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**TORRANCE, JUSTIFICATION BY GRACE ALONE,
AND "LIBERATION THEOLOGY"**

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Karl Barth famously argued that "there is a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology."¹ This bold assertion, with which Barth's student and colleague Thomas F. Torrance would fully, emphatically, and foundationally agree, is crucial because it implies that a properly Christian theological anthropology must begin with Jesus himself as the incarnate Word because, in him, we meet God himself. To bypass Jesus in order to speak theologically is to bypass God himself. That, for Barth and for Torrance, is the height of idolatry because any attempt to speak about our relations with God and our relations with each other, which does not begin with God himself, will always end in some form of self-justification. To begin with God himself, however, means precisely to acknowledge Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Much "liberation theology" does not begin there but with experiences of liberation or fighting against oppression. That approach is neither theological nor in reality liberating.

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts., vol. I, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, pt. 1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. by G. W. Bromiley, (hereafter: CD), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 131.

Profound implications follow from assessing "liberation theology" from a more deeply and ontologically trinitarian-incarnational theology. First, if Barth and Torrance are correct, and I think they are, then what we discover in our encounter with Jesus is that we are disclosed to be enemies of grace, that is, those who are at enmity with God. We are the ones who brought Jesus to the cross and it is in and through that cross that our sins have been forgiven. Additionally, we do well to recall that Jesus was crucified by the political theologians of his day and age! Second, this means that there is no *continuity* to be found in human experience and behavior on the basis of which we are in harmony with God and our neighbors, whether than be based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other basis for an adjectival theology. Basing theology on these latter characteristics, however, is the unfortunate and preferred alternative in our multifarious contemporary theologies. Whenever that assumption is made, then some form of self-justification always is at work and rears its ugly head with some sort of politicized manifestation. Such self-justification simply and profoundly misses the true meaning both of theology and of anthropology as understood in a more properly Christological way.

What I am claiming then is that whenever it is assumed that we humans possess some sort of innate continuity with God, then the problem of sin is unrecognized, ignored, or brushed aside, and the proper meaning of salvation and liberation is missed. And the problem (sin) and its solution (salvation by grace alone) are missed just because they are not sought beyond us in Christ alone. Let me explain. T. F. Torrance makes the following claim in his *Theological Science*: "face to face with Christ our humanity is revealed to be diseased and in-turned, and our subjectivities to be rooted in self-will. It is we who require to be adapted to Him, so that we have to renounce ourselves and take up the Cross if we are to follow Him and know the Father through Him."² In that way we sinful human beings are "healed" and "recreated in communion with God," and any distortion in our knowledge of God and relationship with God is overcome precisely through "cognitive union with God in love."³ Here it is important to stress the

² Torrance, *Theological Science*, 310.

³ Ibid.

"epistemological significance of the Incarnation" because it is precisely in and through the Incarnate Word (Jesus Christ) that "we are summoned to know God strictly in accordance with the way in which He has actually objectified Himself for us in our human existence."⁴ And, contrary to Karl Rahner's theory of anonymous Christianity, this cannot occur anonymously because there is no anonymous way to know of Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for us in his own life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and continuing mediation at the right hand of God without knowing him conceptually through the Gospel witness. Torrance explains this situation with great insight and with important implications for ethical behavior in his book on Atonement. Following St. Paul, Torrance held that "we are alienated or estranged in our minds, and indeed are hostile in mind to God."⁵ He noted that this New Testament view was "deeply resented by the rational culture of the ancient classical world of Greece and Rome" and that our modern world also finds this "difficult to accept."⁶

This may be something of an understatement in light of the fact that so many contemporary theologians ignore or redefine the problem of sin by claiming it merely refers to imperfections in the human condition. That move unfortunately allows them to marginalize the unconditional grace of God as the sole source of our knowledge of God and of ourselves as forgiven sinners. Nonetheless, Torrance wisely and astutely rejected any such move by sticking closely to the doctrine of justification by grace alone. Thus, he held that relying on God's grace necessarily means not relying at all upon ourselves—our religion, our morality, or even our faith. Torrance saw and understood this extremely well as he also noted that "evangelical Christianity" today "does not seem to have thought through sufficiently the transformation of human reason in the light of the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ."⁷ Because of this, both within the church and in society, he held that humanity remained "unevangelised." I think he is right. His claim is simple but with

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 437.

⁶ Ibid., 438.

⁷ Ibid.

profound implications: "the mind of man is alienated at its very root. It is in the human mind that sin is entrenched, and so it is right there, the gospel tells us, that we require to be cleansed by the blood of Christ and to be healed and reconciled to God."⁸

So, the pivotal point here is that because our behavior (ethics) is governed by our minds, Torrance maintained that even though we have free will, "we are not at all free to escape from our self-will" (which for Torrance means our inveterate attempts to live autonomously instead of in dependence on grace alone) that is ingrained within our mind which not only controls all our thinking and culture, but it is there that "we have become estranged from the truth and hostile to God." Thus, it is "in the ontological depths of the human mind, that we desperately need to be redeemed and healed."⁹ That healing took place for us in the incarnation since the Son of God assumed our fallen human nature and bent our wills back to God in our place and for us by experiencing God's judgment (opposition to sin) "in order to lay hold upon the very root of our sin and to redeem us from its stranglehold upon us."¹⁰

Since it is our mind that is sanctified and renewed in Christ, Torrance strongly opposed any Apollinarian view that because our minds are sinful they had to be replaced by the Word in the incarnation. Instead, for Torrance, the Word assumed our sinful flesh, including our minds and healed us that so that through union with him in faith we may live as part of that new creation. Karl Barth's view is in harmony with Torrance's. For Barth, if we look in any direction but toward Christ himself, we will not see the truth about humanity. We will not see our sin and the law against which we have sinned and we will not see the fact that in Christ our sins have been forgiven because in him all human beings in their attempts at "existing otherwise than in Jesus Christ" have been "judged and removed, really removed, i.e., moved and taken up into fellowship with the life of the Son of God."¹¹ This

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 439.

¹⁰ Ibid., 440.

¹¹ Barth, CD II/1, 162.

happens when the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and thus enables our reconciled fellowship with God in truth.

In knowing God in Jesus Christ then we know that "we cannot confine knowledge of Him within our human subjectivities."¹² This means that when we allow Jesus to be the *first* and *final* Word in theology then we are thinking according to the very movement of grace toward us in the incarnation with the result that it is through the Holy Spirit that "we are converted from ourselves to thinking from a centre in God and not in ourselves, and to knowing God out of God and not out of ourselves."¹³ This is crucial because it means that it is only when the Holy Spirit, who is *homoousios* with the Father and the Son, enables us to know the Father through union with the Son, that we have a continuity with God the Creator and Lord of the universe. That continuity does not belong to us innately because we are sinners who cannot escape our self-will which itself is identical with our free-will; however, it becomes ours as that continuity is "continuously given and sustained by the presence of the Spirit."¹⁴ Importantly, since the Holy Spirit is also "the temporal presence of the Jesus Christ who intercedes for us eternally in full truth,"¹⁵ our knowledge of the Holy Spirit and God himself is lost by confusing the Holy Spirit with the human spirit and thus by falling into some form of "subjectivism." Again, Torrance has things just right: "unless we know the Holy Spirit through the objectivity of the *homoousion* of the Son in whom and by whom our minds are directed away from ourselves to the one Fountain and Principle of Godhead, then

¹² Torrance, *Theological Science*, 310.

¹³ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 174. Torrance appealed to the doctrine of election to stress the "unqualified objectivity of God's Love and Grace toward us" so that our faith rests on "the ultimate invariant ground in God himself ... for our salvation in life and death" Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 132. This theonomous way of thinking takes place "from a centre in God and not from centre in ourselves" because the doctrine of election excludes any idea that "we may establish contact with God or know or worship him through acting upon him" (*ibid.*). For Torrance justification means that "it is Christ, and not we ourselves, who puts us in the right and truth of God, so that He becomes the centre of reference in all our thought and action" (*God and Rationality*, 60).

¹⁴ See Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 223.

¹⁵ Barth, CD II/1, 158.

we inevitably become engrossed with ourselves, confusing the Holy Spirit with our own spirits.”¹⁶ When that occurs then knowledge of God, ethics and anthropology stem from our subjective perceptions, agendas, and experiences instead of from the revelation of God in his Word and Spirit.

This may sound a bit complicated. But Torrance explains this with a clarity and precision that make it impossible to miss the implications of his position. His point is very simple, and it is that Christians need to be childlike in the sense of simply taking up their cross and following Jesus as he originally noted in his book *Theological Science*. But they should not become childish in their faith. What did he mean by this? He says, when the Lord spoke of the Kingdom of God, he never spoke about “maturity and adulthood.”¹⁷ Those who seek maturity and adulthood apart from Christ are seeking to ground their humanity in themselves—in their own self-understanding so that they then bring God into the picture only to support their own views of reality. Torrance claims that we live within the Kingdom of God only when, like children, “we are devoid of sophistication and pretentious self-understanding, where we let Christ be everything, and that includes being the mighty Saviour who came to make Himself responsible for us, to shoulder our burdens, and bear away our sins.”¹⁸

True maturity and adulthood, however, should be associated with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s approach who, unlike other Germans, did not yield to authority or to the State and refused to use God as “an ‘external prop’ for his faith.”¹⁹ In him Torrance said, “German Christianity came to maturity, and adult man emerged upon the scene, free from the shackles of authority and standing on his own feet.”²⁰ However, Torrance also noted that many of his contemporaries in Germany, in the USA, and in Britain were using Bonhoeffer only as “a means of objectifying their own self-understanding and as a symbol on which to project their own image of

¹⁶ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 227.

¹⁷ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 73.

¹⁸ Ibid. Torrance develops this same viewpoint in *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), chapter 4.

¹⁹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 73.

²⁰ Ibid., 74.

themselves."²¹ They used phrases like "religionless Christianity" and "worldly holiness" to construct systems of thought that were in conflict with Bonhoeffer's theology and Christology. The reason I bring this up here is because Torrance's analysis illustrates the important point that he frequently presented when he discussed the ethical implications of Christian faith. And he did so by explaining morality on the basis of his view of justification by grace alone. Let me briefly explain this.

