

## **THE VICARIOUS HUMANITY OF CHRIST AND THE SACRAMENTAL ACTION OF THE CHURCH:**

### **The Promise of Social Ethics in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance**

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**Abstract:** *Thomas F. Torrance's thought on social ethics is not developed as an independent area of theology but is alluded to in his trinitarian theology and Christology. The concept of the vicarious humanity of Christ is key to our understanding of how Torrance derives social ethics from trinitarian theology and Christology. Just as for Torrance, Christ's vicarious humanity is the creative source of not only redemption but also personalization, which enables us to have personal relations with God and other humans and sincerely follow moral obligations and order in society; it is of both soteriological and practical significance. Moreover, since the personalizing person of Christ is present and his personalizing work is continuous in the church and its sacramental action, for Torrance, the church's participation in Christ through the Spirit becomes a means of grace to fulfill its mission, that is, a communion of reconciliation amidst a distorted and divisive society. This reflects Torrance's theological approach to the particular social ethics of the church.*

## 1. Introduction

In the theology of Thomas F. Torrance, the discussion of theological ethics or practice primarily emerges in his trinitarian theology and Christology. For example, the concept of the vicarious humanity of Christ is critical to understanding Torrance's thought on how the sinful and divisive personality is subjected to reconciliation with God in and through Christ, thereby being personalized and humanized. Just as our union with Christ through the Spirit is not only the atoning and reconciling union but also the personalizing union that engenders a transformation from "what we are" to "what we ought to be" in relationship with God and other fellow humans, for Torrance the vicarious humanity of Christ is of both soteriological and practical significance.

Torrance understands that the church is the very locus in which Christ's vicarious humanity continues to work and embodies his personalizing activity on earth. When the church is renewed as a community of reconciliation, people are drawn into the fellowship of those who are reconciled with God, then one another, and ultimately into union with Christ. In this way, the human hostilities and divisions caused by sin in our social and cultural existence are continually healed and reshaped. Importantly, Torrance's social vision through the church does not emphasize the church's social and political action *per se* to overcome societal divisions, but instead Christ's ongoing reconciling and transforming work in and through the church, the body of Christ. This kind of approach to social transformation by the church highlights how Torrance relates Christ's personalizing person and work to the promise of true and personal social relations and structures, an approach different from "exemplarism" that detaches Christ from his work.

Based on the above understanding, this essay will first deal with Torrance's concept of the vicarious humanity of Christ, considering its ethical and social implications. It will then explore Torrance's understanding of the sacramental action of the church, that is, Baptism and the Eucharist in relation to Christ's ongoing reconciling and personalizing work. Through this, the essay will demonstrate that the church's sacramental participation in Christ is a means of grace to create the church's own particular social ethics. Finally, Torrance's thought on social ethics will be compared to "exemplarism" to evaluate the theological practicality based on the

concept of Christ's vicarious humanity. Through this investigation, the essay will argue that despite their positive relational and social implications, the theological attempts of exemplarism that directly use the sacraments and the trinitarian communion for Christian social practice fail to properly focus on the personalizing ministry of Christ himself that is continuous in and through the church, and thus Torrance's Christocentric social ethics can offer a theological corrective or complement.

## **2. The Vicarious Humanity of Christ and its Practical Implications**

Employing a variety of theological, scientific, and philosophical epistemologies, Torrance understands and asserts that human beings are onto-relational persons who subsist by and within relations. In particular, for Torrance, the human relationship with God is a "being-constituting relation" that is the creative source of human relational existence and life.<sup>1</sup> Torrance's theological discussion of human being and life, constituted through a relationship with God, is primarily found in his trinitarian theology and Christology, in which the concept of the vicarious humanity of Christ functions as the ontological key to his understanding of relational humanity.

The term "vicarious" (*vicarius* in Latin) means to "speak and act in place of another, on that other's behalf," which is precisely what Christ did for sinful humanity through his entire incarnational life, including birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.<sup>2</sup> However, it is important to note that when Christ's humanity is regarded as vicarious, it refers to a dimension of being, not just a role, as the New Testament testifies that Christ, not like a human being but as a human being, acted in our place, and on our behalf, offering the perfect faith and obedience to God the Father that otherwise we could not achieve. In this sense, Torrance expounds that the vicarious humanity of Christ means that "Christ in his

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition," *Modern Theology* 4 (1988): 311.

