

THE EXISTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF T. F. TORRANCE'S CHRISTOCENTRIC THEOLOGY FOR PASTORAL AND PALLIATIVE CARE

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Abstract: *Contrary to popular opinion, rigorous theology should and can prove beneficial for practical theology and pastoral ministry. This essay claims that Thomas F. Torrance's Christocentric and Trinitarian theological enterprise provides a fitting template for such theological-pastoral integration. More specifically, Torrance's dynamic, scholarly analysis involving such emphases as Jesus' vicarious humanity and high priestly ministry made present to us through the Spirit, and human participation in the life of the triune God, affords vital resources for ministers providing pastoral care to the seriously injured, critically ill, and dying. The symbiotic relation of Torrance's work as a military chaplain during World War II with his mature, dynamic, and resilient theological reflections offers a fitting exemplar for those engaged in pastoral theology and chaplaincy ministry. The article highlights the tangible theological significance of Torrance's in-depth pastoral theological offerings, as the author provides holistic care for his minimally conscious adult son who endured a catastrophic brain injury. The same model can prove promising for pastors and chaplains operating in other critical care settings.*

1. Introduction

Proper consideration of Thomas F. Torrance's legacy must account for the practical import of his rigorous, scholarly reflections. This essay highlights the existential significance of Torrance's Christocentric and Trinitarian theology for pastoral and chaplaincy work in supporting people in critical care situations of various kinds. The dynamic, living reality of Jesus Christ, the ascended Lord, who is present to us by God's Spirit, generates an invigorating and critically important feature, what Andrew Purves refers to as a "kinetic quality," for practical theological reflection.¹ This Christological and Trinitarian perspective, which involves consideration of Jesus' vicarious humanity and our participation in the triune God's life, bears upon pastoral care. Jesus is the "wounded healer" in the community of faith and in its chaplaincy work amid the gravely injured and severely ill, as well as among those who are dying. Torrance's work as a chaplain exemplified a robust and rich, empathic Christocentric quality, which is embedded in his mature theological reflections. The article will begin with consideration of Torrance's work as a military chaplain during wartime. It will turn to consider how his work as a chaplain in highlighting the centrality of Jesus Christ and its kinetic quality for pastoral care is on full display in his theological enterprise. The essay will conclude with how this singular pastoral-theological orientation, which Torrance's work exemplifies, has proven to be life-giving in my own ministry, and can prove cathartic and catalytic for others in pastoral care. Drawing from Torrance and others, I will reflect upon the kinetic, even kenotic, cruciform quality of Jesus' high priestly ministry and its bearing on my theological development while caring for my now minimally conscious, adult son who suffered a catastrophic brain injury in 2021. The hope is that this perspective will benefit others in pastoral and palliative care in service to Jesus, the seriously ill, critically injured, gravely sick, and dying.

¹ Andrew Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," *Theology in Scotland* 16 (2009): 23.

2. More Than “Paper Theology”: Christocentric Reflections for Pastoral Care

Torrance’s theology is Christocentric and arises from existential considerations. There is a pastoral quality to his reflections. No doubt, his work as a chaplain during World War II served as a catalyst, shaping and enriching his theology in this pastoral direction. Daniel Cameron refers to deeply impactful encounters Torrance had on the battlefield and with dying soldiers:

At one point his platoon came under heavy German fire and only he and one other soldier made it out alive. These experiences and questions from dying soldiers, such as “Is God really like Jesus?” made him realize the importance of the centrality of Jesus in Christian theology. He became convinced that it is this facet of Christian theology that is the driving force behind the recovery of the church’s identity and mission.²

Elmer Colyer also reflects upon Torrance’s experiences as a military chaplain during the war and the import for his theology: “Experiences like these crystallized for Torrance that Christian theology has to be able to ground one’s existence amidst the most acute moments of life and death. Torrance later called theologies without this kind of existential depth ‘paper theology’ — interesting reading, but inadequate for living and dying.”³

These statements leap off the page and highlight important pastoral theological values. First, theology that is more than the paper on a page or a paper weight will have existential depth. The ink never really dries. It drips with the secretions, sweat, tears, and blood of the most critical experiences in life and death. Theology must guard against featuring the esoteric, abstract, atemporal, and

² Daniel J. Cameron, “Thomas Forsyth Torrance: Ecumenical Theologian,” *Christianity Today* (December 2, 2017), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/theologians/thomas-forsyth-tf-torrance.html>.