Torrance believed theology was not childlike but childish if it is only based on "an external authority, be it from the Scriptures or the Church."²² By way of example he noted how often it is the case that if a minister is taken away from a congregation then the church members seem to "collapse in their faith" because they were relying on "external props" and thus have not "grown up in their faith."²³ Then he draws some very interesting and important conclusions. First, he says it is possible to use God himself as a prop in that way to support one's own view of religion. In that way he claims people protect themselves "from the searching judgements of God or from being concluded with all the godly and ungodly in the one solidarity of sin under the divine grace."²⁴ This is a vital point because it indicates why both Torrance and Barth spoke of revelation as grace being offensive to us. The reason is that even in our goodness we all are in solidarity in sin and that is what the grace of God disclosed in Christ reveals. Second, because of this Torrance then concludes that when we take justification by grace seriously then "the ground is completely taken away from [our] feet, and away with it there goes [our] own 'religion' and the 'prop-God' that belongs to it."²⁵ And his point is that it is that prop-God that Bonhoeffer was rejecting by "radicalizing justification by grace alone over against man's own religious self-justification and self-security."²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 74.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 74-5.

Justification by Grace and Moral Concerns

How then does Torrance's thinking play out in relation to morality? Torrance approaches this issue by noting that we cannot answer this question on the ground of natural science because with natural science "we have to think of nature out of nature" without recourse to some "*deus ex machina*" to help us out of difficulties. In other words, you cannot bring God in to explain anything in natural science since such science works only on the level of created nature so that all natural knowledge functions as if God were not given, "*etsi deus non daretur*."²⁷ This means that it is part of the doctrine of creation not to bring God in to explain the universe and what goes on within it. Indeed, to do this or to bring God in to stem secularization is pointless since this amounts to using God "against His will" in ways that can lead only to confusion. This is the case because every such attempt ends by "confounding Him with worldly powers" in a way that only alienates us further from the God of the Bible.²⁸

It is this confounding of God with worldly powers that is at the heart of the current attempts by liberation theologians who attempt to understand God from their fight against oppression, no matter what form that fight might take. The God of the Bible, Torrance rightly insists is "known only through the Cross and weakness of Jesus Christ" in such a way that we know that it is God in him who "conquers the power and space of this world." Hence, the God we must do without is the "God' who is a prop to [our] self-justification" and not "the God of justification by grace alone."²⁹ Here Torrance maintains a view that is frequently misunderstood today. He says that if we try to think of God and nature "on one and the same level (or, on two quite separated levels which are merely the obverse of each other, which amounts to the same thing!)" then we fall into naturalism. That unfortunately leads to "a false apologetic that attempts to defend the Christian doctrine of the

²⁷ Ibid., 75.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 75-6.

transcendence of God on the same plane of thought as that in which we engage in merely natural knowledge."³⁰

Here Torrance directly links his understanding of cheap and costly grace both to the doctrine justification and to Christian ethics asking: "Are we to engage in moral decisions without bringing God into them at all, and are we to learn how to behave in this secularized world in a purely secular way, *etsi deus non daretur* [as if God were not given]?" If the answer here is yes, then we deny our actual need for God and God's grace and we fall back finally upon ourselves once again. That, he says, would be a total misunderstanding of Bonhoeffer. He wanted to focus on the God of the Bible and not our prop-God so that "the point of departure for *Christian ethics* is not the reality of one's own self or the reality of the world, but the 'reality of God as he reveals Himself in Jesus Christ.'"³¹ Importantly, Torrance says that in his *Ethics* Bonhoeffer said we have to "discard the questions 'How can I be good?' 'How can I do good?' and ask the very different question 'What is the will of God?'"³²

It is with that question that, like Barth, Torrance began his ethics with the basic principle of our justification by grace alone which means that it is grace alone that "makes a man really free for God and his brothers, for it sets his life on a foundation other than himself where he is sustained by a power other than his own."³³ Here we reach the heart of the matter. Either we live the freedom which is ours in Christ who has loved us and will always love us unconditionally or we rely on external authorities and false props. The right choice here clearly is not to rely on our morality or religion but to live our ethical and religious lives "exclusively from a centre in Jesus Christ."³⁴ Bonhoeffer would not separate our existence within this world from our existence in Christ because it is in Christ that we see the true meaning of both. Hence, ethics and dogmatics both pivot "upon the fact that in and through the incarnation the Being of God Himself is to be found 'in space and time',

³⁰ Ibid., 76.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

for it is by participating in this Christ that we stand at once both in the Reality of God and in the reality of this world."³⁵

Cheap and Costly Grace

This, however, means rejecting Neo-Protestant Christianity, Ebionitism (attempts to ground Christ's uniqueness in human responses to the Gospel instead of in Christ himself) and Docetism (attempts to understand Christology from our ideas about Christ instead of from Christ himself) as well as any dichotomy between idea and reality such as we find in Bultmann. Bonhoeffer's ethics was grounded in Christology and that is how Torrance grounds his ethics as well when he insists that justification is the basis for his view of morality. He argues that justification is the "most easy thing" but "difficult to understand." It is also "the most easy and yet the most difficult to accept." It is easy "because it is so utterly free, and therefore so cheap in the sense that it is quite without price or condition; but it is so difficult because its absolute freeness devalues the moral and religious currency which we have minted at such cost out of our own self-understanding."³⁶ But Torrance offers another view of cheap grace here as well. He says modern people find it difficult to understand and accept justification by grace alone because they want "cheap grace', grace which does not set a question mark at [their] way of life" and does not "ask [them] to deny [themselves] and take up the Cross in following Christ." They want a "grace that does not disturb [their] setting in contemporary culture by importing into [their] soul a divine discontent, but one which will let [them] be quite 'secular', grace that merely prolongs [their] already existing religious experience and does not 'spoil' [them] for existence as [people] of the world."³⁷ There is yet another meaning Torrance gives to cheap grace and that relates to what he called the new theologians of his day such as John Robinson with his book *Honest to God*.

³⁵ Ibid., 77-8.

³⁶ Ibid., 70.

³⁷ Ibid., 71.

Robinson spoke of God as the ground of his being by projecting his view of God from his own secular experience mythologically out of himself instead of thinking from a center in God. He, and those who followed him, should have allowed the triune God in his own personal being to define his view, instead of trying to understand God from his own experience. The end result of Robinson's approach, according to Torrance, was that Robinson embraced an inverted deism because the God he presented was powerless to act in relation to us since, in his theology, God could not be distinguished from Robinson's own experiences of depth. His great mistake was that he was unable "to distinguish God 'out there' rationally as objectively and transcendently other than the depths of his own being, and so he is thrown back upon himself to give content to his notion of God, as what is of ultimate concern *for* him in the depth and significance of his own being."³⁸ Torrance flatly asserts that this approach to theology is one that is only out for *cheap grace* because it merely uses God for its own ends and satisfaction and says that is precisely what Bonhoeffer rejected as idolatrous projection. Accordingly, Robinson ended up where all the "new" theologians ended, that is, with "the 'God' *they* want, one to suit themselves and modern 'secular' man, rather than the God of *costly grace* who calls for the renewing of our minds in which are not schematized to the patterns of this world but are transformed in conformity with His own self-revelation in Jesus Christ."³⁹

This is an enormously important point because it is obvious that Robinson's approach was in harmony with the approach offered by Paul Tillich who argued that if you do not like the traditional meaning of the word God, then you could translate it and speak of the depths of your life or of your ultimate concerns. In doing that he believed you could not be called an atheist. You would only be an atheist if you denied or rejected your own experiences of depth because he believed that the word God means depth and if you know about depth you know about God.⁴⁰ This is still a popular methodology today and it is exactly what Torrance here rightly rejects

³⁸ Ibid., 81.

³⁹ Ibid., 82.

⁴⁰ See Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 57.

as an approach that is out for *cheap grace* because it confuses who God is objectively as the eternal Trinity acting for us in the incarnate Word and outpouring of the Holy Spirit with our own subjective experiences of depth.⁴¹

Importantly then, when Torrance speaks of the God of *costly grace* who meets us in Jesus Christ, he clearly means that Christ himself calls us to renounce ourselves and “take up the cross and follow Him unreservedly all along the road to crucifixion and resurrection.”⁴² Far from threatening those elements of truth that people see as important for the modern world, Torrance insists that the Gospel does not threaten that, but threatens our own “self-centeredness” which is the actual threat that the Gospel opposes. Torrance then says that a proper doctrine of creation would affirm “*the liberation of nature*” and a proper doctrine of grace would lead to “*the affirmation of nature*” by recognizing the unconditional nature of God’s free love by which God maintains his creation in distinction from and dependence upon him. Thus, Torrance concludes: “Cut away that relation to the God of creation and grace and what ensues can only be deism or atheism in some form or other.”⁴³ He claims that the new theology actually smothered the objective truth sought by modern empirical science “with a massive subjectivity in which there is revealed a reactionary flight from scientific objectivity.”⁴⁴

It is not insignificant that Torrance maintains that there is an evangelical and an unevangelical way to preach the Gospel. The latter tells people to believe in Jesus Christ *in order* that they may be saved. That, however, throws people back on themselves and their own personal decision or repentance and ends with a mistaken view of conditional salvation. That is no salvation at all since that is the

⁴¹ One popular example of this approach can be found in John Haught’s book, *What is God: How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) where he devotes a chapter (Chapter 1) to explaining that we know God from our experiences of depth. The result is a disaster since he is unwilling and unable to realize that God recognized in Christian faith is the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit so that God simply cannot be known from our experiences of depth at all. Torrance knew that well because his view of God came from his encounter with the grace of God which could never be separated from Christ, the giver of grace.

⁴² Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 82.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

very thing we cannot accomplish and do not need to accomplish, as it has already been accomplished for us by Christ himself. So, the "unevangelical" approach to the Gospel says, "This is what Jesus Christ has done for you, but you will not be saved *unless* you make your own personal decision for Christ as your Saviour. Or: 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."⁴⁵ The evangelical approach says that salvation is an accomplished reality in the very life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus for all. Therefore, we should accept that new life and live it.