<sup>2</sup> David Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ, Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, and Ascended," *Participatio* Supplement 2 (2013): 102.

humanity stands in our place and represents us," and thus "what is true of him is true of us, and what he did in his (our) humanity is ours."<sup>3</sup>

Torrance explains the ontological basis for relational humanity in terms of two movements in Christ's vicarious humanity: a movement from God to humanity and a movement from humanity to God. The first movement, from God to humanity, is emphasized in the incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation encapsulates the mystery of God becoming human and the essence of grace. In this doctrine, we see the saving presence and action of the triune God and thus clearly recognize the incarnation as a trinitarian and salvific event. Interestingly, Torrance understands the incarnation to not only have soteriological but also anthropological significance. The incarnation is the event that brought about the healing and restoration of fallen human nature in such a way that Christ entered perfect and pure solidarity with us, sinners in his (our) fallen humanity subject to the wrath and judgement of God. As Torrance puts it:

In all this the Son is wholly like us, in that he became what we are, but also wholly unlike us, in that he resisted our sin, and lived in entire and perfect obedience to the Father ... Jesus was wholly unlike us in his actual human nature, for in his human nature he overcame the opposition and enmity of our fallen human nature to God, and restored it to peace with God.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, in and through the incarnation, our fallen humanity that Christ assumed was united with his divinity. When Christ's divinity, which is of the same *ousia* as the Father, and our fallen humanity were united in the one person of Christ, humanity was healed, sanctified, and subjected to reconciliation with God in Christ. In this sense, the incarnation refers to the "reconciling union" of God and humanity.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the incarnation is the ontological foundation from which the true restoration of human existence begins in and through union with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 205.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 64–66.

Torrance states that the incarnation has an anthropological significance that is evident in the theological thought of Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzen, particularly their concept of *theosis*. The Greek term *theosis*, meaning “becoming a god,” is commonly translated as “divinization” or “deification.” According to Torrance, the term was typically used and developed by the Eastern fathers to refer to the personal encounter and relationship between God and humanity, such as human beings created in the image of God, the Israelites invited into intimate fellowship with God, the incarnation, and our union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

The theological discussion of *theosis* primarily took place in relation to the incarnation. Since the incarnation was the locus in which the most intimate and personal encounters and communion between humanity and God were realized and atoning reconciliation was actualized, it is therefore the event of human participation in the divine nature in and through God in Christ. The church fathers regarded the participation embodied in the incarnation as soteriologically transforming human beings, life, relations, and destiny. In this respect, Nazianzen affirmed that “the unassumed is the unhealed; but what is united to God is saved,”<sup>7</sup> and Athanasius stated that the Son of God became incarnate so that we might be made a god, explaining that benefits such as the restoration of the image of God, knowledge of God, and incorruptibility were given by God to humanity through the incarnation:

He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God. He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality... In short, such and so many are the Saviour’s achievements that follow from His Incarnation, that to try to

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1996), 96. According to Norman Russell, *theosis* was one of the important theological themes addressed by the church fathers who reinterpreted the Platonic concept of *theosis* from biblical content. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–2. Regarding the biblical evidence for *theosis* see, Basil Studer, “Divinization,” in *Encyclopedia of the Early Church*, Vol 1, ed. Angelo Di Beradina (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 242.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 164.

number them is like gazing at the open sea and trying to count the waves.<sup>8</sup>

While movement from God to humanity is profoundly revealed in the incarnation, movement from humanity to God is precisely reflected in Christ's vicarious life. Drawing attention to the Pauline statement that the incarnate Christ offered the perfect faith and obedience to God the Father on behalf of sinners, Torrance argues that as our representative, Christ, in our place, for our sake, and on our behalf, offered the Father the perfect trust, obedience, understanding, knowledge, and worship, the full human response that is required in our relationship with God but that we as sinners cannot and will not have.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the whole of Christ's vicarious life that he offered the Father becomes our basic response to God.<sup>10</sup>

In Torrance's thought, it is the Holy Spirit who brings us the healing and restoration of human existence that was achieved objectively or ontologically through Christ's vicarious humanity, making it personally and subjectively realized in individual believers.<sup>11</sup> Through the creative work of the Spirit, we are united with Christ, made partakers in his new and true humanity, and drawn into the fellowship of the triune God. As a result, we are reconciled with God and transformed into true human beings in a personal relationship with God. In the process of reconciliation and transformation, our feeble and doubting faith becomes grounded in the faithfulness of Christ so we can have belief in and obey God on this basis.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the concept of Christ's vicarious humanity provides an ontological understanding of relational human beings and is central to the theological and ontological answer to the question of how human beings can be true to themselves in their relationship

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<sup>8</sup> St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans and ed. a religious of C.S.M.V (New York: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1953), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 145.