³ Elmer Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian & Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 42.

amorphous. Everyday life, including life in the margins and at death's door, must be central to its concerns.

Second, the subject matter of theology must prove a fitting complement to our experiences and be able to ground and support them. Just as the theologian's reflections must arise from and account for everyday life, including critical care situations, the subject matter must show evidence of empathic care and will feature consideration of common, concrete, temporal, and flesh and blood reality. Such subject matter provides a secure basis from which to engage and operate so that the theologian does not utter empty, lifeless, comfortless words in crisis situations.

Third, Jesus is the supreme subject who alone proves sufficient as the secure basis for theology to address our existential need as God's living, embodied Word. Similarly, he is our embodied response to God's living declaration of favor toward us. In keeping with the Nicene Creed and the homoousion, Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity and thereby the proper vantage point for sound reflection on *both* God *and* humanity.

The dying soldiers' existential question, "Is God really like Jesus?" led Torrance to realize that Jesus is central to the theological enterprise, shaping his concept of revelation. For Torrance, following Barth, God is *not* hidden *behind* Jesus. For Barth, God is hidden *in* revelation.⁴ Torrance reasons: "The *homoousion* asserts that God *is* eternally in himself what he *is* in Jesus Christ, and, therefore, that there is no dark unknown God behind the back of Jesus Christ, but only he who is made known to us in Jesus Christ."⁵ Far more than print on a page, he is God's flesh and blood Word to us.

There is more, though. Jesus is also our embodied word that leaps off the page of the New Testament as the fitting response to God's declaration of favor in

⁴ Barth maintains that God is hidden *in* revelation and revealed *in* hiddenness. The *deus absconditus* and *deus revelatus* are one in him. God reveals himself in hiddenness and hides himself in revelation. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 199, 343; Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 136–141.

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 135.

him. Torrance unpacks this dual notion of Jesus as God's Word to us and our word to God in *The Mediation of Christ*. Torrance goes so far as to say the humanity of Jesus Christ is the actual text of New Testament revelation:

The real text of the New Testament revelation is the humanity of Jesus. As we read the Old Testament and read the New Testament and listen to the Word of God, the real text is not the documents of the Pentateuch, the Psalms or the Prophets or the documents of the Gospels and the Epistles, but in and through them all the Word of God struggling with rebellious human existence in Israel on the way to becoming incarnate, and then that Word translated into the flesh and blood and mind and life of a human being in Jesus, in whom we have both the Word of God become man and the perfect response of man to God offered on our behalf. As the real text of God's Word addressed to us, Jesus is also the real text of our address to God. We have no speech or language with which to address God, but the speech and language called Jesus Christ. In him our humanity, our human understanding, our human word are taken up, purified and sanctified, and addressed to God the Father for us as our very own — and that is the word of man with which God is well pleased.⁶

What we see in Jesus is what we get with God. As the incarnate, crucified, risen, ascended, and returning Lord, we have confidence in his identification with us in life and death and victory for us. What we see in Jesus is also what we get with humanity as he mediates us to God as our great high priest. We have assurance in life and death that God really is like Jesus and that we are really like him through our union in the Spirit. And so, we can answer an adjacent question to that of dying soldiers in the affirmative: "Are we really like Jesus?" We have assurance in life and death that he takes up our heart cry and purifies our plea for divine favor as pleasing to God in his "vicarious repentance" bound up with his vicarious humanity.⁷

⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard Publishers, 1992), 78–79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

Fourth, unlike paper theology, Jesus — as the living, embodied, cruciform, resurrected, and ascended Word — is both dynamic and indestructible. The wise and discerning physician of the soul gives himself to us without being lost in the process. As one palliative care specialist and medical ethicist, Robert Lyman Potter, shared, physicians must be “technological wizards” and “empathic care guides,”⁸ remaining distinct and objective but fully engaged with compassion in treating the patient in their vulnerable situation. So, it is with Jesus and the church.