These "unevangelical" views directly conflict with the Gospel of God's unconditional grace. They embody a legalist view of conditional salvation that makes our actual taking up our cross and following Christ impossible by placing the weight of salvation back on us. It should instead point us to the simple fact that Christ has made himself responsible for us. Hence, we do not rely on ourselves at any point at all, but only on him as the one Mediator who loves us unconditionally and thus effectively. Torrance insists that the Gospel is preached evangelically when "full and central place is given to *the vicarious humanity of Jesus* as the all-sufficient human response to the saving love of God which he has freely and unconditionally provided for us."⁴⁶ Two key points follow from this. As the man Jesus, God has utterly and freely given himself in his Son by pledging "his very Being as God for your salvation." He has thus "actualised his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself."⁴⁷ Christ died for us just because we are sinners and quite unworthy of him and in that way, he has made us his own even before and apart from our believing in him. That is why Torrance always insists on holding incarnation and atonement together so that he can stress that Jesus' humanity is not merely instrumental in God's hands but that he personally acts to save us from sin. Salvation is not just an act of

⁴⁵ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 93.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

God for us but “also a real human act done in our place and issuing out of our humanity.”⁴⁸ That is why he insists that we need a view of justification by grace

which really lets Christ occupy the centre, so that everything is interpreted by reference to who He was and is. After all, it was not the *death* of Jesus that constituted atonement, but Jesus Christ the Son of God offering Himself in sacrifice for us. Everything depends on *who* He was, for the significance of His acts in life and death depends on the nature of His Person.⁴⁹

Importantly, this means that “we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of His saving work, rather than the other way round. The detachment of atonement from incarnation is undoubtedly revealed by history to be one of the most harmful mistakes of Evangelical Churches.”⁵⁰ This means that if we focus on Christ’s benefits and not upon Christ himself, we end up with legalism and moralism and miss the whole point of justification. For Torrance, “it is only through union with Christ that we partake of His benefits, justification, sanctification, etc.”⁵¹ Hence Torrance insists that Jesus has bound us to himself by loving us so that “he will never let [us] go, for even if [we] refuse him and damn [ourselves] in hell his love will never cease.”⁵² Because all of this is in effect for us, we are called to repent and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. What he accomplished for us was both an act of God reconciling us to himself and an act of man living perfectly by grace in our place and as the enabling condition of our living in the freedom for God and neighbor accomplished by him and in him and through him. Torrance says Christ himself believed for us and acted in our place.

Does this mean that Torrance has displaced us in such a way that what we do no longer matters? It could seem that way. But that is not what Torrance says and

⁴⁸ Thomas F. Torrance *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK; Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 212.

⁴⁹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 64.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

thinks. What he means is that because Christ's own life of faith and obedience to the Father in our place includes us in our response to God and our own faith thus, he has already made my decision for God for me. Therefore, his acknowledgment of us before God "as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him, and whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ [we] are already accepted by him."⁵³ Because all of this is true, therefore we are called to renounce ourselves and take up our cross and follow Jesus, the Savior and Lord.

When we live this freedom which is ours in him then we will not need to look over our shoulders to see whether we have given ourselves sufficiently to him or not in faith. We won't have to wonder about our faith because the strength of our faith does not rest upon our believing but solely upon what Christ has done for us and what he now does for us before the Father. The freedom Torrance has in mind here is this: in Christ "I am completely liberated from all ulterior motives in believing or following Jesus Christ, for on the ground of his vicarious human response for me, I am free for spontaneous joyful response and worship and service as I could not otherwise be."⁵⁴ Notice that Torrance has not eliminated our own personal decision of faith or our own spontaneous acts of loving God and neighbor here. Instead, he has grounded them in Christ's active obedience in such a way that it is Christ himself even now as the risen, ascended, and coming Lord who empowers our spontaneous free actions in obedience to God and in loving others. So he claims that in his humanity Jesus Christ "stands for the fact that 'all of grace' does not mean 'nothing of man', but the very reverse, the restoration of full and authentic human being in the spontaneity and freedom of human response to the love of God."⁵⁵ This position stands in complete contrast to those who criticize Torrance for presenting Christ in such a way that he does away with our free human actions. His position is exactly opposite such a view.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Torrance, Cheap and Costly Grace, and Legalism

Here I have said enough to be able to explain why those liberation theologians and those who think we can move from anthropology to theology (and Christology) get things wrong both in their theological anthropologies and in their view of Christian ethics. T. F. Torrance once wrote to me telling me that he liked the fact that I was an evangelical Catholic. That was a compliment because any Christian theology that is not properly grounded in the biblical witness will always confuse the Holy Spirit with the human spirit and begin thinking about God and human behavior from a center in human experience rather than from a center in God which God himself has provided in the incarnation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Among contemporary theologians, we have been seeing that Thomas F. Torrance clearly exemplifies how and why a theology that allows Jesus Christ himself to be the *first* and *final* Word leads both to a proper understanding of God and to a proper understanding of our relations with God. For Torrance, the Nicene faith held prominence in the church, but not for any legalistic reasons. So, while the faith confessed at Nicaea meant genuine knowledge of the truth of the Gospel which was called for by the Gospel itself, it did not mean "laying down decrees ... requiring compliance either like apostolic decisions or like imperial edicts."⁵⁶ Torrance always opposed a legalistic approach to theology precisely because, for him an evangelical approach meant a declaration of the church's saving faith based upon the Scriptural witness and not an imposition of it.

To clarify this point, let us consider more closely Torrance's view of justification which, as already noted, he explains with the categories of cheap and costly grace. For Torrance, "Grace is not cheap but costly, costly for God and costly for man, but costly because it is unconditionally free: such is the grace by which we are justified in Christ Jesus."⁵⁷ For Torrance this means that all people, whether they are good or bad or religious or secular, "come under the total judgement of grace" in which they are completely called into question and "saved by grace

⁵⁶ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; reissued in a Second Edition by T&T Clark, 2016, 18.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 56.

alone."⁵⁸ That means, however, that our righteousness before God is not grounded in us at all, and especially not in our religious attempts to reach God without actually relying on Christ who is the grace of God enabling that possibility in the first instance.

Torrance himself preferred to speak of our justification by grace even though Luther correctly referred to our justification by faith in the sense that "It is not faith that justifies us, but Christ in whom we have faith."⁵⁹ However, Torrance noted that in both Lutheran and Reformed theology faith came to be seen as itself a justifying work and that undermined the evangelical meaning of grace and justification. This view made its presence felt in the notion of "*conditional grace*" which became entrenched throughout Protestantism. On the Roman Catholic side, the idea of infused grace was taught. Accordingly, while grace was supernaturally infused *ex opere operato*, we could then cooperate with grace and merit more grace. That idea "obscured the Gospel of free forgiveness of sins granted on the merits of Christ alone."⁶⁰ Once it was thought that grace was offered to people on condition of faith, the evangelical message of God's free grace effective in Christ for all was lost and new types of legalism followed. Legalizing follows by making faith into a saving work. This is another problematic view that Torrance opposed with his concepts of cheap and costly grace. Grace is cheap in that it is freely given to all. It is costly because it not only involved Christ's death on the cross, but it undercuts even the slightest idea that we could rely on ourselves. It always means taking up one's cross and following Christ.

As already noted, our faith should be grounded in Christ's own active obedience in our place. When it is, then the Gospel is proclaimed as an unconditionally free and effective act of God for us in Christ himself. This is why Torrance maintained that

we are yoked together with Jesus in his bearing of our burden and are made to share in the almighty strength and immutability of his

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 57.

vicarious faith and faithfulness on our behalf. Through his incarnational and atoning union with us our faith is implicated in his faith, and through that implication, far from being depersonalised or dehumanised, it is made to issue freely and spontaneously out of our own human life before God.⁶¹

For Torrance then, "Our faith is altogether grounded in him who is 'the author and finisher of our faith', on whom faith depends from start to finish."⁶² Clearly, because Torrance's view of faith is altogether tied up with Christ as the *first* and *final* Word of God he maintained that faith itself "arises in cognitive commitment to the compelling claims of God in Jesus Christ and is linked to the absolute priority of God over all our conceiving and speaking of him."⁶³ And this means our faith is shaped by the "precise form God's truth has taken in the incarnation of his Word" while it is also open to ever more understanding because it is tied to the "inexhaustible nature of God."⁶⁴ This faith, which characterizes the faith of the Nicene Creed, is belief in the eternal Trinity and that means that since Jesus himself is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, belief in any other god is excluded. This, because the only way to the Father was provided by Jesus himself as the incarnate Word in his own personal being and actions. One other key point should be made here. Since faith really is cognitive union with the Word of God incarnate as Jesus Christ, faith cannot be understood "as some form of non-cognitive or non-conceptual relation to God" since in Nicene theology faith involved "acts of recognition, apprehension and conception, of a very basic intuitive kind, in responsible assent of the mind to truth inherent in God's self-revelation to mankind."⁶⁵

Torrance held that contemporary Protestantism obscured this proper view of faith with a subtle element of "co-redemption." This of course is not just a

⁶¹ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 84. Notice that here once again Torrance does not see Christ's mediation between us and God the Father as in any way displacing our free human actions. On the contrary, he frees us to spontaneously respond to God in faith.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 22.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20.

Protestant phenomenon because "co-redemption" is in evidence, as already noted above, whenever one supposes that people cannot be saved "*unless* they make the work of Christ real for themselves by their own personal decision" or that people will be saved "*only if* they repent and believe."⁶⁶ What exactly is the problem with these notions? The answer is simple, but with profound implications, as already mentioned above. This thinking makes Christ's unconditional love of us conditional upon what we do. But we are the sinners who can do nothing, even in our goodness, to merit God's love of us that was unconditionally actualized on the cross and disclosed in Christ's resurrection. The idea of conditional salvation in the form of "co-redemption" or any other form therefore throws the weight of salvation back on us sinners who, whether we realize it or not, cannot save ourselves or anyone else by what we do. That is not good news, as Torrance notes, because if that were true then salvation would be completely lost.

