RESPONSE TO VAN KUIKEN

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This brief essay provides a response by the author to Jerome Van Kuiken's review of The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*. It clarifies the scope of the critique of Torrance's soteriology made in that book, and contends that the review has not fully responded to the force of the argument made. It then provides initial responses to some of the excellent questions about sin and the Holy Spirit raised by Van Kuiken in the review.*

I am honored by Jerome Van Kuiken's thoughtful and detailed review of *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, and grateful for this opportunity to respond. It is especially pleasing to be read with such care in this particular journal, as the book includes, as Van Kuiken notes, an extended and largely critical engagement with the soteriology of T.F. Torrance.

The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience is a book shaped out of number of significant threads over nearly a decade of writing, and few reviews have managed as well as this one to engage with so many of its themes in the short compass necessitated by the review format. I was particularly glad to see one feature drawn out that has too often been missed: the way that Scripture functions in my account as a kind of regulating norm for pneumatological speech, as Van Kuiken puts it, that helps us to avoid the worst dangers of theological appeals to experience

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without at the same time so overdetermining the work of the Spirit that we lose sight of freedom of the Spirit that blows where the Spirit wills. I note this example because it speaks to the quality of Van Kuiken's reading more generally: to have noticed how important and also how subtle the role of Scripture is in the book is to have read the book as a whole with deep understanding, generosity, and care.

Here I will respond first to Van Kuiken's comments on my reading of Torrance, and then to the excellent and generative questions he asks of me at the end. On the subject of Torrance, Van Kuiken reads the book as "recycling the standard canard that Torrance's theology lacks practicality." But to recycle something one must first have had possession of it. In the present case I must confess I was unaware of this "standard canard"; for better or worse, my critique arises not from having read earlier critics of Torrance, but simply from the experience of reading Torrance for myself with questions about pneumatology and soteriological experience in view.

In terms of the substance of my critique, I offer a clarification and a reassertion. The clarification is that my critique of Torrance in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* has a very specific and deliberately calibrated scope. My argument is that, in his major discussions of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation and sanctification, Torrance's theology exhibits in particularly clear form a pattern of theological argument and speech that is in fact quite widespread in modern theology, and that this mode of theological speech is theologically problematic without being "wrong" in the strict sense of making claims that are untrue. The pattern I am referring to is that of describing the change that Christian salvation makes for the Christian[1] overwhelmingly in terms of its metaphysical effects in the soul and *coram deo* rather than also in terms of its practically recognizable effects on the experiences Christians have in their bodies and in time. Grace, for Torrance, I argue, does a great deal to us in our "ontological depths" (for many examples of such language in Torrance, see p. 98), but it is not clear that it does much at all that would be noticeable or make a practical difference in the concrete experiences of Christians. Again, my argument is not that descriptions about changes in our

[1] Most precisely, the change that the Holy Spirit makes in the Spirit's work of mediating justification and sanctification to human beings; or to put it more simply, the change that grace makes.

"ontological depths" through union with Christ are necessarily untrue, but rather that left on their own—i.e., unaugmented by other, more directly experiential modes of description—they are reflective of an inadequately pneumatological understanding of grace that can have, and often has had, important downstream negative effects on theology's ability to make a difference in Christian lives. And I show how the soteriologies of Philip Melanchthon and Saint Augustine, in particular, provide powerful alternative models to what we find in Torrance and others, integrating the ontological and the experiential in salvation in a highly sophisticated and plausible way.

As I state in the book, pointing out this specific problem in Torrance does not mean that his soteriology does not have other strengths or that it does not help meet other challenges in modern theological reflection on the nature and meaning of Christian salvation (p. 96). And indeed, the discussion of Torrance in the book is mainly there in order to illustrate a problem that I find afflicts a great deal of recent Protestant theology well beyond Torrance himself. What my analysis of Torrance does mean, however, I suggest, is that going forward soteriologies that seek to learn from and think with Torrance need to acknowledge what has now been identified as a real and consistent weakness in his thought, and to seek new constructive pathways that can provide the kind of experiential integration in descriptions of the workings of divine grace that (as I argue in Chapter Two of the book) good pneumatology dogmatically requires.

Van Kuiken points to other parts of Torrance that do seem to exhibit more of the affective integration I find lacking across a range of texts, and that is all to the good. But this does not change the fact of the existence of the rhetorical and theological pattern I identify as a standard trope in his argumentation across a wide range of instances at the heart of his descriptions of his soteriological vision (for many examples, see pp. 96-99). It also does not so far as I can see change the fact that this pattern is fully consistent with the anxiety about appeals to experience that is evident in Torrance's early essays on the Spirit, with their regular reference to the errors of "Neo-Protestant subjectivism" (see pp. 99-101). If I have one disappointment in this otherwise excellent and engaging review, then, it is that my critical charge against Torrance's one-notedly ontological soteriology is more

substantial, and far more evidence-supported, than Van Kuiken seems willing to acknowledge, and this seems a missed opportunity. I am pleased however to note Myk Habets' essay in the same issue of this journal that more fully recognizes the seriousness of my critique and presses for new paths forward with and beyond Torrance that take account of what I think we now must acknowledge is a genuine and important weakness in his otherwise generative and formidable thought.

