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THE SOTERIOLOGICAL SUSPENSION OF ETHICS IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE

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With thanks to the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, I am glad to talk today about T. F. Torrance and theological ethics.¹ While I will mention and allude to how his critics have oddly overlooked him as an evangelical ethicist and basically misconstrued him as an academic theologian who "neglected ethics," I won't repeat in public my critique of their critique I have already published in detail.² I will instead mainly make a positive case for TFT as "the precise opposite" (one of his favorite phrases) of his critics' curious charge that he elevated epistemology over ethics or the vertical over the horizontal.³ I will *prove* (which is rare in theology these days but is still the aim of science and mathematics!) that he displayed an *implicit and comprehensive ethic throughout his entire theological corpus*, which in

¹ This paper was delivered virtually, December 1, 2020, as the Keynote of the Annual Meeting of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, in session P1-103 of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. I am very grateful for Chris Kettler's response and the discussion that followed the presentation.

² An earlier version was published in *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, Vol. 5: "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and Ethics" (2015), 56-90, which I developed into a book: *Fully Human in Christ: The Incarnation as the End of Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

³ See *Fully Human in Christ*, 1-7, for my summary and critique of what I have called "the Webster thesis," given that John Webster initially formulated the charge that TFT neglected ethics and his doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ evacuates or invalidates our humanity.

fact and interestingly even included many *explicit essays on ethics*. I will suggest as a precise counterpoint to his critics that a careful reader of TFT could characterize his *entire theological project as an ethic of reconciliation*.

As a point of method, my sources for today's presentation are primarily based on my analytical exposition of TFT. My modest goal is for you to hear, read, and appreciate TFT as an evangelical ethicist as a theological resource for your own various ministry contexts. Also as a personal point, I will say that I grew up daily as with inner city violence in the 60s and 70s (in Paterson, NJ: "The Hurricane" and "Lean on Me"), and so my own appropriation of TFT today will include commentary on the current chaos and violence in US cities (and hopefully I'll provoke you a bit in a good way!).

While I'm not a fan of theology based on narratives or stories, I will simply say that I trace my interest in theological ethics to my background as a child and teenager in the 1960s and '70s as I encountered the urban unrest of the time in a very violent city: Paterson, New Jersey (the setting for the movies *The Hurricane* and *Lean On Me*). While I never experienced violence within my home, I routinely witnessed it on the streets, in school, and in my friends' homes (who were black and white, Italian and Puerto Rican, etc.; who were all poor (and I will submit that SES is deeper than race; and who all had in common, unlike me, the lack of a biological father in the home). Unlike my three siblings who never made it out of Paterson, I began a new personal and theological journey, which has included an ongoing interest in poverty, violence, and reconciliation, and I have benefited from my studies both in the social and the theological sciences (which would raise TFT's eyebrows, though I do agree with him that the social and behavioral sciences have not had their Clerk Maxwell or Einstein).

Suffice it to say that I made it out of Paterson (even though someone randomly pointed a gun in my face the night before I left town), and when I arrived at Gordon College the following day, it was a whole new world for me, and three things immediately struck me: 1. Just about everyone there was wealthy (irrespective of race); 2. I experienced culture shock on many levels (like being spooked by animal and insect noises in the woods, and many city folks find urban life more familiar!); & 3. I was woefully unprepared for college and had to work

very hard to catch up (and education is a key way to get out of poverty). I studied psychology and other social studies at Gordon and was considering Fuller Theological Seminary's Graduate School of Psychology, but I read Harold pseudo-evangelical critiques of Fuller Theological Seminary as "neo-orthodox" and the like, which convinced me that Fuller sounded like an exciting place to study theology!

While at Fuller, I continued my interest in psychology, philosophy, and contemporary theologies, especially if they were anti-Evangelical! I recall well when I first met T. F. Torrance at Fuller (where he gave a lecture series that later became *Reality and Evangelical Theology*) that he, Chris Kettler, and I sat in the center of campus. I will say that after recently graduating from a Christian college, I had become an unrepentant rationalist who was suspicious of so-called "evangelical theology" or abstract attempts to "integrate" Christian faith and life. So Chris invited me to a personal meeting with TFT so I could ask him about questions on my mind! It felt like a NJ setup, but since Chris was from KS, I trusted he had my safety and well-being in mind!

As we sat in the center of campus, I asked TFT what he thought about Fuller's commitment to "the integration of theology and psychology." He replied to me: "I notice that Fuller's Schools of Psychology and Theology are located on opposite sides of the street"! I thought that was very funny, and it reinforced my impression that a deeper level of so-called "integration" (which is implicitly dualistic!) was lacking in my Christian liberal arts education. Also, my seminary studies neatly divided biblical, theological, and pastoral subjects, and I had started to take courses with RSA (a student of TFT) and GWB (co-editor with TFT and chief translator of KD), both of whom challenged me toward a genuine evangelical theology that's interrelated with church ministry and social ethics.

I also asked Prof. Torrance about a confused comment I had heard concerning his critique of dualism, to wit: "How do you reply to the charge that if you're not a dualist, then are you a monist?" He again offered a pithy and cheeky reply: "Monism is merely one-half of dualism." Unlike others who didn't appreciate TFT's directness, I loved his quick, witty, incisive, and humorous replies as he was starting to encourage me to think more deeply about such facile labels and

categories in favor of going deeper theologically in a more genuinely evangelical way.

Another question I asked of TFT (given that I had heard that Tom was “conservative”) was: “What do you think of politics?” His shortest reply to me of all my questions: “Boring.”

I will include examples of how TFT explicitly wrote about ethics, plus some of my own theological-social commentary as I’ve realized my increasing indebtedness to him, but I will say in advance that TFT was an early influence upon me not to politicize theology but to think more deeply about developing a distinctively Christian social ethic, which upholds the living presence of Christ as the one who assumed and redeemed our humanity with ramifications for the entire moral, social, natural, and cosmic order. I do not plan to preach or prescribe that if you agree that TFT provides a better basis for ethics than how you currently operate, then that necessitates a commitment to this or that cause, unlike the politicized posture of much of contemporary culture and pseudo-theologies. I will give some examples of how TFT in his context addressed moral issues (which I’ve done in greater detail elsewhere) to help us think theologically anew in our own church settings.

TFT did make an immediate and overwhelming impression upon me for another reason. While he had greater intellectual depth than I had before experienced, what was actually and personally different for me: He believed in God with a genuine sense of piety that actually rivaled his intellect, which caused a pause for me since I wanted more but hadn’t encountered it until I started taking courses with RSA, GWB, TFT, and later with JBT too. While taking courses with these my mentors, I was also reading thousands of pages of KB & Co., and it finally occurred to me that I had ceased to listen to the living God in favor of my *a priori* concerns of philosophical theology and ethics!

Over time, I came to understand that for Torrance, *Christ* is the personal ground and ontological basis of Christian ethics. Christ has disabled and discontinued our human attempts to justify ourselves before God and others, and he also has fulfilled what he has abolished on behalf of the redemption of all people — which I will suggest as an alternative to the polarized politics and escalating

violence of our times. Christ both negates our futile attempts to be “free” and “independent” apart from God *and* he overcomes the split between God and humanity that we have effected in our personal, social, and political lives. When God assumed our disordered human nature in Christ, he healed us from within the *depths of our being and throughout the entirety of the cosmos!*

I would like to acknowledge one other informal mentor and personal friend, Alasdair Heron. While we were planning on starting up the TFT journal, somehow I started regular correspondence with him (no doubt because I kept emailing him, but he kept replying, and I was glad that a former Editor of SJT mentored and befriended me as a new journal editor until he died of cancer). He emailed me from hospital about his many thoughts about the journal, quite faithfully so for well over five years, and when I told him about the critical and negative comparison of TFT to KB, wherein the latter was more “prolific” re: “ethics” and the former was not, he simply said: In Basel, KB taught courses in theology *and* ethics, whereas in Edinburgh, TFT taught ecclesiastical history and then dogmatic theology, but “ethics” was relegated to the pastoral ministry division. He didn’t live long enough for me to question him further regarding TFT’s way of including “ethics” in his whole theological enterprise in response to New College’s basic theological dualism!