Here Torrance's thinking is consistently Christological in just the right sense because his thinking always begins and ends with Christ and never with who we are and what we do. So he argues that the New Testament's message is that

God loves us, that He has given His only Son to be our Saviour, that Christ has died for us when we were yet sinners, and that His work is finished, and *therefore* it calls for repentance and the obedience of faith, but never does it say: This is what God in Christ has done for you and you can be saved on condition that you repent and believe.⁶⁷

This is a pivotal point already noted above and it is missing in much contemporary liberation theology and in Christian ethics. Such theology, as we shall see, tends to begin with peoples' fight against oppression which may take many forms such as the feminist opposition to patriarchalism or the fight of the disenfranchised against those who try to dominate them or the fight against racism. Certainly, women are right to oppose all forms of patriarchalism and Christians should definitely oppose exploitation and domination of some by others and racism as well. However, to assume that theology begins there or with experiences of overcoming these forms

⁶⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

of oppression is to embrace what Torrance is calling cheap grace and therefore to stand in opposition to the Gospel of God's unconditional love for humanity. The problem here is that if we begin with what we do and then search for a theology to undergird that activity, we have in fact shifted the weight *from* Christ as the objective source of truth and freedom to ourselves and what we do. Torrance astutely notes that "what becomes finally important is 'my faith', 'my decision', 'my conversion', and not really Christ Himself."⁶⁸

Such thinking he believed has led to the idea that we are saved by our "*existential decision*, in which we interpose ourselves, with our faith and our decision, in the place of Christ and His objective decision on our behalf."⁶⁹ This happens when our faith is detached from its objective basis in the historical Jesus as the incarnate Word and his actions for us during his ministry on the cross, and as the risen, ascended, and coming Lord. Such an approach to the Gospel in fact cheapens God's costly grace by equating grace with our own faith, actions, and decisions. What is important then becomes our present contextual reaction to the biblical text instead of our obedience to Christ in faith. At this point Torrance explicitly opposes Bultmann's view of the Gospel by insisting that Christ himself has objectively accomplished our justification once and for all through his life of obedience that reached its high point on the cross. By contrast, Bultmann changes this objective meaning into what Christ means subjectively for each of us. Thus, for Bultmann we must cut through that objective act of God on the cross since for him Christ's death is no different than a fatal accident in the street.⁷⁰ And what Bultmann discovers is that we don't need that objective historical event of atonement to grasp the meaning of the Gospel. Thus, the meaning of the Gospel is the meaning I get from the Gospel story and apply to myself in my contemporary situation.

Torrance unequivocally rejects this approach not only because it obscures the truth of our justification by grace, but because it leads to an incurable form of subjectivism and thus straight to a form of self-justification, which as I have been

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 277.

arguing, is no justification at all. That is the cheap grace we find in those views which begin with us instead of with faith in Christ. One might say that the ultimate example of how really untheological such an approach is would be Bultmann's claim that if the resurrection was in any sense a historical event, then it was nothing other than the rise of faith on the part of the disciples after Jesus's death. That mistaken view overtly reduces the objective event in the life of Jesus, which is indeed the very revelation of God, into the subjective experiences of faith on the part of those who hear the story of Jesus and his death on the cross. This approach by Bultmann and by many today who might theoretically reject Bultmann's view of the resurrection but still employ his "existential" or "contextual" approach to theology, detaches Christian faith from the actual historical events that give it its meaning. Such an approach Torrance rightly asserts "imports an astounding egocentricity in which the significance of the *pro me* is shifted entirely from its objective to its subjective pole. And so we see justification by grace being turned into its exact opposite."⁷¹

Interestingly, Torrance turns to Barth to stress that we can never take our eyes off "the centrality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and His objective vicarious work" because if we do then "the Gospel disappears behind man's existentialized self-understanding, and even the Reality of God Himself is simply reduced to 'what He means for me' in the contingency and necessities of my own life purpose."⁷² He then mentions a book on *The Elements of Moral Theology* saying that he was astonished that Jesus Christ hardly figured in that work at all. What took his place Torrance noted was "the ethical and indeed the casuistical concern." Even more interestingly, Torrance asserted that "what emerged was an ethic that was fundamentally continuous with our ordinary natural existence and was essentially formal."⁷³ Here we see once again how important it was to Torrance to realize that the kingdom of God made present in Jesus completely overturns any ethical (moralistic) or legalistic approach to the truth of the Gospel.

⁷¹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 60.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Love of God and Love of Neighbor

This issue merits some further explanation. One way to do this is to explain exactly why Torrance insisted that we could not love God *by* loving our neighbors. This for Torrance is a key example of self-justification. It indicates a failure to live by God's unconditional love which meets us in the incarnation as grace. For Torrance, "To love God through my love to my neighbour is to move toward God. It does not know a movement of God toward man."⁷⁴ Since, for Torrance, God's grace cannot be separated from the active mediation of Christ at any time or place because Christ is God's grace for us and in relation to us, it would be a mistake to think of grace as a "transferrable quality infused into and adhering to finite being, raising it to a different gradation where it can grasp God by a connatural proportion of being."⁷⁵ This is an extremely important point because many contemporary theologians begin their thinking about Christian ethics with the idea that it is only by loving our neighbors that we can love God. And it is often assumed that it is out of that love of neighbor that we really come to know and love God. Nothing could be further from the truth for two reasons.

First, in ourselves, as we have seen above, we are sinners who are incapable of living by grace. That is why Torrance rightly held that Bultmann's view of ethics was disastrous. This is because "it rejects the objective decision, the actualized election of grace, upon which the whole of the Christian Gospel rests."⁷⁶ Though Bultmann's ethics may be considered radical, in reality it is no more than a "prolongation of man's already existing experience and a reduction of it to what his previous knowledge includes" or might "acquire through philosophical analysis."⁷⁷ However, in this approach we humanly remain prisoners of our own "existentialized self-understanding" because that approach firmly disallows Christ acting objectively as our "vicarious Saviour" who alone can enable us to escape our self-will which as

⁷⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 89.

⁷⁵ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 115.

⁷⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 62.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

such is our free-will. What is implied here is that we do not just sin but that because of the adamic fall, we *are* sinners even in our free-will because sin is the failure to live as God's creatures by acknowledging our total dependence on God.

Sin means that we act as though we could live independently of God by relying on our own goodness in relation to the moral law. Since this really is the problem of sin, it means that even in our acts of free-will, we are still "unable to extricate ourselves from the vicious moral circle created by our self-will, in order to be selflessly free for God or for our neighbor in love."⁷⁸ Torrance explicitly asserts that since God has interacted with us within history and within our "moral existence," he has "redeemed us from the curse of the law" which kept us in "bondage to ourselves." The result is that because of Christ freeing us from sin as self-will we can obey his will "without secondary motives" and we thus become "free from concern for ourselves and our own self-understanding" and also free to "love both God and our neighbour objectively for their own sakes."⁷⁹ The key point then is that justification by grace "involves us in a profound moral revolution and sets all our ethical relations on a new basis." That can only happen, Torrance insists, "when Christ occupies the objective centre of human existence and all things are mediated through His grace."⁸⁰

Second, any attempt to come to true knowledge of God or what it means to be truly human which does not begin with the Incarnate Word has already bypassed God in an attempt to justify ourselves. In light of what Christ himself has revealed, it is just this behavior that uses the law to avoid actually relying on God's grace. Think for example of two key perspectives from Karl Rahner. First, he says that because "the experience of God and the experience of self are one" and that our self-experience and experience of our neighbor are also one, therefore these three aspects "mutually condition one another." The result is that "man discovers himself or loses himself in his neighbour; that man has already discovered God, even though he may not have any explicit knowledge of it, if only he has truly reached out to his neighbour in an act of unconditional love, and in that neighbour reached

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

out also to his own self.”⁸¹ This works for Rahner because he believes that “the personal history of the experience of self is in its total extent the history of the ultimate experience of God itself also.”⁸²

Notice here that Rahner’s view contrasts sharply with Torrance’s idea that it is only through conceptual union with Christ and not with some non-conceptual view of God that we seemingly discover by loving our neighbors that we know the true God. For Torrance, Grace and our experience of grace in no sense mutually condition each other. That is why, as we have seen, Torrance rejects the idea that we can love God by loving our neighbor. Furthermore, in contrast to Torrance, Rahner here places the work of knowing God on us and our love of neighbor instead of recognizing that the enabling condition for true love of neighbor is the love of God revealed and active in Christ alone as described in detail above. Since Christ is God’s grace enabling our knowledge of God the Father, it impossible to claim that knowledge of self and knowledge of God mutually condition each other when grace is not detached from the Giver of grace. Second, Rahner explicitly concludes that “love of God and love of neighbor stand in a relationship of mutual conditioning. Love of neighbor is not only a love that is demanded by the love of God, an achievement flowing from it; *it is also in a certain sense its antecedent condition.*”⁸³

It goes without saying that Torrance would flatly reject any such notion of mutual conditioning between us and God because that view obviates the unconditional freedom of God’s love in himself and for us. In Torrance’s view, it does not know of the incarnation and especially of the fact that incarnation was intrinsically related to atonement in that its purpose was to forgive sin and enable fellowship with God by overcoming our self-will. Additionally, it is just because Rahner thinks he can know God and the proper meaning of anthropology through our loving our neighbors that he grounds theology in us instead of in Christ alone with the result that his approach offers a perfect example of what goes wrong in

⁸¹ Karl Rahner, “Experience of Self and Experience of God,” in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 13, *Theology, Anthropology, Christology*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 128-9.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸³ Karl Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor*, trans. Robert Barr (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 71, emphasis mine.

theology when Jesus himself is not allowed to be the *first* and *final* Word in theology. I have documented Rahner's position on this, illustrating that he himself says he cannot begin with Christ alone in considering theological anthropology, because he thinks that is too simple a solution.⁸⁴ Instead, he begins by reflecting on our human experiences of self-transcendence which he assumes includes some sort of non-conceptual knowledge of God as the term of our experiences of self-transcendence.⁸⁵ In that way he ignores the real problem of sin as self-will as well as its objective solution in God's electing grace which meets us in the incarnate Word.

It is just because Torrance allows Jesus himself to be the *first* and *final* Word in his theology that he also insists that Christian ethics could not find its criteria in any kind of moral responsibility as dictated by the moral law or by any concept of human goodness. Torrance maintained 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."⁸⁶ When that happens, people then "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."⁸⁷ This then is a form of self-justification.