<sup>10</sup> Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding his Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007), 113.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke and Co, 1959), cvi–cxviii. At this point, Torrance's understanding of the role of the Spirit in terms of subjectifying the objective healing and restoration is identical to that of Barth.

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 70.

with God and give a faithful response.

As elucidated, the human being who experiences reconciliation and healing through union with Christ is transformed in his/her relationship with God — the transformation of the vertical relationship. Torrance asserts that the reconciled and healed human being now lives out a true personal and relational life among fellow humans — the transformation of the horizontal relations. Thus, the reconciled vertical relationship invades horizontal relations, creating a true relational transformation. According to Torrance, human beings who are reconciled with God live out true personal and relational lives in relationships with others. As Torrance argues, ethical obligations in human relations reveal the divisive character of human existence. This means that the moral structures and ethical behaviors demanded in human relations highlight a fundamental gulf between “the human beings we are” and “the human beings we ought to be.”<sup>13</sup> Although we strive to pursue sincere relations with others in accordance with laws and moral obligations, our fallen human existence and nature deceive us and others and thus result in hypocrisy. Based on this, true personal human relations and a voluntary moral life and practice are considered to be impossible unless the self-deception, hypocrisy, and selfishness of human nature is healed and overcome.

In and through the incarnate Son, however, fallen human nature experienced a “reconciling union” or “atoning reconciliation” with God and was thus healed and transformed.<sup>14</sup> Christ in himself transformed “fallen humanity” into “new humanity,” breaking the rift in human nature and restoring true human existence, the *imago Dei*. In this sense, Torrance states, Christ is a “personalizing person,” and we are the “personalized person.”<sup>15</sup> When we are united with Christ through the Spirit, his personalizing work transforms our impersonal beings and relations into personal ones. This transformation draws us out of our self-centered and hypocritical ways and enables us to relate to God and our fellow humans in a true and personal way.

Therefore, the personalizing work of Christ creates a new moral life and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 69–71.

order. As explained above, the moral behavior required in human relations is externally imposed by laws and morals. The fallen human nature, which is selfish and hypocritical, prevents us from willingly complying with moral demands. Yet Christ sincerely obeyed the Father from within his (our) humanity. His obedience did not result from an external relation and obligation, as legally prescribed, but from his inner childhood relations and love for the Father. In his vicarious humanity, Christ restored our fallen human nature, one that had come to reject and exhibit hostility to God, so that he could offer the Father a child's duty and love in perfect faith and obedience, without unfaithfulness or hypocrisy. In union with Christ, we are called to share his new and perfect humanity, thereby being personalized and enabled to participate in the true moral life and relations that Christ has established in our place. As a result, an external moral life and relation with God and our neighbors is transformed into an internal moral life and relations governed by love.<sup>16</sup>

The personalizing work of Christ extends to the transformation of social relations. Since human relational existence and life restored through union with Christ is situated within social structures, human society and its structures and orders can be continually renewed. In this discussion, Torrance draws our attention to the early church that did not have any program of political involvement or social transformation. However, as Torrance explains, when all members of the church were faithful to the evangelical imperatives of union with Christ, worship, prayer, evangelism, and service, the church had the power to reshape society and culture in its practice of love and mercy.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, for Torrance, the promise of social transformation is rooted in the personalizing person of Christ who is the creative source that progressively transforms society into a community of interpersonal love.

This is what Torrance calls the "soteriological suspension of ethics," an idea that refers to the way in which human relational existence and life is derived from

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas F. 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), 253.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, ed. Jock Stein (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 166–171.



the vicarious humanity of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Torrance notes that since the possibility of ethics in human existence and relations are grounded in the person and work of Christ, theological discussions of ethical thought and practice that develop based on human possibilities in themselves must be suspended. The event of penetrating the abyss of distorted human existence, life and relations and healing and restoring them to a highly personal and relational state was fulfilled in and through Christ. Union with him through the Spirit embodies the personalization or the humanization of humanity. Thus, for Torrance, the vicarious humanity of Christ is the foundation of theological ethics, the ethical inquiry and practice of theology, and the starting point for relational human existence and life.