Torrance’s critics did not get that the vicarious humanity of Christ does not displace our humanity but affirms, restores, and liberates our humanity! Torrance did announce a *soteriological* suspension of autonomous ethics, understood as a human attempt to justify ourselves through moral law, effort, and virtue. T. F. Torrance’s theology did reflect his broad concerns as a churchman, professor, author, editor, evangelist, and minister of the Gospel, who *intentionally* suspended, not neglected, “ethics” — especially understood as a human attempt at self-justification through morality — and instead clearly and explicitly articulated a *Christian ethic grounded in the interrelationship of incarnation and atonement as a reconciliation of all things in Christ*. Contrary to his critics, I will argue that his unitary theological ethic presents an *evangelical and comprehensive ethic of reconciliation rooted in God’s grace*, which encompasses, sustains, and transforms

the entire human and created order and provides an alternative to the politicized theologies and racialized politics of our contemporary context.

Torrance's Entire Theology as an Ethic of Reconciliation

Torrance described his theological ethic as a "soteriological suspension of ethics," alluding to and playing on Kierkegaard's "'teleological suspension of ethics' in the transition from a merely moral to a religious situation before God."⁴ The Son acts personally and ontologically within the depths of our human existence in its estrangement, rebellion, and violence in a vicarious way to assume and redeem our humanity.⁵ Christ's humanity heals our humanity in relationship to others on all levels of life. Following the lead of Kierkegaard as an incarnational theologian (not a textbook "existentialist philosopher," as top SK scholars have argued in our latest issue of *Participatio* — if it's ok to include an ad here!), Torrance treats "ethics" not as a form of autonomous moral philosophy but as a matter of personal participation in Christ based on union with Christ. Contrary to legalistic moralism — which perhaps is the prevailing nomistic ethos of our day and age and also our perpetual attempt at self-justification apart from Christ — TFT favors *an account of justification that places human morality under the cross of Christ in order to reestablish a Christian ethic of faithful obedience and joyous gratitude to our God of reconciling grace.*

The vicarious humanity of Christ means that we may and must rely on his faithfulness to God to uphold and undergird *our humanity*, including (from *TF*):

all my human responses to God, for in Jesus Christ they are laid hold of, sanctified and informed by his vicarious life of obedience and response to the Father. They are in fact so indissolubly united to the life of Jesus Christ which he lived out among us and which he has offered to the Father, as arising out of our human being and nature

⁴ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 160, including n. 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 156, 185.

that they are *our responses* toward the love of the Father poured out upon us through the mediation of the Son and in the unity of his Holy Spirit.⁶

Contrary to his critics, Christ's humanity validates, grounds, and establishes our fallen and faltering humanity as we participate in his covenant-keeping in our place and on our behalf. More of Christ does not mean less of our humanity, which is such a curious mathematical formulation! Christ's faithful and obedient humanity is precisely what makes room for our humanity and places a *higher, not lower*, expectation on us when we neglect or refuse to be who we are and are becoming in him.

Christ's humanity frees us to be human! Because "we rely wholly upon the vicarious faith of Christ and not upon ourselves even in the act of faith ... we are really free to believe ..."⁷ Christ's vicarious faith makes both possible and necessary our act and life of faith. His vicarious humanity sanctifies and informs and reorients our moral order, social reconciliation, and political responsibility, away from moral conformity to an external and impersonal legal-religious code and toward a filial, trusting, and loving obedience to God!

The vicarious humanity of Christ militates against the warring political ideologies of our day in favor of a filial ethic, in which God has included us irrespective of race, class, or gender and has made us new beings with a new status as part of God's extended family. Christ has healed "the ontological depths" of our disobedient and alienated humanity and bent it back to "filial union with the Father." In union with our brother Jesus, we *are* sons and daughters of the Father. Christ has redeemed humanity "out of the depths of our actual existence through the incredible oneness which Christ forged with us in his vicarious humanity."⁸

⁶ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, New Edition (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 98 (emphasis Torrance's).

⁷ Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), cix.

⁸ Torrance, "The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order," in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 238-9.

Because Jesus was and is God acting as one among us, God's reconciling work in the world is a reality and source of our true humanity. The vicarious humanity of Christ bends back our disobedient humanity toward God, so that we may truly and freely participate in Christ's humanity as we live and act in union with him.

Christ's humanity establishes his atoning work in "our human existence" *precisely because* it is anchored in God's own self-giving and reconciling being. The Spirit mediates Christ to us and us to Christ, so that we may actually participate in his vicarious and redemptive humanity. We live in union with Christ by the Spirit, for "Calvary and Pentecost belong integrally together."⁹ Christ's cross and Spirit work together to bind us to Christ by God's grace, so that we may believe and live and act in union with him. Contrary to an unfortunate popular political axiom, "the personal *is* the political," for TFT, "the ethical" is personally and profoundly rooted in a theology of *God's grace* — which is sorely lacking in contemporary pseudo-theologies and so-called liberation theologies that tend to divide up humanity in somewhat and surprising simplistic ways by race, class, and gender — given that politicized theologies baptize various social categories as a context, basis, or precondition for "doing theology" — and thereby constrain, control, and contradict God's gracious and reconciling work in Christ!

Christ's atoning work extends to all humanity and the whole creation, so "that the whole moral order had to be redeemed and be set on a new basis through the atonement." In Christ, we move from personal and social moralistic legalism to a trusting and active obedience to the living God, which is to say from self-will to genuine freedom (a distinction that you'll immediately understand if you're a parent or teacher of adolescents)! Christ heals the very "unbridgeable rift between what we *are* and what we *ought* to be, for no matter how much we try to be what we ought to be we can never transcend that deep rift in ourselves."¹⁰

The atoning mediation of Christ entails, Torrance proclaims, "'a soteriological suspension of ethics' in the establishing of a new moral life that flows from grace in which external legal relation is replaced by inner filial relation to God the Father." By

⁹ Ibid., 242-3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 249-51.

the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, "this new life of ours in him is inwardly ruled by the indicatives of God's love rather than externally governed by the imperatives of the law."¹¹ For Torrance the *merely ethical* is legal, extrinsic, and lived out in a way that fails to recognize the person and work of Christ and our reconciled relationship to God in him as a way to look beyond our own human skin and predicament. Mere morality, for Torrance, must be superseded by the indicatives *and* imperatives of God's grace — and the indicatives *precede and include* the imperatives. In this way Christ fulfills humanity's covenantal obligations to God, with his own filial obedience as the Son of God on our behalf, so that we now may participate by the Spirit as beloved children of our Father. Hence, *we may actually share in Christ's faith and obedience, and through his person and work we may live humanly as his brothers and sisters and sons and daughters of his Father — and contrary to the divisive politics of our current day, we must do so! If you support race-and-class-based politics, which today pits blacks against whites, cops, and local business entrepreneurs, you are re-crucifying Jesus Christ, who has broken down these dividing walls of hostility and in whom there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female!*

Christ's atoning work is not merely moral or political but *ontological* (and the following is from TFT's "Atonement and Moral Order"):

Here the ultimate ground of the moral order in God is no longer a detached imperative bearing down abstractly and externally upon us, for it has now been embodied once for all in the incarnate Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and takes the concrete and creative form of new righteousness that transcends the split between the is and the ought, the righteousness of our Lord's obedient Sonship in which our human relations with our Father in heaven have been healed and reconciled. We are now made through justification by grace to share in the righteousness of God in Christ. Thus we are made to live in union with him and in the communion of his Holy Spirit who sheds the love of God into our hearts, and informs our life with the very mind of Christ the obedient Son of the Father. *This does not represent merely a*

¹¹ Ibid., 252-3.

*conceptual change in our understanding of the moral order, but a real ontological change resulting from the interlocking of incarnation and atonement in the depth and structure of our human existence and the translation of the Son/Father relation in Christ into the daily life of the children of God.*¹²

Torrance believes that *Christ's humanity places our humanity and the whole moral order* on a "wholly new basis" (even in his more theological works, such as from *Incarnation*):

In Jesus Christ, God has intervened decisively in the moral impasse of humanity, doing a deed that humanity could not do itself. That impasse was not simply created by the inability of human beings to fulfill the holy demands of the law and justify themselves before God, but created by the very nature of the (moral) situation of man before God, so that it could not be solved from within itself as demanded by the law. Thus the intervention by God entailed a complete reversal of the moral situation and the setting of it on a wholly new basis ... as sheer gift of God's grace which is actualized in them as reality and truth.¹³

Christ's atoning work effects and announces "the great change and renewal of all things," "the whole of creation," and "*cosmic peace*."¹⁴ It is not merely a personal or private affair because it extends in and throughout all strata of human life, including and transforming historical and horizontal existence. In Torrance's words (from *Atonement*):

Hence we must think of the reconciling work of God in the cross, not only as once and for all completed and effected, but as travelling within and through our historical existence, as it were, as continually

¹² Ibid., 254; emphasis added.