However, if one considers ethics in a strictly theological perspective and thus within faith, then one will see that this approach amounts to a sinful attempt to seize "the ethical imperative of God, making it an independent authority which is identified with human higher nature, so escaping God and deifying humanity—"you

⁸⁴ See Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), Second Edition, Chapters Two and Five.

⁸⁵ For a full discussion of how Torrance's view of knowledge of God relates to Rahner's non-conceptual understanding of God, see Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark Bloomsbury, 2022), Chapter Four.

⁸⁶ Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

will be like God.”⁸⁸ It is just this sinful human behavior that uses the law of God by relying on the moral law or common law in a way that yields obedience to the law without actually committing oneself to responsible action under God. This, Torrance thinks, is what Jesus set us free from by fulfilling the law for us and justifying us by 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.”⁸⁹ Thus, the “act of grace in justification which breaks through to us apart from law is spoken of as ‘revelation.’”⁹⁰ This righteousness as the act of God in Christ which forgives and justifies us “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.”⁹¹

This is exactly why Torrance spoke of 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.”⁹² For Torrance justification by grace means that just because Christ has put us “completely in the right or the truth with God, Christ calls us completely into question.”⁹³ That is the reason why “the way in which he embodied the love of God among men or expounded to them what the Kingdom of God was like so often rebuffed them.”⁹⁴ He was indeed offensive to them in what he revealed. And what he revealed was “the vast chasm between the heart of man and the Will of God” so that this “provoked the bitter hostility of man to God and

⁸⁸ Ibid., 112-13.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 116.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 65.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

brought Jesus to the Cross."⁹⁵ It is precisely in his suffering that God himself launched his "supreme attack upon man's self-centredness, self-concern, self-security, self-seeking and self-will."⁹⁶

Through all this Jesus remained "the absolute grace of God that will only be grace and nothing but grace" as was disclosed when he said "'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."⁹⁷ This was God's unconditional love and complete forgiveness by which all are accepted on "the ground of the divine grace." In this way judgment and grace are connected because we are called into question as those who try to establish ourselves in relation to God by relying somehow on ourselves. But in Christ we are set upon the proper foundation of grace by Christ himself. That is why Torrance maintains that this dialectic of judgment and forgiveness is most evident in our "moral life" because in light of this grace we are all exposed as needy sinners so that we cannot be saved by our works in relation to the moral law or even the ten commandments, but only by a faith which totally relies on what Christ himself has done for us. This is why St. Paul could say that God alone is true while every one of us is a liar (Rom. 3:4).

These are crucial points that separate Torrance's thinking from all those contemporary attempts to reach a proper understanding of the triune God and of human freedom by starting with human acts of fighting oppression or human acts of kindness. Those are important of course. But the moment it is thought that the truth of our knowledge of God and our knowledge of responsibility as Christians is to be sought in our human acts of opposing oppression or of being kind, then all is lost. Why? Because, as I have been arguing, what is disclosed by the cross of Christ is that, even in our goodness we are at enmity with God in our self-will and self-reliance and that we need God's grace even to become aware of this in the first place. Moreover, we are completely unable to work our way up to a knowledge of this truth apart from revelation, that is, apart from the reconciliation that has taken place for us in Christ. In this way Torrance held that "divine revelation conflicts

⁹⁵ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

sharply with the structure of our natural reason.”⁹⁸ This is what rules out the idea espoused by Rahner and many of his followers that natural theology and revealed theology mutually condition each other.⁹⁹ Confronted with God in Christ, Torrance thinks that the shape and structure of our minds begin to change. This will involve “a radical repentant rethinking of everything before the face of Jesus Christ” with the result that we would then take up our cross and follow him. He insists 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.”¹⁰⁰

For Torrance it is specifically in our encounter with Jesus Christ that there takes place a “soteriological suspension of ethics”¹⁰¹ which enables us to grasp the fact that our justification is a miraculous action of God who makes us righteous by forgiving our sins. But that means that we cannot understand ethics in a properly Christian sense from within the moral law as it now stands or our justification as a legal transaction because, as already noted, from the point of view of morality and law “forgiveness is impossible—it is legally speaking immoral or amoral.”¹⁰² Forgiveness as justification thus cannot be understood “from any ground in the moral order as such” but “only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us. It is a *fait accompli*.”¹⁰³ The law is not thereby put aside since God’s judgment is not put aside. Rather this means that Christ brought about our regeneration from within his own personal activity from the divine and the human side and in that way he embodied “an

⁹⁸ Torrance, *Atonement*, 443.

⁹⁹ Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 1*, trans. Cornelius Ernst, O.P. (Baltimore, Helicon Press, 1965), 98.

¹⁰⁰ Torrance, *Atonement*, 443.

¹⁰¹ Torrance, “The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics*, 1991, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 252.

¹⁰² Torrance, *Atonement*, 118.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

altogether new way of life for us resulting from our being translated out of the bondage of law into the freedom of the children of God."¹⁰⁴

Here we see the fruits of Torrance's insistence that we cannot love God by loving our neighbor. He claims that God's will is not disclosed to us in terms of abstract ethics or law or even of goodness but only in the free unconditional love of God manifested in Christ himself. That is the love that brings about peace between us and God and thus between us and our neighbors. Torrance claims that as sinners we use the law to "escape from God's judgement, in order to escape from God."¹⁰⁵ This is what he finds so objectionable in Bultmann's thinking. In Torrance's words, "What Jesus did, according to Bultmann, was to think out radically to the end the absolute requirement of man within the relation between what he 'is' and what he 'ought to be' and so made everything pivot upon man's own individual decision."¹⁰⁶ What he left out was the fact that

Jesus Christ has to come to lift man out of that predicament in which even when he has done all that it is his duty to do he is still an unprofitable servant, for he can never overtake the ethical 'ought'. But actually the Gospel is the antithesis of this, for it announces that in Jesus Christ God has already taken a decision about our existence and destiny in which He has set us upon the ground of His pure grace where we are really free for spontaneous ethical decisions toward God and toward men.¹⁰⁷

Notice here once again that for Torrance Jesus's vicarious human action as our representative and substitute does not overwhelm or make unimportant our human action because it is the enabling power of that free action. However, this takes salvation completely out of our hands because it is not the moral law or common law or the ten commandments which save us. And it is not our obedience to these which saves us either. That is something only God could do, and he did it apart from

¹⁰⁴ Torrance, "The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ," 253.

¹⁰⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, 112.

¹⁰⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

the law and in fulfilment of its proper meaning. We have seen that Torrance was quite critical of Bultmann's existentializing the Gospel, and for good reason. Here we may ask exactly what it means to live by grace. Torrance's answer is clear: we are summoned to "live out of God and not out of ourselves, in which everything in religion is justified by reference to Jesus Christ because it can have no justification by reference to itself."¹⁰⁸

Torrance and Liberation Theology

Now, let me briefly contrast Torrance's view of faith as knowledge of the truth and justification as God's action in Christ freeing us for spontaneous action in loving God and on that basis loving our neighbors with the views offered by some contemporary theologians who embrace the method of contemporary liberation theology. That method, as already mentioned, invariably grounds knowledge of God and of human freedom in the human struggles against oppression and racism and other "isms" that threaten our humanity and the ideology that springs from that struggle. I have already noted the difference between a view of God grounded in our own experiences of depth and the knowledge of God that comes from an encounter with Jesus himself, the crucified and risen Lord. In the former approach, the word God is defined from and by us and always leads to some form of idolatry, legalism, and self-justification. That is the approach based on a theology that wittingly or unwittingly is in search of cheap grace. A theology grounded in Christ however is one in which, as Torrance repeatedly insists, the Gospel calls us to "repent and believe, to take up the cross and follow Christ."¹⁰⁹

What precisely does that mean in this context? It means that we really must accept Christ as our Lord and Savior specifically and thus conceptually because no one other than Jesus himself could substitute himself for us before God. That has some real meaning. Because he has actually accomplished our reconciliation with God in his own personal life of vicarious obedience for us by virtue of the hypostatic union of his humanity with his being as the Son of God, his action for us is total and not in any sense partial. If we do not accept that fact, then Torrance says, we

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹⁰⁹ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 84.

"empty it of saving significance."¹¹⁰ Torrance held that it was through the blood of Christ that Jews and Gentiles were united in one body.¹¹¹ He also believed that since God the Father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was personally and actively involved and present in Christ's crucifixion redeeming us from our lost condition under sin, therefore "the cross was a window into the very heart of God, for in and behind the cross, it was God the Father himself who paid the cost of our salvation."¹¹² Through Christ's blood then as he acted in "atoning sacrifice for our sin." Torrance maintains that "the innermost nature of God the Father as holy compassionate love has been revealed to us."¹¹³ Furthermore, Torrance argues that it is the Holy Spirit who pours out this very love into our hearts because the cross and Pentecost belong together. This leads him to offer one of his favorite passages from Calvin, namely, that "God does not love us ... because he has reconciled us to himself; it is because he loved us that he has reconciled us to himself."¹¹⁴

To clarify his point further Torrance looks at Jesus's incarnate life and activity in light of the parable of the prodigal son and says his life is "atoning activity from beginning to end." He asserts that Jesus made himself one with us in our "estranged humanity when it was running away into the far country, farther and farther away from the Father, but through his union with it he changed it in himself, reversed its direction and converted it back in obedience and faith and love to God the Father."¹¹⁵ Jesus, he says, was "baptized 'into repentance' ... , for as the Lamb of God come to bear our sins he fulfilled that mission not in some merely superficially forensic way, though of course profound forensic elements were involved, but in a way in which he bore our sin and guilt upon his very soul which he made an offering for sin."¹¹⁶ Torrance goes on to say that Christ's baptism was

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 105.