Van Kuiken also raises a series of further questions that emerge from the soteriological vision articulated in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, and I conclude with a few brief responses to these excellent questions. To start, he asks whether the "radical healing" of fallen human nature by Christ through his atoning union with us might be grounds to push back against or complexify the "pessimism" I express in the book about the "incorrigibility of the affects" (what I call the problem of "non-transformation"). One part of an answer would be that I do affirm quite clearly, with Augustine, that the Holy Spirit does at various times and in various ways act to move and change us by reordering our desires. So I am by no means committed to an *absolute* incorrigibility of sinful affects. And I fully agree that any account of such movement and change must have its basis in the work of Christ, actualized by the Spirit.

At the same time—and this is perhaps the more interesting thing to say—there are good reasons to think that whatever the nature of the healing Christ has achieved for us, a great deal of the appropriation of that healing work to us clearly lies in the eschatological future. The key analogy, I am convinced, is with physical death, which is closely allied with sin in Scripture (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:12-28) as well as in the dogmatic implications of Christ's death and resurrection (i.e., the fact that scripturally and dogmatically the defeat of death and the defeat of sin are a single synchronic divine act). In the incarnation and resurrection, we must say without reservation, Christ has definitively and permanently defeated death. And yet, the nature of Christ's defeat of death is such that Christians, like all human beings, remain universally subject to physical death in our embodied lives. In the same way, I suggest, Christ has definitively and permanently healed human nature, even as we at the same time remain radically sinful, fallen creatures in this life. In other words, the same complexity—the word *mystery* is not entirely

inappropriate here—that we find in Christ's paradoxical defeat of a death that we are nevertheless still subject to obtains in the relationship between the finality and irreversibility of Christ's healing work and our ongoing subjection to sin. Here I would appeal to the abiding theological and pastoral power of Luther's description of the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator*. Just as it is somehow right to say that each Christian is both fully justified and yet still fully a sinner, so, I suggest, it is also right to say that we are fully healed and yet still deadly ill, fully enslaved to the death of the body and yet radically and permanently free of death's tyranny.

Equally generative to me is Van Kuiken's final question, about whether in my view "all 'worldly' emotions [are] always already the Spirit's application of law and gospel, so that all that's needed is to *reinterpret* them in Christian terms," or is it instead that the Spirit specially "supervenes" on human affects "so as to *transpose* them into a qualitatively higher register?" This is an excellent and incisive question about the relationship between nature and grace, and is one that I left open-ended in the book.[2] And I confess that although I am glad to be pressed, I find it difficult to give a single definitive answer. On the one hand, my view of divine providence is such that I am instinctually suspicious of easy appeals to distinctions between natural and supernatural workings of God's Spirit in God's world. Too often this move has been used to deny the theological significance of the body and the deep union of body and soul in Christian thought shaped by the incarnation. On the other hand, there really is something different that seems to emerge when we come to view specific events, emotions, and experiences as directly constitutive in some sense of God's saving work in our lives.

What I do think I can do with some confidence is to articulate two further principles which might help guide an answer without resolving Van Kuiken's question entirely. The first principle is that the "interpreter" that actually matters when our experiences of certain negative and positive affects get "*reinterpreted*" as law and gospel is not us but the Holy Spirit. As Luther points out, the Spirit alone is the true "user" of the law and it is the Spirit alone who can truly mediate the gospel

[2] I do speak quite positively of the neo-Thomist vision as having its chief strength here, in the subtle and sophisticated relation such theology articulates between natural affects and the workings of grace (see pp. 108-112). My significant worries about the neo-Thomist approach to grace are on other grounds, as I explain in the book.

to us. However, whether the Spirit in a given case is already using "worldly" or natural emotions without us realizing it, or else only at a certain point "supervenes" to transpose such affects into the work of divine grace, is not something we will be able to reliably determine in advance through the application of a theological principle alone. An implication of this is that the challenge of discerning the Spirit in such cases is one that proves a fair bit easier to meet *in practice* than *in theory*. In other words, the question from our end is never really finally something like, "Are all negative affects that follow a certain pattern instances of the law?" Rather, it is always a more specific question in practice: "Might what Susan or Andy is experiencing right now in fact be the work of the Spirit in their lives to bring them to God, even if they don't yet realize it?" The latter, I hope it is clear, is the far more useful and productive question, both theologically and pastorally.

Second, if I am at all right in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, then it is a great mistake to assume, as Protestant theologians too often have, that "worldly emotions" in a given case are *definitely not* (or not yet) the work of the Spirit because they do not yet appear to be directly "about" one's relationship with God. Who are we to say, mysteries to ourselves as we are? Certainly God often uses our discourse, our religious labels, and our theological interpretations of our experiences in his work in us. But it is equally certain that God is not bound by these linguistic and conceptual instruments, that he is not waiting around for us to interpret things with the right labels before acting, and indeed that we are on very strong theological ground when we say that his deepest interest is in our affective, motivational, and desiderative life, even when that life is opaque to us. "For the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Sam 16:7 NRSVUE) For all of these reasons, I remain convinced that the greater theological danger is not that of mistakenly interpreting some negative experience as divine conviction when actually it isn't. The greater danger is of missing the work the Spirit is already doing because our concepts and our language haven't yet caught up with our hearts.