¹³ Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. R. T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 107.

¹⁴ Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. R. T. Walker (Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2009), 168-9.

operative in reconciling intervention within history and all the affairs of humanity, and in the whole cosmos — *Immanuel*, God almighty with us in the midst of history, bearing all its sin and shame in his holy love, for he has already gathered it up upon himself.¹⁵

All things are reconciled in Christ as “God’s presence in sheer grace” breaks into the fallen cosmos, “so that not only human life but the whole of creation has been set on a wholly new basis.”¹⁶

God’s reconciling work and personalizing presence penetrates and transforms the social spheres and horizontal domains of human life (also from *Atonement*):

For humanity, the redemption of the cross involves at the same time reconciliation of man with fellow man, of all men and women with each other, and particularly of Jew and Gentile, for the middle wall of partition has been broken down and God has made of them one new man in Christ Jesus. The word of the cross is not that all men and women are as a matter of fact at one with one another, but that such at-one-ment is achieved only in desperate and crucial action, through atonement in the death and resurrection of Christ. But because that has been finally achieved in Christ, the cross cuts clean across the divisions and barriers of the fashion of the world and resists them. It entails a judgement upon the old humanity of Babel and the proclamation of the new humanity in Christ Jesus which is necessarily one and universal. That becomes evident in the Christian church, whose function is *to live out the atonement in the world*, and that means to be in the flesh the bodily instrument of God’s crucial intervention.¹⁷

Reconciliation is a universal event, which the Spirit effects and actualizes as believers become “joined to Christ and therefore joined to a new universal humanity.” Thus the crucified Christ breaks down “all the barriers of race and

¹⁵ Ibid., 170.

¹⁶ Ibid., 195.

¹⁷ Ibid., 199.

language" as he leads Christians "to proclaim reconciliation to all and to live it out, for it is by that same motion of universal reconciliation that he and she have themselves been redeemed in the cross."¹⁸ Clearly our new status in Christ is a call to participate in Christ's transforming and reconciling action, not the curious criticism of "passive inaction"! *We are to be who we already are and are becoming as brothers and sisters in Christ.*

The risen and ascended humanity of Christ raises our humanity to a new status in him in order to participate in Christ's ongoing work of reconciling the world. "The staggering thing about [the ascension]," Torrance insists (and in clear-cut contradiction to his critics) "is that the exaltation of human nature into the life of God does not mean the disappearance of man or the swallowing up of human and creaturely being in the infinite ocean of the divine being, but rather that human nature, while remaining creaturely and human, is yet exalted in Christ to share in God's life and glory." Our new status in Christ does not function "as a flight from history, but precisely the reverse, as the invasion of history by the kingdom of Christ through the everlasting gospel."¹⁹ *The vertical invades and redeems the horizontal:* "Participation in Christ carries with it participation in one another," Torrance clearly and emphatically proclaims, "and our common reconciliation with Christ carries with it reconciliation with one another."²⁰

Torrance advocates an Athanasian-Trinitarian-ontological ethic in continuity with the ancient and orthodox faith and over and against an Arian-unitarian-moralistic ethic (from *Mediation of Christ*):

If Jesus Christ is only morally related to God himself, then the best he can be is a kind of moral Leader who through his own example in love and righteousness points us to a better moral relationship with the heavenly Father ... The Church then becomes little more than a way of gathering people together on moral grounds or socio-political issues ... But if Jesus Christ is God the Creator himself become incarnate among

¹⁸ Ibid., 200.

¹⁹ Ibid., 294-6.

²⁰ Ibid., 375.

us, he saves and heals by opening up the dark, twisted depths of our human being and cleansing, reconciling and recreating us from within the very foundations of our existence.²¹

In the Incarnation, the Son assumes both our human nature as created and as fallen, healing what he has assumed as a prolepsis of our humanity in the crucified, risen, ascended, and coming humanity of Christ. The Arian view, however, more simply, superficially, and self-defeatingly relies on a doctrine of human self-justification (also from *Mediation*):

Thus there has opened up a deep gap in our relations with God and with one another which we cannot bridge.... The human heart is so desperately wicked that it cunningly takes advantage of the hiatus between what we are and what we ought to be in order to latch on to the patterns and structures of moral behavior required of us, so that under the image of what is good and right it masks or even fortifies its evil intentions. Such is the self-deception of our human heart and the depravity of our self-will that we seek to justify ourselves before God and our neighbors ...²²

Jesus Christ, however, "became the humanising Man who constitutes among us the creative source for the humanising of mankind," the true healing, restoring, and establishing of human morality and social existence (again from *Mediation* and worth quoting in context).

Now if from this perspective, in light of the fact that as the Mediator between God and man Jesus Christ is the personalising Person and the humanizing Man, we look back at the doctrine of the Church, we may be able to see more clearly why the Church is not merely a society of individuals gathered together on moral grounds and externally connected with one another through common ethical ideals, for there is no way through external organization to effect personalizing or humanizing of people in society or therefore of transforming human

²¹ Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 61-2.

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

social relations. But that is precisely what takes place through the ontological reconciliation with God effected in the Mediation of Christ which binds the Church to Christ as his Body. Through union and communion with Christ human society may be transmuted into a Christian community in which inter-personal relations are healed and restored in the Person of the Mediator, and in which interrelations between human beings are constantly renewed and sustained through the humanizing activity of Christ Jesus, the one Man in whom and through whom as Mediator between God and man they may be reconciled to one another within the ontological and social structures of their existence.... *The very same message applies to human society, for in virtue of what takes place in the Church through corporate union and communion with Jesus Christ as his Body, the promise of transformation and renewal of all human social structures is held out in the Gospel, when Society may at last be transmuted into a community of love centring in and sustained by the personalizing and humanizing presence of the Mediator.*"²³

Reconciliation is a personal and social, private and public, historical, political, and even cosmic affair because God's humanity sanctifies and humanizes our humanity in its vertical and horizontal, societal and cosmic dimensions. Christ has even redeemed the space-time structures of the cosmos, the actual conditions of our humanity and all that supports human existence (from *ST&R*):

[I]t is necessary to see that the resurrection means the redemption of space and time, for space and time are not abrogated or transcended. Rather are they healed and restored, just as our being is healed and restored through the resurrection. Of course we cannot separate our being from space and time for space and time are conditions and functions of created existence and the bearers of its order. The healing and restoring of our being carries with it the healing, restoring, reorganizing and transforming of the space and time in which we now

²³ Ibid., 72; emphasis added.

live our lives in relation to one another and to God.²⁴

We may now participate in "the life-giving New Man" by his Spirit and through his body the Church, both to proclaim and to practice the reality of reconciliation in Christ within this fallen world.²⁵ God in Christ by the Spirit has moved human moral activity out of the sphere and business of legalistic moral self-promotion into the sphere of God's Kingdom, wherein our standing with God is both *gift* (with gratitude to the covenant faithfulness of the Son whose humanity includes and reorients ours) and *task* (but not a Kantian sense of moral autonomy that reduces true religion to mere ethics). In Christ, we may and must love God from the heart, obey him throughout all of life, and love all our neighbors, both near and afar, as our brothers and sisters in God's Kingdom.

Torrance's trinitarian-incarnational ethic assumes and announces an interrelationship of faith and godliness: of worship, behavior, and thought. As he writes (in *ST&R*),

An outstanding mark of the Nicene approach was its association of faith with 'piety' or 'godliness' ... that is, with a mode of worship, behavior and thought that was devout and worthy of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This was a distinctively Christian way of life in which the seal of the Holy Trinity was indelibly stamped upon the mind ... of the Church.²⁶

The Creator is the Redeemer, who intervenes in human affairs, binds and reconciles the whole universe in himself, and grants a contingent freedom to participate in his own freedom — all dependent upon the genuine humanity of the Son in his oneness of being and agency with his Father.²⁷ The Spirit of Christ actualizes within the Church the whole life and ministry, person and work of Christ, "healing and restoring and deepening human personal being" as "*personalised persons*," both "in relation to God and in relation to one another." The Spirit "actualises among us the

²⁴ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grands Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 90-1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96-9.