Torrance's concept of the 'soteriological suspension of ethics' clearly points to the ontological basis of theological ethics, focusing our attention on the ongoing personalizing work of Christ. In this sense, Christopher Holmes argues that Torrance's Christological emphasis reveals the anthropological significance of Christ's person and work as continuing to operate in reconciling mediation. Put another way; Christ is an "active agent" who continues to engage us in his work of personalization, through which we share in new humanity and enter into new and true lives and relations.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, Holmes asserts that the importance and centrality of Torrance's emphasis on the person and work of Christ in theological anthropology and ethics is equally found in the theologies of Paul Lehmann and Kathryn Tanner, critiquing "exemplarism" that excludes Christ himself from his ongoing work of reconciliation and transformation.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, for Torrance, Christ's vicarious humanity and personalizing work transforms fallen humanity into a new humanity, giving rise to personal relations and true moral life and order in society. Thus, the person and work of Christ and our union with him through the Spirit constitute a distinctively Christian understanding and practice for human personal and relational life and society.

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<sup>18</sup> Torrance, "The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross," 238. See also Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 160.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher R. J. Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 23–25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3. The Sacramental Action of the Church and its Practical Implications

In Torrance's theology, in the church we can clearly see the continuous work of the vicarious humanity of Christ. In particular, the sacraments are the locus in which the church is united with Christ, renewed by him, and thus directed to its task of reconciliation in society. Thus, the sacramental action of the church has not only ontological but also practical significance. The church's participation in the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist thereby serves to realize its ultimate telos and eschatological fulfilment, which signifies its ontological union with Christ to become the body of Christ and its movement from *sōma* (body) to *plērōma* (fulness) in the task of reconciliation.<sup>21</sup> Since the sacramental participation creates the church's existence and life or practice in a way that it is drawn into the reception of, participation in, and communion with Christ, it is thus renewed as a community of reconciliation, embodying its reconciled and diaconal life among people.<sup>22</sup> This is indicative of Torrance's theological perspective on the church's practicality, a perspective in which the church's sacramental participation is construed as the creative influence on ecclesial life and practice, serving as a transforming force in human society.

We will now consider Torrance's view of the church's practicality in more detail. For Torrance, the church's take on reconciliation must be deeply driven in the human society in which the divisive forces of sin are embodied.<sup>23</sup> Through the church, renewed as a community of reconciliation, individuals are able to enter the fellowship of those reconciled to God and one another and thus into union with

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, "What is the Church?" *The Ecumenical Review* 11 (1958): 13–18. For Torrance, Baptism is a sacrament that focuses on what Christ has done — justification, while the Eucharist is a sacrament that focuses on what Christ continues to do — sanctification. Although the theological exposition of the sacraments and their characteristics is evident in Torrance's ecclesiology, the focus of this essay will be more on his thoughts on their practical implications in order to shed important light on the practicality of the sacraments. For Torrance's biblical and theological understanding of Baptism and the Eucharist, see Torrance F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 82–138; *The Mediation of Christ*, 89–92; *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 85–92.

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 82 and *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 151.

<sup>23</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 72.

Christ. This has a reconciling influence, not only on a person's relationship with God and fellow humans but also on broader social dynamics and frameworks, as through reconciliation and renewal in Christ, the hostilities and divisions between people caused by sin in human social and cultural milieu are subject to an ongoing process of reconstruction and restoration.<sup>24</sup>

Torrance understands that the church, incorporated in Christ, and even in the deep divisions of the world, develops "a way of organised corporate and public life" that is consistent with the gospel it proclaims.<sup>25</sup> For Torrance, this ecclesial life expresses, realizes, and preserves the church's inherent universality that does not refer to "an exclusive coterie of the few but to an ever-widening communion in which the Body (*sōma*) presses out in expansion toward a fulness (*plērōma*) in the love of God," but instead means that all are gathered in the body of Christ regardless of race, or social or political status.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the church's universality invites individuals into its own fellowship of peace with God in Christ and with all of humanity, overcoming divisive patterns within the human social and cultural context. When the church is incorporated in Christ, its universality as the body of Christ takes place and begins to work so that the divine reconciliation embodied in Christ's vicarious humanity is unfolded horizontally within the divisions of the world into which the church is sent.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, when the church partakes of the Eucharist, the church "must live out in its own bodily existence the union and communion in which it participates in Christ."<sup>28</sup> In this way, in union with Christ, the church addresses the divisions of the world and seeks the renewal of humankind in the reconciling and recreating work of Christ who gathers and unites all things in himself.<sup>29</sup>

Torrance points out that ecclesial practice in the service of mercy to others,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21–24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>26</sup> Torrance, "What is the Church?" 17.

