the proper meaning of *kenosis* which he insisted could not be understood in some metaphysical way “as involving a contraction, diminution or self-limitation of God’s infinite being” (153). So, while the Arians searched the scriptures for texts emphasizing Christ’s weakness and mortality, Athanasius did not reject those scriptural statements but “seized upon them” to show that “the eternal Son came among us, became one of us and one with us, precisely in order to be *our Saviour*” (154).

From here Torrance devotes the rest of the Chapter (154-90) to explaining the proper view of Atonement.

Many key ideas emerge and are clarified and discussed.

He explains why it is important to stress that the incarnation must be regarded as something new, even for God (155). He clearly embraces the one Person, two natures Christology of Chalcedon which is contested today by some who think Chalcedon needs to be repaired!

Importantly, however, Torrance flatly rejects the idea that our redemption through the incarnation could simply mean that “He became man that we might be made divine” because he says such a statement seriously misrepresents the actual meaning of the incarnation as a personal act of the incarnate Logos on our behalf from “within the ontological depths of our human existence” (156). It is not therefore merely through the physical union of the Logos with our decaying humanity that salvation is brought about, but through the personal actions of Jesus himself as the incarnate Word who *personally* brought about our salvation from within our estranged humanity through his own life of obedience as our representative and savior.

From here Torrance stresses that Christ took on our lost condition to substitute himself for us. By making death as we experience this as something that is affected by sin and judgment his own, he took upon himself the penalty due to all people in death and destroyed its power for all (157).

Torrance thus explains that the oneness in being between the incarnate Word and the Father was captured with the development of the Nicene *homoousion* in “face of Hellenising and Judaising distortions of the Gospel” (157). This led to a better view of Christ’s vicarious

obedience and the “inner relation between his Person and work” over against Arian and Apollinarian views.

From an Arian standpoint, salvation would only be understood as some “superficial socio-moral or juridical transaction . . . which does not penetrate into the ontological depths of human being or bear savingly upon the distorted and corrupt condition of man’s actual human existence”(158).

This is an enormously important point because it means that atoning reconciliation took place within the personal being of Christ himself for everyone—it was not an act of God “done *ab extra* upon man, but an act of God become man, done *ab intra* . . . it is an act of God as man, translated into human actuality and made to issue out of the depths of man’s being and life toward God” (158-9).

This leads Torrance to stress what he calls a “soteriological suspension of ethics” to avoid a legalistic view of atonement (160).

He appealed to Gregory Nazianzen to explain why Apollinarianism was such a threat to the Gospel (164).

Important also is his stress upon the fact that it is our minds that really need healing before we can understand the Gospel correctly (165-6). It is only as our minds are healed through union with Christ that we recover “the true knowledge of God in Christ” and the image of God is restored in him. Redemption and knowledge through Christ therefore were crucial for a proper view of regeneration. Torrance explains this in more detail toward the end of his important book on Atonement.

Christ shared all our experiences so that it was in his cry of dereliction that “Christ was in his own Person representing us, for we were forsaken and despised before, but now by the sufferings of him who could not suffer, we were taken up and saved” (167). For a great in-depth explanation of this matter, see Torrance’s *Theology in Reconstruction*, Chapter 7, “Questioning in Christ.”

Torrance presents Christ’s own interpretation of his passion (168-9) explaining that “God is always the subject and never the object of the reconciling and atoning act” (170).

He also explains why he rejected any secular notion of “ransom” with regard to atonement as morally repugnant (173, 175, 178), stressing that Christ actively was the “Servant-Son and High Priest” who offered himself “in propitiatory sacrifice to God in our stead and on our behalf” (176). He himself therefore is our redemption (177).

Torrance further stresses that for the Nicene theologians Christ's death and resurrection were never treated in isolation from each other (180) so that we are in a real sense consecrated and exalted to fellowship with God the Father through union with him (181).

Torrance makes a point of rejecting Origen's universalism, which in another context he called a menace to the Gospel! (182). For more on this, see my article on T. F. Torrance and the problem of universalism in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. He also makes a point of stressing that the incarnate Son did not just suffer as man but as God—any other view of this matter would display some sort of Nestorian view of his person and work.

So, for Torrance, we must think of the whole human race and indeed all of creation “as in a profound sense already redeemed, resurrected, and consecrated for the glory and worship of God” (183). In Christ's own life, death and resurrection we have a “saving fact which has been perfected once and for all, and now endures for all eternity within the one divine-human being of the Mediator” (183).

This is extremely important because it allows Torrance to explain coherently the implications of salvation that has taken place for us in the person of the Mediator: since the Son did not cease being God in the incarnation “he did not leave the throne of the universe” while incarnate for our benefit (184). For that reason, he himself did not sin but “brought his holiness to bear upon [our sinful humanity] so that it might be sanctified in him” (184). It is in this context that Torrance explains the proper view of Christ's passibility and impassibility. He does this magnificently and avoids the extremes of those who completely deny Christ's impassibility or refuse to ascribe passibility to him in his deity (184-5). Torrance insists that these categories must be understood soteriologically and not logically!

Torrance then considers what it means for Jesus to experience our ignorance in order to redeem us in that regard as well (186-7). He says, “It was an economic and vicarious ignorance on our Lord's part by way of deliberate restraint on his divine knowledge throughout a life of continuous *kenosis* in which he refused to transgress the limits of the creaturely and earthly conditions of human nature” (187). Indeed, he says, “Jesus Christ came among us sharing to the full the poverty of our ignorance, without ceasing to embody in himself all the riches of the wisdom of God, in order that we might be redeemed from our ignorance through sharing in his wisdom. Redemption was not accomplished just by a downright *fiat* of God, nor by a mere divine ‘nod’” (187).

Toward the end of this Chapter Torrance returns to the statement of Athanasius cited earlier: “He was made man that we might be made divine” and explains that this must be understood soteriologically so that we must realize that there is no change either in divine or human being since “as he is not less divine in becoming man, so we are not less human in being brought under the immediate presence and power of his divine being. What makes us ‘divine’ is the fact that the Word of God has come to us and acts directly upon us” (189). Elsewhere Torrance says this phrase must be understood relationally.

Torrance gives his explanation of *theopoiesis* by appealing to a proper view of the Holy Spirit (189-90). Torrance says, following Irenaeus, “It was because of the incarnation that the Holy Spirit descended upon man in Christ and became accustomed to dwell in humanity, and thus on the other hand that man was accustomed to receive God and have him dwelling in him” (189). He says this is also how Athanasius understood the way the Holy Spirit was mediated to us—it is “by and through the humanity of Christ who sanctified himself in the Spirit that we might be sanctified in him” (189).

This is an extremely important point because it illustrates that for Torrance the Spirit literally cannot be separated from the Word, so that people could claim to know and experience the Spirit apart from knowledge and experience God the Father through union with his incarnate Son.

Hence, Torrance closes the chapter arguing that the Spirit’s descent upon Christ in the Jordan “was a descent upon us because of his bearing our body” (190). He says, “This did not take place for the promotion of the Word himself, but for our sanctification, that we might share in his anointing” and we would be “washed in him and by him” (190). His reception of the Spirit then made it possible for us to become “recipients of him” (190).

Hence the giving and receiving of the Spirit “actualised within the life of the incarnate Son of God *for our sakes* is atonement operating within the ontological depths of human being. IT constitutes the ‘deifying’ content of the atoning exchange in which through the pouring out of the same Spirit upon us we are given to participate” (190).

That is why Pentecost is not something added to the atonement but instead is the “actualisation within the life of the Church of the atoning life, death and resurrection of the Saviour” (190).