²⁶ *Trinitarian Faith*, 17.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 91, 107, 137ff.

self-giving of God to us in his Son, and resonates and makes fruitful within us the intervening, atoning and intercessory activity of God on our behalf."²⁸

Contrary to the highly divisive and specifically racialized terms of our age, which presents a new form of a human-centered prolongation of the Fall and Tower of Babel: Social reconciliation *under the cross of Christ and grounded in the very being and life of God himself exposes the moral order itself for leading us back into legalistic moralism as human agents before God*, and so our contemporary moral contexts need to hear and witness *God's gracious healing in Christ*. Torrance understands Christ's atoning work operating on "the inner ontological relations" between Christ and God and between Christ and humankind, which (from *TF* and quoting in context)

implies that the very basis for a merely moral or legal account of atonement is itself part of the actual state of affairs between man and God that needs to be set right. The moral relations that obtain in our fallen world have to do with the gap between what we are and what we ought to be, but it is that very gap that needs to be healed, for even what we call 'good', in fulfillment of what we ought to do, needs to be cleansed by the blood of Christ.... The inexplicable fact that God in Christ has actually taken our place, tells us that the whole moral order itself as we know it in this world needed to be redeemed and set on a new basis, but that is what the justifying act of God in the sacrifice of Christ was about.... Such is the utterly radical nature of the atoning mediation perfected in Christ, which is to be grasped, as far as it may, not in the light of abstract moral principle, but only in the light of what he has actually done in penetrating into the dark depths of our twisted human existence and restoring us to union and communion with God in and through himself. In this interlocking of incarnation and atonement, and indeed of creation and redemption, there took place what might be called a 'soteriological suspension of ethics' in order to reground the whole moral order in God himself.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 190, 230, 249.

²⁹ Ibid., 160-1.

For the “suspension” of ethics, for Torrance, provides a permanent *transformation* of the very grounds and categories of moral decision-making and action and a *disruption* of our epistemological and ethical categories by God’s gracious action in Christ. *God’s grace is the antidote to the politicized, angry, and divisive politics of our day and age!*

While Torrance discusses an “epistemological inversion” required for our knowledge of God, which is based on God’s self-revelation rather than our mythological projections,³⁰ I will similarly speak of a related *ethical inversion*. In place of an autonomous morality arising from a center out of ourselves, Christ reconciles us to our neighbors by relating us to *God*, who is personal, dynamic, and relational. “While the being of God is not to be understood as constituted by his relation to others,” writes Torrance, “that free outward flowing of his Being in gratuitous love toward and for others reveals to us something of the inmost nature of God's being ...”³¹ Torrance insists that we have no life based in our autonomous and self-justifying selves but only in Christ (from *Incarnation*):

Thus in living out to the full in our humanity the relation of the Son to the Father, and therefore in bringing the Father into direct and immediate relation with the whole of our human life, Jesus Christ was the perfect man perfectly reflecting the glory of God, but as such and precisely as such, the whole course of Christ's perfect human life on earth was identical with the whole course of the Father's action toward mankind.³²

Christ as the Son of the Father in the presence and power of the Spirit overcomes the perennial and intractable human split between the *is* and the *ought*. Torrance’s ethic in short, is not moralistic or legalistic but filial! Because Christ is our brother, we are God’s children as sisters and brothers, blacks and whites, rich

³⁰ Torrance writes, “Within the sphere of divine revelation an *epistemological inversion* takes place in our knowing of God, for what is primary is his knowing of us, not our knowing of him.” See *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 123-4.

³² Torrance, *Incarnation*, 126.

and poor, Democrats and Republicans, and many others too who don't fit into today's oppositional categories. Christ's true humanity, God as one among us, is the actual basis of our human-ethical activity in and through the Church. Torrance does indeed have moral antennae, which however are rooted in our filial relationship with Christ in, by, and through the Spirit in relationship to our gracious God.

Torrance's explicit Christian ethic is based on the atoning work of Christ, not on the self-justifying action of the sinner!

I will transition from TFT's implicit and comprehensive ethic of reconciliation (and even there he addressed the whole moral order as redeemed by Christ) to his more explicit treatment of ethics in a way that will be suggestive but not prescriptive. Torrance helps me provide a christological critique of contemporary church and society, and he also provides examples of his own theological thinking about moral issues in his setting. I will offer some personal comments too based on my personal and theological concerns, but I do not intend to offer *abstract and theoretical models of ministry or politicized prescriptions* as much as *paradigmatic pointers to Christ* and an invitation to participate in his work in your own setting (whether as pastor, professor, businessperson, etc.).

TFT's trinitarian-incarnational ethic rests on a foundational axiom and evangelical call to church and society to *hear before we speak* (from his essay in *G&R* "The Eclipse of God"): *Jesus Christ alone frees us to love God and our neighbors* by sharing in his life and our renewed and transformed humanity, "not out of a centre in ourselves ..." Furthermore, "It is only in and through Jesus Christ that man's eclipse of God can come to an end and he can emerge again out of darkness into light," which means "to hear a Word coming to him from beyond which he could never tell to himself."³³ Perhaps churches could plan "silent protests" in public to invite others to join us as we *listen to God*: "For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14, English Standard Version) and sing together in multiethnic witness songs like: "Christ Has Broken Down The Wall"!

³³ Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford, 1971), 54-5.

Torrance continues his trinitarian-incarnational ethic in his brilliant essay "Cheap and Costly Grace" (also in *G&R*): *Christus pro me* frees us from the autonomous ethical enterprise and refers us back "to the objective intervention of God in Christ, a saving act independent of man himself by which he is liberated even from himself, for there is nothing that man can do by way of knowledge or decision or believing that can deliver him from his in-turned, self-centred self."³⁴ As Torrance continues in this explicit essay on theological ethics,

Let us consider then what is involved in justification by Christ alone. It means that it is Christ, and not we ourselves, who puts us in the right and truth of God, so that He becomes the center of reference in all our thought and action, the determinative point in our relations with God and man to which everything else is made to refer for verification or justification. But what a disturbance in the field of our personal relations that is bound to create! ... How different altogether, I thought, was the *ethical disturbance* that attended the teaching and actions of Jesus or the *upheaval that broke in upon contemporary society and law* when He proclaimed the absolutes of the Kingdom of God, and summoned people to radical obedience ... What the Gospel of Jesus proclaims is that God Himself has stepped into our situation and made Himself responsible for us in a way that sets our life on a wholly new basis.³⁵

Jesus healed our self-willed inner being, so that we may be truly and fully responsible for moral action, which for Torrance is truly and decidedly evangelical, for "in Jesus Christ God has already taken a decision about our existence and destiny in which He has set us on the ground of His pure grace where we are really free for spontaneous ethical decisions" toward God and one another.³⁶ Justification by Christ alone suggests a soteriological suspension and categorical transformation of self-justifying ethics (from *G&R* again):

³⁴ Ibid., 58-9.

³⁵ Ibid., 60-2 (emphasis added).

³⁶ Ibid., 62.

God Himself has intervened in our ethical predicament where our free-will is our self-will and where we are 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. It means that God has interacted with our world in a series of decisive events within our historical and moral existence in which He has emancipated us from the thralldom of our own failure and redeemed us from the curse of the law that held us in such bitter bondage to ourselves that we are now free to engage in obedience to God's will without secondary motives, but also so free from concern for ourselves and our own self-understanding that we may love both God and our neighbour objectively for their own sakes. *It is thus that justification involves us in a profound moral revolution and sets all our ethical relations on a new basis, but it happens only when Christ occupies the objective center of human existence and all things are mediated through His grace.*³⁷

Even Torrance's explicit theological ethic reposes on the interrelationship of Incarnation and Atonement! "Apart from Christ's incarnational union with us and our union with Christ on that ontological basis," he warns, "justification degenerates into only an empty moral relation."³⁸ Christ is the very ground and grammar of theology, salvation, and ethics, I submit on Torrance's behalf -- with the *homoousion* as the lynchpin of all of the above! Torrance relies upon Athanasius vs. Arius for his interrelated theological ethic over and against the moralistic vacuum that gives way to political power as is so evident in contemporary US society and culture.