<sup>27</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 21–22.

<sup>28</sup> Torrance, "What is the Church?" 18.

<sup>29</sup> Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 23.

that is, *diakonia*, is determined by the church's sacramental participation in Christ. Through the sacraments the church is in union with Christ and thus participates in the justification and sanctification that he has realized for the church. For Torrance, this union refers to union with Christ clothed with his gospel. Yet this also refers to union with Christ clothed with the needs and misery of humanity because, as Torrance explains, Christ, who achieved justification and sanctification, identified himself with us as sinners in our hopeless misery and abject need. In his vicarious life, Christ made the whole of human misery his own and thus became the *diakonos par excellence*, "the perfect model or example of compassionate service to the needy and distressed."<sup>30</sup> In the church's sacramental participation, Christ incorporates the church into his diaconal existence and life. The church is, therefore, transformed into "the bodily instrument which Christ uses in the proclamation of the divine mercy to mankind and in prompting their responses to that mercy."<sup>31</sup>

It is important to note that for Torrance, it is the vicarious humanity of Christ that reveals the very nature of the divine mercy, which regards the nature of human needs, misery, and suffering above all in the light of soteriology. As Torrance puts it:

What distresses God so deeply as he looks upon man in his fearful condition is not simply his sickness and pain, nor even the torment of anxiety that gnaws at his inner being, but the fact that in his hostility to God man has become possessed of sin in his very mind and is caught in the toils of a vast evil that extends far beyond him, and what vexes God also is that man's existence breaks up under the pressure of guilt in it all and under the threat of the divine judgement upon him. In view of this tragic state the mercy of God takes on a dynamic and creative form in which he allies himself with man... That is why there took place in Jesus such a struggle with evil, a struggle that was waged between God and evil power not only in the heart and mind of man but in his bodily and historical existence, and a struggle to

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<sup>30</sup> Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 145.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

reclaim the existence of man as human being from its subjection to futility and negation.<sup>32</sup>

In Torrance's explanation above, the entirety of Jesus' diaconal life and work is not simply interpreted as "the service of kindness for kindness' sake," but as "a far profounder service of mercy that dealt with the real sting of evil by penetrating its sinful motion and undoing its guilt in atonement."<sup>33</sup> This is the characteristic of *diakonia* that is fulfilled through Christ's life as a vicarious service commanded by him and set as a task by him for every baptized member of his body.<sup>34</sup> This is why the ecclesial community that is united with Christ and clothed with humanity's needs and miseries offers its diaconal service to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. This is the continuing diaconal ministry of Christ in the concrete realities of humankind through his body.<sup>35</sup>

Insofar as the diaconal life of the church cannot be isolated from the organized welfare services of the state, the ecclesial action assumes the joint responsibility of the state and church in meeting human needs. In this respect, Torrance believes that the church's *diakonia* has not only an evangelical but also a social significance.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, for him, the diaconal life of the church is the way in which the ecclesial community reveals its distinctive social ethics. This can only be initiated through the *participatio Christi*, the supreme *diakonos* in his vicarious humanity.

#### **4. Torrance's Corrective to "Exemplarism" Regarding Ecclesial Practice**

As already elucidated, the practicality of theology derives from our *participatio Christi*. Since union with Christ the personalizing person, the humanizing man, engenders not only the personal transformation of individuals but also the personal

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 156–157.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 154.

structures and order in social relations, for Torrance, the vicarious humanity of Christ and the church's communion with him in its sacramental action is the ontological foundation for ecclesial practice in society. In this sense, Torrance's approach to social ethics illustrates what should be the priority in terms of the practical implications and applications of theology, an approach that establishes a new moral life and order not in an autonomous moral philosophy but in Christ's vicarious humanity. Just as this kind of approach considers in depth and sheds important light on the role of his vicarious humanity in personalization, which enables us to sincerely follow moral obligations in relation to God and our fellow humans, it can offer a theological corrective to exemplarism, a theological effort that creates the church's social vision not in its ontological relationship with Christ but in its meaning *per se* in the sacraments, and thus detaches Christ himself from his continuing work.