¹¹² Ibid., 109.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 84.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 84-5.

one of "vicarious repentance for us which he brought to its completion on the Cross where he was stricken and smitten of God for our sakes, by whose stripes we are healed."¹¹⁷ Hence, Christ "laid hold of us even in the depths of our human soul and mind where we are alienated from God and are at enmity with him, and altered them from within and from below in radical and complete *metanoia*, a repentant restructuring of our carnal mind, as St Paul called it, and a converting of it into a spiritual mind."¹¹⁸

Thus, Torrance persuasively argues that we are completely unable to extricate ourselves from the sin which places us at enmity with God because he says "our free-will is our self-will" which, as we have seen, is what puts us at enmity with God and each other to begin with. Once again, he notes that sin "is so ingrained" in our minds that we are incapable of genuinely repenting because to do so would mean we could not rely even on our own repentance before God. In that regard Christ "laid hold of us even there in our sinful repentance and turned everything round through his holy vicarious repentance, when he bore not just upon his body but upon his human mind and soul the righteous judgments of God and resurrected our human nature in the integrity of his body, mind and soul from the grave."¹¹⁹ Our regeneration then is completely tied to the fact that Christ repented once for all in our place and that there will be a final transformation when Christ comes again to make all things new. But that means that our conversion, regeneration, or new birth have already occurred in Jesus himself for us. So conversion means that in "our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake ... we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion."¹²⁰ He is the one and the only one who could take our place before God because he was God himself acting *as* man for us. He is the "substance of our conversion" so that without him all "so-called repentance and conversion are empty." Thus, a truly evangelical view of conversion is one in which we turn

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 85.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 86.

completely away from ourselves and toward Christ so that we need to be converted "from our in-turned notions of conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself."¹²¹

How different this view of conversion is from the view espoused within a liberationist perspective. Elizabeth Johnson persistently argues that exclusively referring to God as Father subordinates women to men. While she notes that God is Spirit and beyond identification with male or female sex, her own thinking is in conflict with this. She claims that "the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman."¹²² However, if God is Spirit, then there is no gender at all in God. So her claim that the language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction which refer to God as Father and Son conveys the message that God is male is clearly mistaken. If one is referring to the Father through the revelation of his Son, then the message is not and could never be that God is male. That message would confuse divine and human being by projecting gender in some way into God who transcends gender!

The actual message is, or should be, that there is an exclusive and unique eternal relation of being between the Father and Son (Matt. 11: 27) and that our knowledge of God as Spirit, which itself is enabled by the Holy Spirit who is one in being with the Father and Son, comes to us as revelation through our conceptual union with Jesus himself. It does not come *from us at all*, but from *God alone*. Because all that Jesus does "in his human life is identical with the act of God himself" we can say that "nothing is done in his human life except what issues out of the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father."¹²³ The result is that behind his "life in the flesh" we can say that there "stands the closed circle of the intimate and private relation of loving and knowing, of speaking and doing, that

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992; reissued in 2002 as a tenth anniversary edition and in 2017 as a twenty-fifth anniversary edition), 5.

¹²³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 127.

exists between the Son and the Father."¹²⁴ Torrance himself cites Matt. 11:27 and concludes that "the relation between the Father and the Son and the Son and the Father is a closed relation, but entry into it is given through the incarnation of the Son, for in the perfect human life of Jesus the love and truth of God are addressed to man in the concrete form of a historical relationship of man to fellow man."¹²⁵ In his human life we are directly confronted with God acting as our savior in revelation and reconciliation.

So Johnson's mistake, and it is not a minor one, is that she thinks knowledge of the triune God comes *from* us. Following the thought of Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague she claims that the symbol God functions, and *we* must make it function to include women since any continued traditional and exclusive reference to God as Father and Son will not function according to her liberationist goal of overcoming male attempts to subordinate women to men. This of course is a laudable goal; but the point she misses is that this can be achieved only through faith in Christ who has already liberated us from the sin which leads to patriarchy in the first place. For Johnson, within her liberationist perspective, it is out of women's fight against oppression that "women are engaged in creative 'naming toward God,' as Mary Daly so carefully calls it, from the matrix of their own experience."¹²⁶ She says "feminist reflection is ... not alone in its use of human experience as a resource for doing theology. What is distinctive, however, is its specific identification of the lived experience of women ... as an essential element in the theological task."¹²⁷ For Johnson then, naming God is grounded in women's emerging identity and not exclusively in the revelation of God as it comes to us through his Word and Spirit. Johnson believes that the conflict that arises over naming God "He" or "She" indicates "that, however subliminally, maleness *is* intended when we say God."¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 128.

¹²⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 61.

¹²⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 98.

By contrast, if one is thinking evangelically, on the basis of the Gospel as depicted above, then since we know God is Spirit and that there really is no gender in God, the moment maleness enters the picture, we know that we are not yet or no longer thinking about the God of the Nicene faith. Important here is the fact that a key experience of women for Johnson is the experience of conversion. She describes this as women's struggle against sexism which affirms their own human worth. It is foundational, she says, as "a turning around of heart and mind that sets life in a new direction."¹²⁹ Accordingly, she thinks this is a "new experience of God" from which new understanding arises from women's experiences of liberation to know "what is fitting for the mystery of God to be and to do."¹³⁰ Further, she thinks that in "classical theology" conversion has been defined from the perspective of the ruling male as "pride or self-assertion" so that such pride must be divested to "in order to be filled with divine grace."¹³¹ She thus argues

Through women's encounter with the holy mystery of their own selves as blessed comes commensurate language about holy mystery in female metaphor and symbol ... conversion experienced not as giving up oneself but as tapping into the power of oneself simultaneously releases understanding of divine power not as dominating power-over but as the passionate ability to empower oneself and others ... in the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves we are engaged in a dynamic reaching out to the mystery of God.¹³²

This approach is so manifestly opposed to any reasonable view of conversion evangelically understood that it offers an unmistakable example of a self-grounded theology that not only ignores the problem of sin but argues for a view of salvation or freedom which is directly opposed to one that is Christ-centered, as depicted above.

¹²⁹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 62.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 66-7.

First, knowledge of the triune God does not in fact come from knowledge of ourselves, no matter how deep that may be. It comes from the Father through the Son in an encounter with the historical Jesus as attested in Scripture and through the power of the Holy Spirit and thus through faith and by grace alone. And, as noted above, it comes from a conceptual and ontological union with the crucified and risen Lord himself. Therefore, it does not come from "the ontological naming and affirming of ourselves" as Johnson claims. And because our knowledge of God comes from Christ himself, it never really came from the perspective of the ruling male as Johnson thinks, but from God's own self-revelation, his own naming himself to us in his incarnate Son and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, in her view of "classical theology" she certainly misses Torrance's stress on the unconditional nature of God's forgiving grace by claiming that we must divest ourselves of pride in order to receive grace. Torrance's point is we do not have to do anything to receive grace because that is freely given in Christ for all. Additionally, "pride or self-assertion" affect men and women and not just ruling males because pride in relation to God refers to our unwillingness to live by grace alone. Pride refers to the human attempt to live from our own resources instead of from Christ alone.

Second, language about this God is not simply produced metaphorically and symbolically based on our experiences of who or what we think God is as a holy mystery. Third, when compared to the evangelical view of conversion offered by Torrance, one can see with unmistakable clarity the difference between a Christ-centered view of the matter and one that is entirely untouched by such a view. For Johnson, conversion here is totally understood based on women's experiences of themselves and is presumed to be inherently in touch with God as holy mystery. Jesus Christ is not even mentioned. For Torrance conversion is understood as God's amazing grace actualized in Christ himself by his converting us back to God the Father through his vicarious life of perfect obedience for our benefit. So our conversion is not any sort of reliance upon what we do or experience but rather our participation in the freedom for the triune God through conceptual and ontological union with Christ in faith.

For Torrance then, as we saw above, conversion involves regeneration because we are judged by God's forgiving grace in Christ and so conversion he says is "wholly bound up with Jesus Christ himself" since it is "our new birth, our regeneration, our conversion" which have all already taken place in him for us. The result is that in a properly theological theology that begins and ends with Christ himself conversion can only refer to "our sharing in the conversion or regeneration of our humanity brought about by Jesus in and through himself for our sake. In a profound and proper sense, therefore, we must speak of Jesus Christ as constituting in himself the very substance of our conversion."¹³³ So an evangelical view of conversion is one that sees our "new birth" to knowledge of the true God and of God's purposes for humanity "as a turning away from ourselves to Christ" because it is "conversion from our in-turned notions of conversion to one which is grounded and sustained in Christ Jesus himself."¹³⁴

It turns out that the liberationist view of conversion offered by Johnson and many who follow her views is in direct conflict with a properly Christian view of the matter not only because in her view Jesus is decidedly absent. It is so also because it is self-grounded with the assumption that we really can know the true God without experiencing the reconciliation of our minds that took place on the cross for us in Christ himself. So her view ignores the real problem of sin and the proper meaning of salvation as liberation from our own self-grounded attempts to know God and fight against the inequality of women and men. The fact is that in Christ we have been liberated from the sin that leads to patriarchy. And we know about that liberation because it has taken place as an act of God for us in Jesus' own life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Thus, we know that our actual liberation is not and can never be an achievement of ours. It is ours. But it is ours as it is realized for us in him and through our conceptual and ontological union with Christ in faith. To live that freedom is to live by grace alone through faith in Christ.

Without experiencing the reconciling grace of God through the Holy Spirit we will always assume that knowledge of God comes from ourselves and the naming of God from ourselves in our struggles for liberation. All of that is fundamentally at

¹³³ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 85-6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

odds with the fact that true liberation is the liberation *from* our self-will which is our free-will which is already ours in Christ. It is liberation from ourselves since in ourselves we are sinners at enmity with God and each other. Importantly, as noted above, when Torrance equates sin with our self-will what he means is that all our human attempts to live apart from faith in Christ are always attempts to live autonomously and independently of God. That is the impossibility created by sin—God will not let us go, even in our self-will which places us in conflict with the fact that we are created to be in relationship with God by depending upon him. Thus, we cannot heal those who sinfully act to subordinate women to men by changing the name of God since the power of naming God does not come from us in the first place. And in the second place, we do not have the power to overcome the sin of patriarchy no matter how we reconstruct our metaphors and symbols. That power comes exclusively from the power of grace in and through which the reconciliation of the world has already taken place in the history of Jesus Christ for all people. So, there simply can be no true naming of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by tapping into the power of ourselves as Johnson assumed. That power is always the power of sinners who, in pride and self-will, are unable and unwilling to live by grace alone in its identity with Jesus Christ who, as the risen, ascended, and advent Lord still is the only one who can enable knowledge of the Christian God here and now through the power of the Spirit and thus in faith as tied to Jesus himself. It is then a matter of accepting the costly grace of God rather than cheapening it by detaching it from the need to take up our cross and follow Christ alone.