Torrance's recurrent call for an "epistemological inversion" suggests an ethical correlate that turns all political programs and human projects, which today are especially based on anger, divisiveness, and hostility, on their collective head (quoting again from *G&R*):

³⁷ Ibid., 62-3 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Ibid., 64-5.

By pouring forth upon men unconditional love, by extending freely to all without exception total forgiveness, by accepting men purely on the ground of the divine grace, Jesus became the center of a volcanic disturbance in human existence, for He not only claimed the whole of man's existence for God but exposed the *hollowness* of the foundations upon which man tries to establish himself before God.³⁹

I will offer Asheville, NC, where I moved six years ago, as a case study of contemporary Arianism, and I do think Torrance's ethic helps Christians be more constructively critical in our local communities and larger society. AVL is a place where syrupy and self-centered spirituality, which goes by the colloquial phrase "spiritual but not religious," is the dominant "religion" of the town, except it's disorganized and do-it-yourself religion and qualifies for what TFT has called the hollow foundations that humans erect in place of the living God. You can't drive around town without frequently encountering large political placards in front of houses and churches based on an emotivist ethic of self-expression, such as:

"BLM" — which can mean anything from a sentimentalized sympathy to the ambiguous call for "defunding" the police to the overthrow of global and imperialistic capitalism!

"LOVE IS LOVE" — a mindless tautology with which it's hard to disagree, except that it's not God's universal and unconditional love but a partisan political point aimed at so-called "conservatives," "Christians," and those who disagree with how the very vocal locals understand "love" (or related loaded terms, such as "inclusiveness" and "diversity")!

"LOVE OVER DOGMA" — or "*homoagape*" over *homoousion* (with thanks to JBT for the term "*homoagape*")! After I moved to Asheville, I taught for a local Christian college while a professor was on sabbatical, and I saw this sign in front of a church while driving to my 8 AM class. I asked my students if anyone saw any irony in this proclamation of LOVE OVER DOGMA, and a freshman at 8 AM shouted out: "That *is* their dogma!"

³⁹ Ibid., 66 (emphasis added).

When I moved to Asheville, I emailed the local university's religious studies dept. to see if there was interest in my serving as an adjunct to teach Christian theology and ethics. The Head of the dept. replied to inform me that as a public university that they were bound to conform to "the constitutional mandate for 'the separation of church and state'"! I informed him that that phrase didn't appear in The Constitution but inquired of him, given that they were already offering all kinds of courses in world religions and spiritualities, if he thought that only Christianity should lack a voice in the public square.

An autonomous ethic that's independent of Jesus Christ, to summarize Torrance's point, suggests a sinful self-reliance, but (still from *G&R*): "Justification by grace alone removes from us all false props, all reliance upon external authorities, and all refuge in worldly securities, and throws us not upon ourselves but upon the pure act of God in His unconditional love, so that the ethical and the religious life are lived exclusively from a centre in Jesus Christ."⁴⁰ Torrance does call us to engage in our local and national cultures as we participate in Christ in each of our own settings, and I'm suggesting that we subject current fads and political slogans to christological critique and learn to think theologically and develop theological instincts for what Christ is doing in our contemporary contexts. While eschewing a "self-justifying ethical approach" based on a "loud insistence upon external social relations" — a human-centered proclamation of love which "has at its heart a refined form of egoism"! — Torrance (in his Auburn Lectures of 1938-39) calls us to follow the risen Jesus as he transforms "our relations with others, whether in family, society, or state etc."⁴¹

In "The Word of God and the Response of Man" (also from *G&R*):

We recall that in Jesus Christ the Word of God has established reciprocity with us in the conditions, structures and limitations of our creaturely existence and within the alienation, disorder and disintegration of our human being where we are subject to the wasting power of evil and the divine judgement upon it, in order to lay hold of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴¹ *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 80-9.

our world and sustain it from below, to recreate its relation to the Creator and realize its true response to Him as God and Father of all. That is to say, in Jesus Christ the transcendent Rationality of God has planted itself within the created order where its bounds, structures and connections break down under the negation of evil, in order to reintegrate spiritual and physical existence by setting up its own law within it, and restore it to wholeness and integrity in the form, as it were, of a meeting of the Rationality of God with itself in the midst of estranged existence and in the depths of its disorder. In this way, the incarnation has affected the whole creation, confirming the primordial act of the Word in conferring order and rationality upon it.⁴²

As an example, Torrance writes about abortion (and whether you agree or not with him, it exemplifies his explicit theological ethic without it becoming a universal rule or self-established ethic):

we must think of the human person as transcendently determined in his or her existence as soul and body, which not only constitutes him or her as a personal human being before God, but maintains him or her in relation to him as the ultimate Ground and Source of his or her creaturely order... The human embryo is fully *human being, personal being* in the sight and love of his or her Creator, and must be recognised, accepted, and cherished as such, not only by his or her mother and father, but by science and medicine.⁴³

I will add as a practical point that he distributed this pamphlet on abortion to members of BP! He also spoke about abortion to pro-life Presbyterians in North Carolina, to whom he repeated one of his basic axioms for his theological ethic: "As such we are ultimately to be understood not from an independent center in ourselves, but only from above and beyond ourselves in a unique relation to God."⁴⁴ So he not only challenged members of BP to think theologically about abortion, but

⁴² Ibid., 162f.

⁴³ "The Soul and Person of the Unborn Child" (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 18-9.

⁴⁴ "The Being and Nature of the Unborn Child" (Lenior, NC: Glen Lorian Books, 2000), 11.

he also challenged pro-life Presbyterians to think more theologically as he appealed interestingly to the Virgin Birth (!): "The eternal Word of God become incarnate *was and is himself the metaplan*, the creative and regulative force in the birth of each human being, come among us as one of us to be Lord and Savior of the human race!"⁴⁵

Torrance upholds a unitary view of Christian service in and through Christ on behalf of all humanity and creation: "We cannot hold apart the ministry of love from the activity of science, nor may we pursue our scientific exploration of the universe except in obedience to the God of love." He continues:

If we are to follow this Jesus in the modern world we must surely learn how to apply scientific knowledge and method to such terrible problems as hunger, poverty, and want, without falling into the temptation to build up power-structures of our own, through ecclesiastical prestige, social success or political instrumentality, in order to make our ministry of compassion effective within the power-structures of the world, for then we would contract out of Christian service as *service* and betray the weakness of Jesus. On the other hand, if we are to engage in scientific exploration of the universe, in response to the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ by whom it was made, we must learn to respect the nature of all created things, using pure science to bring their mute rationality into such articulation that the praises of the Creator may resound throughout the whole universe, without falling into the temptation to exploit nature through an instrumentalist science in the interest of our own self-aggrandizement and lust for power, for then also would we contract out of Christian service as *service* and sin against the hiddenness of Jesus in the world.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid., 13-4.

⁴⁶ *God and Rationality*, 163-4.

Torrance thus argues for a concept of order in a way that shows the integral relationship of his Christian ethic with his entire view of theology and science (from *CFM*):

Hence, far from thinking of the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ as in any way an interruption of the order of creation, or some sort of violation of natural law, we must rather think of the Incarnation, Passion and Resurrection of Christ ... as the chosen way in which God, the ultimate Source of all rational order, brings his transcendent mind and will to bear upon the disordered structures of our creaturely existence in space and time.⁴⁷

For the Incarnation of the Word is (*CFM*):

the creative order of redeeming love, and the kind of order that is unable to reveal to us its own deepest secret but can only point mutely and indefinitely beyond itself. Yet since this is an order that we may apprehend only as we allow our minds to yield to the compelling claims of reality, it is found to be an order burdened with a latent imperative which we dare not, rationally or morally, resist, the order of how things actually are which we may appreciate adequately only as we let our minds grope out for what things are meant to be and ought to be.⁴⁸

Torrance, for example, wrote an essay on Anselm as a way of discussing and relating telling and doing the truth. Here we see TFT's interrelationship of the epistemological with the ethical: knowing things *kata physin* ("in accordance with their nature"), which also means knowing God according to his nature and acting in accord with it. He notes the close relation "between telling the truth and doing the truth ... signifying, by word or act, that that which is, is what it is and what according to its nature it ought to be." Truth, then, refers "to a condition of reality beyond itself ... the truth or rightness of that to which it refers," from which "there