James White, for instance, argues that Baptism has far-reaching implications for social justice, as Baptism, in which we are made sisters and brothers of Christ and thus neither rich nor poor, neither communist nor capitalist, conveys to the world "a sense of absolute equality," so that acts of love and charity for our fellow members of the church, including the homeless and the poor, are required as "a form of living out our baptism."<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, John Howard Yoder insists that the sacraments shape Christian ethics, in which the practice of breaking bread and drinking wine in the Eucharist itself is "an economic act of sharing," and Baptism is a "social act of egalitarianism," forming a common and equal community despite social, political and economic differences.<sup>38</sup> In this approach, although Christ underlies the church's sacramental action and its resulting ethical implications, the main focus is not on Christ himself but on the ethical and socio-political meaning of the sacraments. Although such theological efforts may facilitate effective ecclesial practice, the undue ethical focus on the sacraments distracts our attention from the primary focus, that is, Christ himself and *participatio Christi*. This, after all, can risk giving priority to ethics, the signifier that the sacramental action might represent,

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<sup>37</sup> James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 71.

<sup>38</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992), 21, 33, 40.

rather than to the person and work of Christ, which is the content, power and reality signified in the sacraments.

John Zizioulas is another instance reflecting exemplarism in ecclesial practice. He suggests that the church that participates in the sacraments shares the trinitarian communion and life and thus becomes the image of the Trinity. Zizioulas explains that in the baptism of the Spirit, the individual person is a participant in Christ and thus is transferred from the “*hypostasis* of biological existence” to the “*hypostasis* of ecclesial existence” in such a way that his or her incorporation into the communion of divine persons takes place in Christ.<sup>39</sup> He further explains that in the Eucharist, Christ makes a single body of the congregation and gives the church a “*testis* in the very life of the Holy Trinity” in which “communion and otherness are realized *par excellence*.”<sup>40</sup> The church is therefore transformed and reshaped as an earthly existence reflecting the trinitarian being as communion in the distorted social forms of hierarchies and developing a “non-hierarchical but truly communal” life and structures based on a “non-hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>41</sup>

It is notable that in his explanation of the sacraments and their attendant social implications, Zizioulas does not give sufficient theological attention to union with Christ, despite his being at the center of the sacraments. As elucidated, for Zizioulas, Baptism and the Eucharist signify an ontological transformation from a self-centered humanity. Baptism is regarded as “a radical conversion from individualism to personhood,” that is, a conversion from “the *hypostasis* of biological existence” to “the *hypostasis* of ecclesial existence.” In this process, the theological weight is not on Christ himself but on the trinitarian communion that embodies our ecclesial being and life corresponding to the trinitarian personhood and life. Of course, the sacramental action of the church gives rise to an ontological transformation from sinful and self-centered humanity, but we must understand it

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<sup>39</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 50–62.

<sup>40</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 7; *Being as Communion*, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4.

as resulting from union with Christ in Baptism and the Eucharist. In this respect, Edward Russell rightly points out that in his thought on the sacraments Zizioulas focuses on “the signifier not the thing signified,” that is, Christ and our union with him.<sup>42</sup> Thus, in Zizioulas’ understanding of the church’s social vision through the sacraments, we cannot properly recognize the true meaning of the sacraments, and consequently, it becomes unclear how our hypocritical and distorted humanity can be healed and restored through union with Christ and live out a truly personal life in society.

Considering the Christological deficiency of exemplarism in theological discussions of ecclesial practice, Torrance’s focus on the vicarious humanity of Christ and *participatio Christi* can be regarded as a theological corrective or complement. If the theological account of the transformation of humanity in and through Christ and of personhood now in union with Christ through the Spirit fails, and thus the church’s participation in Christ is not properly understood and pursued, then the church’s practice is little more than an “imitation” of Christ or the triune God’s characteristics of love, mercy, tolerance, and hospitality.