Let me give one more example of a liberationist perspective that purports to be grounded in the Holy Spirit but is not properly grounded in the Holy Spirit at all to show the difference Torrance's view makes in this discussion. In his book, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture*, Rubén Rosario Rodríguez proposes to recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit "in liberating work—especially when such work is located outside the church."¹³⁵ In his view, theological analysis is grounded in acts of liberation and humility. He thus advocates

¹³⁵ Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 143.

a "doctrine of revelation grounded in the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit."¹³⁶ But the question is: can one recognize the Holy Spirit by exploring "liberating work"? From within a proper evangelical theology that allows Christ to be the *first* and *final* Word, the answer to this question is an unequivocal no. Why? Because in a strict doctrine of Christology and of the Trinity one cannot separate the Spirit from the Word since they are one in being (*homoousios*) in eternity and in the economy. That means that it is impossible to recognize the Holy Spirit simply by exploring liberating works just as it is impossible to know and love God *by* loving our neighbors.

The idea that one can recognize and understand the Holy Spirit by focusing on liberating works is simply another form of self-justification. It begins theology with what we do without recognizing the fact that unless what we do is grounded in the love of God for us actualized in the incarnation and revealed by the risen Lord, then even if that theology is described as faith seeking understanding, it is clearly an untheological theology. Unless faith is enabled by the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father, it is not yet or no longer Christian faith. It is an approach that relies on cheap rather than on costly grace just because it will not recognize that true liberation means taking up our cross and following Christ the Liberator. We need to be liberated from the self-will that refuses to begin and end with Christ himself and not with ourselves. Here Torrance's view of how we know the Holy Spirit is decisive:

the doctrine of the Spirit requires the doctrine of the Son. It is only by the Spirit that we know that Jesus is Lord and can assert the *homoousion* of him, but apart from the Son, and the inseparable relation of the Spirit to the Son, the Spirit is unknowable, and the content of the doctrine of the Spirit cannot be articulated.¹³⁷

Importantly, then for Torrance "The Spirit does not utter himself but the Word and is known only as he enlightens us to understand the Word."¹³⁸ This approach clearly

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 213.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 214.

rules out the idea that we can know the Holy Spirit by focusing on any sort of human behavior such as acts of liberation or compassion, however humanly important those acts may be.

In light of what I am arguing here then, beginning with our liberating works detaches revelation from the incarnate Word as the revealer and makes revelation a general catchword for human acts of liberation. At the outset we see a massive difference of views. While Rosario Rodríguez thinks “no tradition speaks with absolute certainty or universal application,”¹³⁹ that very assertion eliminates the possibility of knowing the truth in its identity with Jesus himself who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. In other words, while it is true that no tradition has control over the truth so that such tradition is in any sense true in itself, that does not mean that one cannot speak with absolute certainty and universal application about the truth. Once that conclusion is drawn relativism follows. A quick example from Karl Barth will make this point clearly. Because he believed there was a way from Christology to anthropology (as did Torrance), he held that everything said about anthropology, that is, about our human relations with God, including our sin and God’s forgiveness of that sin,

can only be said from this point, from [our] being in Jesus Christ. If this rule—which is the basic rule of all sound doctrine—is followed, the statement that God is knowable to [us] can and must be made with the strictest possible certainty, with an apodictic certainty, with a certainty freed from any dialectic and ambiguity, with all the certainty of the statement ‘the Word was made flesh.’¹⁴⁰

For Barth this means that we can speak with absolute certainty and universal application as long as we are thinking about humanity from the vantage point of our having been reconciled to God in Christ. Any attempt to speak of humanity in its quest for freedom and fight against oppression apart from this christological basis will necessarily mean uncertainty because it would accord anthropology a role independent of the truth known christologically. That would imply that we can find

¹³⁹ Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 143.

¹⁴⁰ Barth CD II/1, 162.

truth in ourselves when what is revealed in and by Jesus Christ is that we are sinners incapable of knowing God and ourselves truly apart from the incarnate Word. True knowledge of God only occurs when Christ's completed atoning reconciliation is actualized in us with the healing of our minds and hearts through the power of his Holy Spirit.

Torrance makes this same point repeatedly when he speaks of cheap and costly grace and stresses the importance of our justification by grace alone, as we have seen. He also does so when he refers to Jesus himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6). He takes that statement with utter seriousness because he firmly and consistently holds that a proper theology must take its stand "on the supreme truth of the Deity of Christ" and thus it must interpret the Gospels "in the light of the epistemic and ontological relation between the historical Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, and God the Father."¹⁴¹ For example, Torrance says that it is particularly in the Gospel of John that this evangelical truth is emphasized with clarity. He notes that none of the other gospels stress Jesus's earthly, historical, and fleshly reality more than the Gospel of John. At the same time the fourth Gospel stresses "the eternal *I am* of the living God" which is "irresistibly evident in Jesus' self-disclosure, above all at those points where he stands forth as the Lord of life and death."¹⁴² In a manner similar to Barth, Torrance concludes that "the central focus of the Gospel upon the Deity of Christ is the door that opens the way to the understanding of God's triune self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" and that is why any proper interpretation of the New Testament has to be "at once both Christological and trinitarian."¹⁴³ Torrance's reaction to Bultmann expresses this point quite decisively:

When Bultmann wishes to reinterpret the objective facts of *kērygma*,
e.g. as given in the Apostles' Creed, in terms of an existential decision

¹⁴¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996; reissued by T&T Clark with an Introduction by Paul D. Molnar, 2016), 48.

¹⁴² Ibid. It is at that point that Torrance cites many supporting texts such as "I and my Father are one" (Jn. 10: 30); "I am the resurrection and the life ..." (Jn. 11:15); "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by me ... He who has seen me has seen the Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (Jn. 14:6, 9, 11).

¹⁴³ Ibid., 49.

which we have to make in order to understand, not God or Christ or the world, but ourselves, we are converting the gospel of the New Testament into something quite different, converting christology into anthropology. It is shockingly subjective. It is not Christ that really counts, but my decision in which I find myself.¹⁴⁴

Additionally, as seen above, Torrance takes seriously the problem of sin and our need to have our minds reconciled to God in Christ *before* we can know God truly and in order for us to love God and neighbor. So Barth and Torrance are very close on this subject.

Since both theologians think the only way to God is through the incarnate Son and that we are united to the Son conceptually through the Holy Spirit and therefore in faith, both of them also agree that it is only on the basis of justification by grace alone that we are justified and sanctified. For Torrance justification cannot be understood as the “beginning of a new self-righteousness” which it would be if our sanctification were thought of as “what we do in response to justification.”¹⁴⁵ Such a view of sanctification would have to mean that finally “our salvation depends upon our own personal or existential decision” instead of upon God’s grace, namely, upon what Christ has accomplished objectively for us in making us free to live from him alone as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.¹⁴⁶ In this context Torrance argued that we should not use political theology “as a basic hermeneutic to interpret the Gospel and mission of the Church” because whenever that happens then we are entrapped in “an ecclesiastical will to power” instead of living by grace by taking up our cross and following Christ.¹⁴⁷ It is only because Christ loved us while we were

¹⁴⁴ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 286.

¹⁴⁵ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 161.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 162-3.

¹⁴⁷ See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 79. Torrance thus maintained that “through sin and self-will the Christian religion, as easily as any other, may be turned into a form of man’s cultural self-expression or the means whereby he seeks to give sanction to a socio-political way of life, and even be the means whereby he seeks to justify and sanctify himself before God” (*God and Rationality*, 69).

still sinners and forgave our sins that we are truly free to love him and thus to love God and on that basis to fight against oppression by loving our neighbors.

Here let me briefly contrast the approach of Rosario Rodríguez who speaks for many to that of Torrance in a bit more detail. As noted, Rosario Rodríguez thinks we can know the Holy Spirit from human works of liberation. With that assumption he methodologically separates the Spirit from the Word and thereby confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. This leads him to several problematic conclusions. He thinks that "to participate in the process of liberation is already, in a certain sense, a salvific work." From this it follows that one can locate revelation "in the work of historical and political liberation."¹⁴⁸ As a result his key thesis is that since God desires that we all live peacefully together "guided by God's compassionate justice" he can explore biblical views of the Spirit's work in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity before they became "calcified into exclusivist doctrines."¹⁴⁹ On this basis he argues "that the work of the Spirit serves as a theological locus for pluralistic dialogue and cooperation because the sacred Scriptures of all three faiths share an ethical norm grounded in the themes of liberation, justice and compassion."¹⁵⁰ This may sound promising to the uncritical reader. But it is not.

Torrance would certainly oppose this thinking because it clearly replaces Christ himself with an ethical norm. So, instead of grounding his view of the Spirit and of liberation in the Spirit's enabling us to love God spontaneously as he meets us in Jesus Christ here and now on the basis of his forgiving grace, Rosario Rodríguez substitutes an *ethical norm* that he thinks unites the three faiths, and then searches for instances of liberation, justice and compassion as indications of the actions of the Holy Spirit. This factually undermines the doctrine of justification by grace and separates the Spirit from the Word, thus undoing the unity of the Trinity acting for us in history. The fact that Rosario Rodríguez does this is evident when he asserts that he will begin his theology "with pneumatology *rather than*

¹⁴⁸ Rosario Rodríguez, 142.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

with christology."¹⁵¹ As I have been arguing, however, to begin with pneumatology within a properly evangelical theology one would immediately have to begin with Christology because the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ as our Liberator. To have the Holy Spirit is to recognize and acknowledge that Jesus himself is the Lord who enables our knowledge of God in the first place as he speaks his Word to us here and now.