⁴⁷ Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order, and Openness in Theology and Natural Science* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 21.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

derives a universal obligation for things to be true . . . for truth is a demanded form of rightness: a thing is true not only when it is what it is but when it is rightly what according to its nature it ought to be." Moral action is both rational and voluntary (not the former over the latter as his critics misread TFT), "for only when the mind and will act together can the rightness of will be fulfilled for its own sake." In short, "[T]he rightness of sanctification depends on the rightness of its *end* and its *object*, of its *why* and its *what*, which are determined for it by an objective correctness ..." and through which we participate "in the Supreme Truth or Supreme Rightness of God."⁴⁹

TFT explicates *contingent order and freedom*, wherein the "independence of the world depends entirely upon the free creative act of God," which allows "a methodological turning away from knowledge of God" and yet: "The mystery of contingency cannot be grasped or thought out within the framework of the latent processes of the contingent world or their inherent lawfulness: its deepest secret lies outside its own reality" ... "for as soon as the dependence of the universe upon the Creator is pushed aside, the independence of the world tends to arrogate to itself the status of a wholly self-supporting and self-explaining necessary system" (41).⁵⁰ And so, *the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ announces a theology of grace in a way that* "God moves out of himself to become one with his creatures, while remaining what he is in all his eternal constancy as God," so that "the ontological and epistemological [and I'll add "ethical"] situation has been altered," *and therefore the interrelationship of incarnation and atonement as the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ announces a contingent order and freedom*, so that "the natural axis of the universe is to be found not within the universe itself ... but in its relationship to God its transcendent Creator" (69f.).⁵¹

Torrance wrote an entire monograph on law, which I mention as an example of how he did explicitly relate his Christian ethic well beyond the walls of the church even into the very structures of society. In JL&PL, he criticizes "modern ethics

⁴⁹ Torrance, "The Ethical Implications of Anselm's *De Veritate*," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 24 (1968), 309-11.

⁵⁰ *Divine and Contingent Order*, 35f., 41

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 65, 115, 69f.

where the norms of behaviour are tracked back to mere convention and social utility, without any claim that they are objectively grounded in being or constrained by an order in the rational nature of things independent of ourselves” – e.g., the lack of a “deeper and more enduring foundation that we have allowed in our legal science or in our political constitution. We need to rediscover the ontology of juridical law,” rather than a legal positivism that practices “the ontological uprooting of moral and judicial law from its objective ground in the Ultimate Truth and Rightness of God himself.” Modern legal theory too often relies upon “a moral positivism, as ethical principles and concepts uprooted from their ontological grounds tend to be treated as little more than traditional arrangements ... ” – unlike modern physical science which “has moved from a positivist to a realist outlook ...”⁵²

Similar to his essay on Anselm and ethics, he argues that legal science must think and behave “strictly in accordance with the nature of things.” Similar to his essays on abortion, he bases the true nature of law on “the ontological substructure of personal and social relations” or “person-constituting relations,” such as the human family which is “governed by mutual sharing, love and concern.” This “ontological structure of interpersonal human relations ... points all human law-making beyond itself to a normative source and self-sufficient ground in Almighty God.”⁵³

Our contemporary society does not point “beyond itself” but is *incurvatus in se*, even as it shouts in the streets its moral and social ideals (whether for or against “BLM”!) – and *shouting* at each other violates COVID protocol, even if you’re wearing masks and staying 6’ apart! Torrance quotes his friend Polanyi that “moral perversion” feeds upon “moral perfectionism”⁵⁴, and so one can rationalize even violence in the name of “social justice”! The various politicized and adjectival pseudo-theologies of our day baptize a “natural axis” (especially today of race and class) in contradiction to Christ in whom we are one and so throw people back upon themselves). Instead, God our Father relates us to himself “in his grace so that our

⁵² Torrance, *Juridical Law and Physical Law: Toward a Realist Foundation for Human Law* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), ix-x, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 28, 41-5, 53.

⁵⁴ *D&CO*, 90.

relation to him correspondingly takes the form of freedom and faith"⁵⁵! We may thus be "saved from [our] diseased self-reference" as we confess the incarnation, which means that God has presented himself to us "in an entirely new way" in a way that "makes our creaturely existence his own"; and acknowledge the cross and resurrection because they mean that "God has refused to hold himself aloof from the violence and suffering of his creatures" and "that all creation with which God allied himself so inextricably in the incarnation has been set on the entirely new basis of saving grace."⁵⁶

Christ sends his Church into our world of "disharmony and dissension" with "deep divisions" socially, culturally, and racially and "sharp political and ideological confrontations" to "proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation, live the reconciled life, and be a reconciling community." "Reconciliation in the Church means living out together the reconciled life" in Christ, and yet division within the church "is a fearful blasphemy" that "implies a divided Christ."⁵⁷

Torrance's essays in *Gospel, Church, and Ministry* offer a personal glimpse of the man who was first and foremost a minister of the Gospel, include several of his explicit essays on theological ethics (including one of his best, "Service in Jesus Christ"), and can help us focus on the church's distinctive role in society. Regarding parish ministry, Torrance practiced the interrelationship of the proclamation of the Gospel and pastoral visitation, and likewise later, his theology lectures and the personal power of the Gospel. For example, Torrance had weekly dinner and discussion with his parishioners, who considerably helped him relate the Gospel to daily life and work. In a monthly study with parishioners of the Sermon on the Mount, Torrance recalled how one parishioner raised his farm workers' salaries above the government standard, which increased the prosperity both of the farmer and of his workers.⁵⁸ Service in Jesus Christ by his body the Church *exceeds*, not displaces, government standards and programs, and I think the essays in this book

⁵⁵ Ibid., 105-108.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 133-38.

⁵⁷ *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans), 21-2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 35, 50.

could be helpful to church pastors as they consider how to participate in what Christ is doing in their contexts, especially by listening to informed parishioners.

When the Church becomes merged with society and culture, Torrance warns, its “mild form of Christianity” leaves it with no message to the modern world. The Church should not identify herself with any social order or political regime, “far less with the 'status quo'” (and those who call TFT “conservative” should consider how he didn’t fit into a neat, little political box):

The Church can only be the Christian Church when she is ever on the move, always campaigning, always militant, aggressive, revolutionary... to turn the whole order of State and society, national and international, upside down.... By throwing the social environment into ferment and upheaval, by an aggressive evangelism with the faith that rebels against all wrong and evil, and by a new machinery through which her voice will be heard in the councils of the nation as never before, the Church will press toward a new order. Whenever there is evil in the industrial and economic order, in the political or international sphere so in the social fabric of ordinary life, the Church must press home the claims of the Christian gospel and ethic.... [T]he great task of the Church is the redemption of the world and not a comfortable life in little, religious churches and communities.⁵⁹

The Church is both conservative and revolutionary: the servant of the living God, not to uphold and justify the status quo but to take initiative in society to check the authoritarian State. The Church must recover her distinctiveness and believe again that the proclamation of the gospel is her primary task, refusing to identify with any social system or political program and especially taking offensive action against the status quo.⁶⁰ The Church witnesses to the gospel as it advances “the claims of the Christian gospel and ethic” in all spheres of life: personal, social, industrial, economic, political, and international. For God is ushering in a new order of “peace and brotherly relations on the basis of the Christian ethic” — checking for

⁵⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 76-81.

example the basic human tendency toward a will to power or a focus upon ourselves, and instead presenting to society the Christ who presents himself as the one on behalf of the many to redeem the world.⁶¹

Torrance's Athanasian vs. Arian love-ethic proclaims that "God is the great householder who has come to take control of his own house and family and order it according to his love," TFT proclaims, for "in the whole human life of Jesus the order of creation has been restored." The Christian Church participates in the redeemed order of humanity and creation in Jesus Christ, who took the form of a Servant — "not simply an imitation of his obedience but a fulfilling of God's will through participation in Christ's obedience" by the person and power of the Spirit.⁶²

Christian service, for Torrance, is not an optional matter: "The great characteristic of all Christian service or *diakonia* is that while it is certainly fulfilled under the constraint of the love of Christ it is a service *commanded* by him and laid by him as a *task* upon every baptized member of his body." He continues (in close step with Barth): "The content of the commandment and the content of the service in obedience to it derive from the self-giving of God himself in Jesus Christ the Lord. He gives what he commands and commands what he gives. He commands a service of love, and he gives the love that empowers that service."⁶³ Torrance's ethic is one of obedience to the person of Christ and participation in his work and not adherence to the primacy of moral oughts reflected in the moralistic legalism so prevalent in our contemporary society.