It is noteworthy that, as Kathryn Tanner argues, social trinitarians, including Zizioulas, fail to see and follow “what the economy of the Trinity itself is suggesting about human relations” when they take the trinitarian communion in the economy as “a model for our imitation” for human relations without deep theological speculation.<sup>43</sup> Although it is the life of Jesus that is taken by social trinitarians as an example to reveal the trinitarian communion for human imitation, it does not simply show us the kind of relations that human beings are supposed to have. Rather, it illustrates the way in which the trinitarian persons relate to one another in the incarnate presence of Christ healing and reconciling us, and then sharing the communion of the Trinity with us.<sup>44</sup> Thus, for Tanner, the trinitarian form of human

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<sup>42</sup> Edward Russell, “Reconsidering Relational Anthropology: A Critical Assessment of John Zizioulas’s Theological Anthropology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 5 (2003): 179.

<sup>43</sup> Kathryn Tanner, “Trinity, Christology, and Community,” in *Christology and Ethics*, eds. F. LeRon Shults and Brent Waters (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–73.



social life is realized not by imitating the personal and relational life of Jesus but by being united with Christ, who still draws us into his trinitarian relations and communion through the Spirit. Importantly, when Tanner derives the promise of the trinitarian patterns of human social structures from union with Christ, this signifies our ontological transformation and its resulting changes in social relations from that union. This is a genuine transformation that has a creative impact on the divisions and distortions in human social existence and relations.

In Torrance's theological thought and language, the ecclesial practice of "imitation" can be seen as complementing what the state may or may not do, or as a retreat into religious, social, and political matters.<sup>45</sup> This is the reason for his emphasis on Christ's vicarious humanity and union with Christ. As explained, for Torrance, it is Christ's vicarious humanity and union with him that justifies and sanctifies the church, rendering it a participant in the trinitarian communion. Torrance, like Tanner, understands that the church's being and life derive not from "*imitatio Christi*" but from "*participatio Christi*," which enables the church to not only be united with God, but also to be transformed as a community of reconciliation, living out its reconciled life in intercession, witness, and service in society.<sup>46</sup> For Torrance, this is indeed a way for the church to have its own distinct social ethics.

Thus, in Torrance's understanding of ecclesial practice, *participatio Christi* is essential not only for facilitating the transformation of ecclesial life with its transformative impact on society, but also for making ecclesial practice distinctive and effective. This refers to "the centrality of Christ" in terms of the creative source of the church's existence, life, and practice and its power to transform human society, an understanding that offers a corrective or complement to the theological attempts to propose a social vision of the church from "exemplarism" or "imitation of Christ."

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<sup>45</sup> Jock Stein, "Editor's Introduction," in Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, 153–155, 158–161.

## 5. Conclusion

We have seen the ways in which Torrance derives theological practicality from the vicarious humanity of Christ and *participatio Christi*. As explained, for Torrance, in and through the vicarious humanity of Christ our fallen humanity was healed, atoned, and sanctified, and thus personalized and humanized. Through the Spirit, we can have union with Christ, the personalizing person, the humanizing man, so we are transformed as a personalized person, humanized man who can sincerely follow moral obligations in a relationship with God and other fellow humans. The personalization derived from union with Christ engenders new moral relations and orders by which the distortions and divisions of social relations are progressively reshaped into interpersonal relations. Inasmuch as the personalizing work of Christ through the Spirit is embodied in the church, particularly in its sacramental action, the church is the very locus to which we draw our attention in thinking of where Christian social ethics begins.

We must keep in mind, however, that Torrance derives the promise of Christian social ethics not from the autonomous actions of the church but from its participation in Christ. In this regard, as elucidated, Torrance's theological approach to social transformation is different from exemplarism. Theological attempts at exemplarism that unduly emphasize the practical meanings of the sacraments themselves or the trinitarian communion and its anthropological and ethical implications for human society run the risk of losing sight of the personalizing person and work of Christ continuously working in and through the church as his body. Therefore, Torrance's Christocentric perspective must be regarded as a theological corrective or complement to this.

Torrance's social ethics, of course, focuses on ontological or hierarchical relations and meanings, while the social ethics that is found in exemplarism focuses on practical or horizontal relations and meanings. In this respect, Torrance can be regarded as a theologian who emphasizes "where" the theological practicality or social practice of the church are derived from, while those who seek social ethics in exemplarism emphasize "how" Christian theology and the church can have a transformative impact on impersonal and non-relational social order and structures. However, if the theological practice in society has both hierarchical and horizontal

relations and meanings, we should understand that this is not a matter of choice but a matter of priority. In this sense, Torrance's social ethics reminds us of what should be the priority in our thinking and acting on ethics, that is, the vicarious humanity of Christ and the church's *participatio Christi*.