To claim to be speaking of the Holy Spirit without at once being directed toward Christ the liberator necessarily confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit. This would have to mean that sanctification has become a work of ours instead of an accomplished work of Christ for us. That is why Rosario Rodríguez can say that to participate in liberation is in a certain sense already a salvific work. It is not. The key indicator that such confusion has occurred will always be the fact that someone thinks the truth of our knowledge of God and of liberation comes from the moral law as it now stands and our obedience to the moral law or from various experiences of compassion or liberation. As seen above, Torrance helpfully maintained that any such approach was bound to fail because it misses the central point that we are not saved and thus not freed from our sin as self-will through faithfulness to the moral law or to any abstract ethical norm, even if that be constructed from the Bible. That approach is a way of hiding from our true responsibility which is to hear the Word of God's forgiving grace and thus to love God in Christ for his own sake. On that basis Christians become free to love their neighbors and fight against oppression without any ulterior motives for themselves or others since they are impelled to do so by the unconditionally free love of God. That approach is what keeps Christians from falling prey to ideologies in their fight for freedom and against oppression in all its forms. Through the Holy Spirit they are conceptually and ontologically united with Jesus Christ the risen, ascended, and coming Lord who alone enables our liberation from sin and for service of God and neighbors.

While Rosario Rodríguez argues in a general way that "all three faiths share a conception of the Spirit as the *historical* manifestation of God in the world *through*

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 145, emphasis mine.

acts of liberation that preserve human dignity,"¹⁵² the truth is that a genuine recognition of the Holy Spirit would require that we look away from our acts of preserving human dignity to Christ himself as the one who justifies and sanctifies sinners. Because Rosario Rodríguez does not do this, he claims that to seek dogmatic certainty "steers us toward theological totalitarianism."¹⁵³ Thus he claims that theological knowledge "is more a matter of personal and communal spiritual formation than of detached scientific observation."¹⁵⁴ Armed with that approach he claims once again that "God can be known in human history through divinely inspired acts of justice, compassion, and liberation."¹⁵⁵ This is a problematic assertion even if the acts in question were thought to be divinely inspired simply because no such human actions are capable of making God known to us since only God can reveal God. It is crucial to realize here that seeking dogmatic certainty could never steer us toward theological totalitarianism if it *begins* and *ends* with Christ himself.

Torrance captured this perfectly when he noted that we must never "transfer the centre of authority from the objective revelation of God to ourselves" and that it is only when we recognize the "ultimate authority of the Supreme Truth over all other authorities" that there is "freedom for the faithful, for it makes us to know the truth finally out of itself and by its grace alone, and demands of us an obedience that transcends our respect for the authoritative institutions of the Church."¹⁵⁶ Torrance then asserts that it is only when these institutional authorities are subordinated to the "Supreme Truth" of God himself that they avoid being "authoritarian tyrants" and become instruments of the truth itself. Still, the Spirit always directs us away from the institutional teaching of the Church to "the one Truth of God revealed and incarnate in Jesus Christ, in order that it may serve that

¹⁵² Ibid., 167.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 168.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, "Truth and Authority: Theses on Truth," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (3), 240, 242.

Truth in such a way that it is allowed to retain its absolute priority over all the Church's teaching."¹⁵⁷

The problem here is that Rosario Rodríguez believes that it is appropriate to speak about "human struggles for liberation *as* the historical experience of God."¹⁵⁸ He thinks he can describe the Holy Spirit by exploring the spirit latent in various cultural activities. This can be done therefore "*without* adhering to any one confessional or ideological tradition, which in turn facilitates a certain kind of 'body politic' that embodies the emancipatory practices of spirit in the public arena."¹⁵⁹ On this basis Rosario Rodríguez believes that movements such as the Black Lives Matter movement is one of a number of "'confession-less' yet profoundly spiritual movements of liberation" that "have become the new *loci theologici* ('places of theology') for understanding and encountering the work of the Spirit in history."¹⁶⁰ This means that one might uncritically embrace a movement that is more interested in creating chaos and hatred of the police than in caring for the lives of black persons who are frequently threatened by other blacks within their own communities. And one might also think that Black Lives Matter "presents itself as an emancipatory spirituality for all black lives."¹⁶¹ BLM, he says, "invoked Martin Luther King, Jr." while encouraging violent rather than nonviolent actions in the pursuit of liberation from perceived oppression. Of course Dr. King was irrevocably in favor of nonviolence in the pursuit of racial justice. But Rosario Rodríguez defends the violence of BLM as "'recovering the radicalism of King's methods and message for the twenty-first century."¹⁶² This supposedly places them on the same foundation as Martin Luther King, Jr. However, it most certainly does not do so because he never would have advocated the kinds of violence clearly supported by BLM.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 242.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 169.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 172.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 173.

¹⁶² Ibid., 170.

While Rosario Rodríguez notes that "white mainstream" resistance to BLM has labelled that group a terrorist group, he thinks that "the tragedy of Michael Brown" has, by the Spirit, been turned "into a sacramental encounter with God."¹⁶³ This, in spite of the fact that Michael Brown was not at all innocent, but was assaulting a police officer. Notwithstanding this, movements such as BLM become the basis for the theme of Rosario Rodríguez's book: "The argument articulated in these pages is simple: faith ought not be reduced to human emancipation, but faith without the liberating works of the Spirit has lost all 'living connection to the reality of God.'"¹⁶⁴ The problem here is this: Christian faith is Christian only to the extent that the Holy Spirit, who is one in being with the Father and the Son, is the enabling condition of liberation. And liberation in the first instance means liberation from self-will, self-reliance, and thus from sin and enmity toward God and thus freedom to love God and on that basis love our neighbors. So, while it is true that faith and works do go together, one cannot recognize the Holy Spirit by focusing on liberating works because it is Christ himself who empowers us to be truly free for others in the first instance.

Here we return to the theme of his book: by focusing on "the work of the Spirit in human history—especially through works of compassion and liberation" Rosario Rodríguez offers

a possible strategy for moving past the impasses between *theologies of the Word* that take a fideistic stance on Scripture as God's self-revelation without subjecting their dogmatic claims to external criticism, and the *theologies of culture* that contend that God can only be known through the medium of culture but lack criteria for differentiating revelation from the cultural status quo. The argument has been made that God is encountered in history *in* works of justice, compassion, and liberation, even when the locus of this spiritual work is a body politic not historically associated with any religion whose members describe their emancipatory work without appealing to

¹⁶³ Ibid., 174.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 175.

explicitly theological language.¹⁶⁵

From this Rosario Rodríguez concludes that “*wherever* the work of establishing justice, extending compassion, and facilitating human liberation occurs, *there* is the true Spirit of God.”¹⁶⁶ Since these “emancipatory movements in history” are thought to “embody the divine will for all humankind regardless of confessional or creedal origin” Rosario Rodríguez thinks this supposed work of the Spirit leads to the “notion of history as sacrament” which allows us to speak of “divine agency in human history” so that we also can affirm “the work of the Spirit in the religious and cultural ‘other’.”¹⁶⁷

Here is the problem with this analysis: fideism is the view that Christian faith dispenses with human reason. Hence, Rosario Rodríguez’s claim that faith in God’s self-revelation in Scripture which in the New Testament specifically attests to the work of the Spirit as one in being with the Father and Son according to the Nicene faith is fideistic if it does not subject itself to “external criticism.” Unfortunately, a faith that subjects itself to criticism external to the Word of God has to mean that he thinks there is a criterion for the Spirit and thus for theological truth and true liberation that is other than and beyond the very Word of God attested in Scripture. While Rosario Rodríguez is right to want to differentiate revelation from culture, his attempt to find the truth of the Christian faith in human acts of liberation finally is unable to do so. Why? Because he has missed the most important point of Christian theology at the outset. To have the Holy Spirit is to be bound conceptually and ontologically to Jesus Christ himself who is the incarnate Word who alone liberates us for true knowledge of God and for spontaneous love of neighbor based *solely* on God’s loving us in his incarnate Word while we were still sinners. It is based upon God’s grace which is costly to us because to live by grace means to take up our cross and follow Christ. To have the Holy Spirit confessed at Nicaea and attested in the Bible means to recognize that Jesus is the Lord (1 Cor. 12:3) and thus to live in union with him by faith. Identifying works of justice, liberation and compassion as the locus of the Holy Spirit overtly confuses the Holy Spirit with the human spirit by

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 175-6.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 176.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

directing our attention away from Christ the Liberator and toward our own works which permit descriptions of "divine agency" apart from and without knowing God the Father through his Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an approach ignores the problem of sin and the fact that living by faith means living by Christ's forgiving grace and not by our works of justice and liberation. Such thinking inadvertently advances a version of self-justification and modalism by referring to divine action in history apart from the specific actions of God in his Word and Spirit.

A proper theology of liberation does not mean pursuing ideologies that promise liberation but actually enslave their followers by directing them back to themselves and their political and social action as the way toward true liberation. Here I suggest that Torrance has the better view. He insists that Jesus himself *is* the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and that no one can come to the Father except through him. He is right. Since Jesus himself is the very Word of God active in history as the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended and advent Lord, we cannot know the truth of who God is, who the Spirit is, or what true liberation means apart from him. He liberates us for service of God and neighbor. Without being united to Christ through the Spirit conceptually and ontologically we will always define truth in a way that grounds knowledge of that truth in us and what we do, instead of in God acting for us within history in his Word and Spirit. That is precisely what Rosario Rodríguez does in the end when he claims that "truth has been defined as an existential appropriation and practical application of the prophetic work of the Spirit to love the neighbor as oneself."¹⁶⁸ Unfortunately, this is just the view of truth that Torrance rightly rejected when he said we cannot love God *by* loving our neighbors, as discussed above. Sadly, having detached the Spirit from the Word methodologically, Rosario Rodríguez offers history itself as a sacrament instead of realizing that one cannot detach the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular, from Christ himself who instituted those sacraments as the way Christians live in and from union with Christ throughout history. Once again, his view of history as a sacrament allows him to direct attention away from Christ and thus away from the Holy Spirit and toward our human actions in history for theological knowledge and proper Christian action. This just misses Torrance's all-

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 186.

important understanding of justification by grace alone and places us in the unfortunate position of having to rely on ourselves to do something we can never accomplish, that is, to live in the freedom which only God can, did and does provide.