For example, he notes that human mercy mirrors and participates in the mercy of God himself (*GC&M*): "It is the very property of God's nature to be merciful, and in mercy it is that nature that he has come to share with men and women in Jesus, that they, too, may be merciful as he is merciful."⁶⁴ Reminiscent of Matt. 25 (and Calvin), Torrance proclaims his unitary theological ethic:

Hence Christ is to be found wherever there is sickness or hunger or

⁶¹ Ibid, 81-4.

⁶² Ibid., 94-7.

⁶³ Ibid., 140-2.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 145.

thirst or nakedness or imprisonment, for he has stationed himself in the concrete actualities of human life where the bounds and structures of existence break down under the onslaught of disease and want, sin and guilt, death and judgement, in order that he may serve man in re-creating his relation to God and realizing his response to the divine mercy. It is thus that Jesus Christ mediates in himself the healing reconciliation of God with man and man with God in the form, as it were, of a meeting of himself with himself in the depths of human need.⁶⁵

The Church cannot be in Christ without being in him as he is proclaimed to men in their need and without being in him as he encounters us in and behind the existence of every man in his need. Nor can the Church be recognized as his except in that meeting of Christ with himself in the depth of human misery, where Christ clothed with his gospel meets Christ clothed with the desperate need and plight of men.⁶⁶

The Church must resist a two-fold temptation. First is the enticement to use *worldly power to secure success*, "not only to institutionalize its service of the divine mercy but to build up power structures of its own." The Church should nonetheless support on behalf of the poor and hungry "scientific methods in the production and distribution of goods from the vast wealth with which God has endowed the earth." Second is the allurements of retreat into a *spiritual ministry of forgiveness*, which concedes corporate responsibility to the State for the betterment of human welfare. This second temptation, like the first, means "the Church would decline the burden of human need at its sharpest point and deflect the real force of Christian witness, and so run away from the agony of being merciful as God is merciful."⁶⁷ I would add a sociological point modern urban America differs significantly from TFT's parish settings, so that Christian or parachurch organizations can provide specialized ministries (such as KARM and IFHC).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 151.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 154-5.

While Torrance's Christian ethic is not primarily moral or political — and perhaps its greatest strength is its service as a counterpoint to the many politicized theologies of our day! — it is centered on the Church's service *to God in the world* (not to the world!). And Christ calls his Church to a three-fold ministry of service to: (1) believe in intercessory prayer as a direct reliance upon God and as a direct engagement with the world, rather than "frantic attempts" to make its ministry and message relevant, powerful, and successful based on human agenda and standards; (2) practice evangelistic and suffering witness on behalf of all people in their estrangement and separation and alienation from God; and (3) live the reconciled life first and foremost by healing its own internal divisions, which mirror the divisive forces of evil in the world, so that it may "live out in the midst of a broken and divided humanity the reconciled life of the one unbroken Body of Jesus Christ — that is *diakonia*."⁶⁸

One preeminent moral issue for the one body of Christ is what Torrance boldly calls an "'apartheid' between different churches"⁶⁹

Until the Christian Church heals within itself the division between the service of Jesus Christ clothed with his gospel and the service of Christ clothed with the need and affliction of men, and until it translates its communion in the body and blood of Christ into the unity of its own historical existence in the flesh, it can hardly expect the world to believe, for its *diakonia* would lack elemental integrity. But *diakonia* in which believing active intercession, bold unashamed witness, and the reconciled life are all restored in the mission of the Church will surely be the service with which Jesus Christ is well pleased, for that is the *diakonia* which he has commanded of us and which he has appointed as the mirror through which he reflects before the world his own image in the form of a Servant.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 161.

Christ “does not override our humanity but completes, perfects, and establishes it,” especially in light “of bringing Christian understanding of the personal relations within the Holy Trinity to bear upon social relations and structures ...”⁷¹ The vicarious humanity of Christ, very far from “invalidating” human being and agency, does just the opposite. Christ assumes, heals, and sanctifies our humanity, placing “all our human life and activity before God,” “under the judgment of the cross ... our goodness as well as our badness,” and redeeming and reorienting the ontological depths of our humanity through his true humanity.⁷² Torrance does indeed affirm an intrinsic and integrated relationship between what Christ has done as one among us, in our place and on our behalf, creating a new and transformed basis for human morality, interpersonal relations, social structures, and the created order, which invites us beyond legalistic moralism and partisan politics to christological critique and confession in society and transformation within the church.

For example, Torrance began writing on women in ministry in the early 1960s and published his “The Ministry of Women” in 1992, which shows how long TFT has been addressing moral issues and also could also serve as a close analogy to today’s renewed racialized politics. The call and ordination of women for the ministry of the Gospel, for Torrance, is based on an evangelical egalitarianism that presupposes the “radical change” effected in Christ — i.e., “the old divisions in the fallen world have been overcome in Christ and in his Body the Church,” a reversal and “healing of any divisive relation between male and female.”⁷³

Torrance argues concretely and forcefully:

Thus any preeminence of the male sex or any vaunted superiority of man over woman was decisively set aside at the very inauguration of the new creation brought about by the incarnation. In Jesus Christ the order of redemption has intersected the order of creation and set it

⁷¹ Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994), 13, 26.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 30, 35, 59.

⁷³ Torrance, *The Ministry of Women* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1992), 3-5.

upon a new basis altogether. Henceforth the full equality of man and woman is a divine ordinance that applies to all the behavior and activity of 'the new man' in Christ, and so to the entire life and mission of the Church as the Body of Christ in the world.⁷⁴

[I]n view of this representative and substitutionary nature of the sacrifice of Christ, to insist that only a man, or a male, can rightly celebrate the Eucharist on the ground that only a male can represent Christ, would be to sin against the blood of Christ, for it would discount the substitutionary aspect of the atonement. At the altar the minister or priest acts faithfully in the name of Christ, the incarnate Saviour, only as he lets himself be displaced by Christ, and so fulfils his proper ministerial representation of Christ at the Eucharist in the form of a relation 'not I but Christ,' in which his own self, let alone his male nature, does not come into the reckoning at all. In the very act of celebration his own self is, as it were, withdrawn from the scene.⁷⁵

Christological Critique and Conclusion

Christ took upon himself our sinful and alienated humanity, redeeming and restoring us as children of God and as brothers and sisters in him. He has said No to all of our attempts to undo his reconciliation of all things unto God. He is not captive to political slogans that divide instead of unite, such as Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter, for Christ as Reconciler breaks down these dividing walls of hostility. The Jewish man Jesus has taken on our humanity — in all of its racial, ethnic, historical, economic, and geographical diversity — and both judges and heals it. He says No to our ongoing attempt to erect and perpetuate barriers of anger, hatred, and bigotry, and he says Yes to his Father's mission to reconcile all things, all peoples, and all cultures *in him*. *Christ's humanity matters*, and our lives matter more, not less, as we receive our true humanity in him by the gift of his Spirit.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 12.

TFT's Christian ethic dispels theology made in our own image on behalf of this cause or another and instead considers what the Word of God is doing in our world, which suggests filial relations over and against the political divisiveness that dominates current public discourse. Therefore, a theological starting point is not whether we are black vs. white, pro- or anti-cops, well-to-do or underprivileged, one of the "oppressed" or "oppressors" (a very fluid category that significantly overlooks SES in our contemporary context), etc. If the Christian Church believes and participates in Christ's reconciling ministry in the world, it would pray and call for an end to the public pitting of blacks vs. whites, which contradicts that Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility, and black communities vs. police departments, which puts the poor, whether they be black or white, in vulnerable situations to increased violence and aggression.

And so the Church has a vital role in today's society to proclaim and point to the preeminence of Christ, both in church and society, which means to live by and attest to *God's grace* as the Christian alternative to the racialized politics and the politicized pseudo-theologies of our day and age.

Consider a case study of the city of Seattle, which like other US cities has been beset by the violence and suffering of God's children. If you're not familiar with the case study method, it presents a fact-based situation in an open-ended way that calls for the audience's response. (If you teach theology and would like a more creative teaching tool, consider for example the case of Karl Barth: Should he in his public teaching role start classes with a state-mandated salute to Hitler on utilitarian grounds or refuse to do so because it violates the First Commandment?) A case study approach does allow one to go suggestive and not prescriptive as one deals with the reality of a situation, and Seattle with its mayor, city council, and chief of police are one of the case circumstances in contemporary society:

Seattle's Mayor, Jenny Durkan, ordered former Chief of Police Carmen Best to cede public space to what peaceful protesters announced as a "cop-free zone" and she dubbed a "summer of love" (which she later said was in jest and yet admitted was a matter of poor word choice). Eventually, rioters and looters wreaked havoc and killed innocent people (including a teenager) and protesters occupied space in front of the mayor's private residence. So a possible question for later:

What would Seattle's mayor and city council do (and I can tell you what actually happened)?⁷⁶

Meanwhile, Pastor Donn T. of the AME Zion Church of Seattle and Pastor Todd S. of Seattle Anglican Church, who had been friends and colleagues for many years and read and discussed TFT together, planned a joint church service of reconciliation in Christ, which would include hearing God's Word (e.g., Eph. 2:14) and singing choral songs (e.g., "Christ Has Broken Down The Wall"). They requested a meeting with Carmen Best in order to plan an appropriate place where she and her police officers could be included, and they could provide basic safety and security for parishioners, local residents, and businesses. Pastor Donn and Pastor Todd left unresolved the question: Should we include Holy Communion as a joint act of participation and reconciliation in Christ our one Lord or observe our Lord's admonition first to deal with our alienated brothers and sisters before returning to the altar? (The two pastors disagreed, which we can return to later if it's of interest.)

Todd S. concluded the service by plagiarizing a TFT sermon (using an excerpt from a sermon he delivered in St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh) on the preeminence of Christ as "the one Mediator of reconciliation":

"3. *Christ is the one Mediator of reconciliation.* If all things were created by Christ and for him, *then he alone can unite them*, when evil threatens to disintegrate them - whether they are things in (on) earth or in heaven, things visible or invisible. If all the fullness of God dwells in Christ and *he* has made peace through the blood of his Cross, then what we have here is a *cosmic peace*. There are no differences under heaven, or even in heaven, which do not fall under the reconciling

⁷⁶ Mayor Durkan recanted, but Seattle City Council later and nonetheless approved deep "defunding" cuts to the police dept. (\$3 million), which resulted in the massive attrition of young cops with racial diversity and sensitivity training and led Carmen Best, an African American woman, to resign. Here's a thought for Seattle: Defund police *unions*, which defend bad cops with seniority and rehire the younger police force that the former Chief of Police thought were more suited to contain the chaos in their city and build better relationships with its residents (and I'd add business owners too, given the long-term devastating consequences for a community when local businesses are destroyed while the police force is disempowered to protect a local community).

power of Christ and his Cross. Even the visible and the invisible realities are reconciled to one another.

If this is the Christ whom we preach, the one Mediator of reconciliation through the blood of the Cross, how can we preach that Gospel, unless we are prepared to act out that reconciliation in our own lives and bodies, and so refuse to let divisions among us give the lie to the Gospel with which we are entrusted?

Let us listen to the words of Jesus himself: 'If you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave there your gift and go your way, *first be reconciled to your brother*, and then come and offer your gift'.

Are we ready to let this govern our relations with other Churches, even to govern Holy Communion in our own Church as well as inter-communion with other Churches? - first go and be reconciled with your brother'.

Are we ready to let this reconciliation affect also our social and national life, so to set Christ and his Cross in the midst of all that divides us, that he may heal our wounds, unite and bind us together in one Body until every wall of partition is demolished by the Cross?

... *Come*, let us put the love of God incarnate in Christ in all his creative power, with healing and compassion and reconciliation unbounded, absolutely first in all we think and do; and to him, with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory for ever and ever. Amen."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ From a sermon "The Pre-eminence of Jesus Christ," given by TFT in St. Giles' Edinburgh, May 24, 1977, *Expository Times* 54f.

PRACTICAL POINTS FOR DISCUSSION ON CHURCH IN SOCIETY:

My last job was Director of Education for a healthcare corp. (and when you earn a PhD in theology, it's wise to train broadly and do contingency planning for unanticipated career paths and spheres of service). I was hired to oversee school for troubled teens in residential treatment in a way that would overcome the daily chaos and violence of students afflicted with mental health issues, chemical dependencies, and violent criminal records and would integrate school within the overall context of clinical treatment. During my job interview with the CEO, he asked me for my diagnosis of why their teenage patients were out of control not only in school but throughout their whole hospital setting. I said, "The adults are not in charge or providing the kind of structure that adolescents need, and the more troubled and chaotic kids are, the more all adults need to get onto the same page in order to provide a tighter structure, which will contain chaos, reduce physical restraints, and care in a deeper way than letting kids 'express themselves.'"

Our contemporary society needs greater structure (as we have seen in Seattle and many other chaotic cities), and I'll comment on the church's unique role vis-a-vis society: The Church of Jesus Christ should offer intercessory prayer for social healing and reconciliation; proclaim Christ as the one breaks down and heals barriers between us; and practice what we preach on several levels of ecclesial existence:

**intrachurch:* proclaiming Christ as The One who demolishes our ongoing Towers of Babel and continued walls of hostility; confessing how we re-crucify Jesus Christ in our collective life; and living the reconciled life ourselves in our local church communities;

**interchurch:* especially if local churches would challenge and overcome denominational, ethnic, and racial divisions, including offering an alternative to BLM vs. ALM as they confess together Jesus' Sonship to the Father as a filial bond between blacks and whites, which is sadly unlikely, even though TFT wanted as much as anything to live and act as the one, not the broken, body of Jesus Christ;

**parachurch*: with specialized ministries in Jesus' name and with a focus on SES more so than race — e.g., when I lived in Knoxville, I thought it important to support *Knoxville Area Rescue Ministries*, a Christian social outreach ministry that provides food and shelter, personal and healthy relationships, job training, Christian worship and Bible study (which disqualifies it from United Way funds!), and in short, holistic and comprehensive services toward overcoming the cycle of poverty and on behalf of personal restoration and wholeness; & *InterFaith Health Clinic*, which is an ecumenical and interfaith effort to provide comprehensive medical and wellness services to the working poor, who are among the most vulnerable because they're not poor enough to qualify for Medicaid or have good enough jobs to qualify for private insurance;

**and extrachurch* — e.g., through personal relationships, such as when Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon and instructed the latter to receive the former as a Christian brother and partner in the faith, which about 2000 years ago profoundly undercut the very foundations of slavery, even and especially in a time when slavery was customary. If I were a church pastor in an area with chaos and violence on the streets, I'd develop professional relationships and call a meeting with church, police, business, and political leaders.

And so re: BLM, a *stronger relationship* with a local police presence in violent neighborhoods is vital for the most poor and vulnerable, including the basic need for safety and security where gang and gun violence has overtaken areas; the restoration of order, including preventing the destruction of local businesses in inner cities that represents long-term damage to people, families, and business owners in those communities (and the talk about African Americans as especially vulnerable to COVID elevates race over the deeper matter of SES since comorbidity factors such as obesity and other health conditions are most highly correlated with COVID, and so economic improvement is important for the health of all people irrespective of race); and COVID is a concern too with public protests!

COVID: language and science

"Social distancing" is imprecise language and the last thing that all of us need! More precise language would be "physical distancing" and "distant

socializing.” The 6’-rule is a public slogan that assumes asymptomatic exposure and overlooks variables, like that coughs propel droplets up to 50 MPH and sneezes up to 250 MPH! So if you’re singing in the choir or protesting on the streets with someone who is symptomatic, 6’ of physical distance might not protect you, even if wearing a mask and washing your hands! BLM public protests violate basic COVID protocol, which states allowed while they outlawed church worship services! The unfortunate language of “social distancing” overlooks our basic human need to do the opposite: human connection while we figure out ways to protect ourselves and our loved ones through “physical distancing” and “distant socializing,” especially since loneliness and social isolation have now been identified as a higher morbidity factor than obesity.