Jesus’s incarnation reveals that God does not remain aloof, refusing to intervene in human affairs as “immutable and changeless.” We also perceive in the incarnation that Jesus is not “detached and separated from” God “and therefore mutable and changeable.”⁹ We find that Jesus became like us in every way, yet without sin, and without ceasing to be God. Jesus assumed our fallen human condition in contrast to an ideal, pristine, human state. However, our crisis did not subsume and overwhelm him. As Torrance writes, Jesus:

took upon himself our twisted, lost, and damned existence, with all its wickedness, violence, and abject misery, and substituted himself for us in the deepest and darkest depths of our perdition and godlessness, all in order to save and redeem us through the atoning sacrifice of himself.¹⁰

⁸ Robert Lyman Potter, “End-of-Life Care: Wounded Healers,” in *Maximize — Don’t Marginalize*, A New Wine, New Wineskins Conference, Portland, Oregon, Week 2, Thursday, April 20, 2022; <https://www.new-wineskins.org/event/maximize-dont-marginalize-end-of-life-care/>. Robert Lyman Potter, MD, PhD, is Senior Scholar Emeritus for the OHSU Center for Healthcare Ethics, Portland, OR.

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 261.

¹⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, “The Atonement, the Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. N.M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 236–237.

The eternal Son, who in cooperation with the divine Spirit, offers himself up in humble, sinless obedience in his solidarity with us. In this way, he assumes our fallen humanity to heal it and make us whole.¹¹

We observe here in these various reflections a kinetic or dynamic and resilient or durable quality to Torrance's theology. We now turn to highlight in greater detail this kinetic feature. Far beyond paper theology, it will be shown to have profound import for pastoral care.

3. More Than Timeless and Faceless Logic: A Kinetic Method for Pastoral Care

Andrew Purves reflects upon the kinetic quality of Torrance's theological work and quotes from *Theological Science*:

His work, rather, had a kinetic quality that was appropriate to its subject, the living, acting, and reigning Lord. "Real theological thinking," he wrote in *Theological Science*, "is thus alive and on the move under the control of the Truth that makes it free from imprisonment in timeless logical connections." Later in the same book, he wrote that "the living Truth requires a *kinetic* mode of knowledge and thought." For Torrance, theology is on the move because it is knowledge of God in, through, and as Jesus Christ. There are no fixed or anchoring points independent of Jesus Christ to which theology might appeal or that might restrict appropriate movement....¹²

¹¹ Torrance discusses this subject in various places. See for example Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 39; and Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ: Auburn Lectures 1938–39* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 121. Refer to the following treatment of an important pneumatological emphasis intended to clarify and support Torrance's position on the *non assumptus* for which I account above: Myk Habets, "The Fallen Humanity of Christ: A Pneumatological Clarification of the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance," *Participatio* 5 (2015): 18–44, especially 43–44.

¹² Andrew Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," 23. The quotations from Torrance are found in Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 154, 209.

We will return to Purves' article later in this section. For now, it is important to note that Jesus is the north star of theological work. It follows that he serves as the compass for pastoral theology and pastoral ethics. The incarnate logos who serves as the mediator between God and humanity addresses people in their life settings through his timely operations.

Torrance's work emphasizes Jesus Christ as the humanizing human and personalizing person.¹³ No deontological construct, utilitarian consequence, or habitual virtuous characteristic has the final word in such domains as pastoral and palliative care. Given that Jesus addresses human persons face to face in space and time situations, we must follow suit. All theological, pastoral, and ethical considerations must account for the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, who comes to us through the Holy Spirit. He is the ontic and epistemic ground for all such considerations. He is God's eternal and timely Word who addresses us fittingly in our hour of need.

As the eternal Word who is incarnate, he breaks through the divide between timeless logic and the temporal situation. As the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, he unites time and eternity in his person. And so, he is by no means a distant human figure locked up in the historical past. There is no "ugly ditch" of history.¹⁴

Now if it weren't for the resurrection and oft-neglected doctrine of the ascension,¹⁵ one might have to accept an insurmountable ugly ditch in history that separates Jesus from us today. But Jesus' vicarious activity was not limited to his time on earth. The great resurrected and ascended High Priest and life-giving Spirit bridge the gap between time and eternity and intercede for us daily. Jesus' entire life work from past to present is vicarious, including his repentance on our behalf and resurrection of our healed human nature in the integrity of his whole person as

¹³ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 47–49, 67–72.

¹⁴ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1957), 51–55.

¹⁵ Refer to David Fergusson's account of the ascension's neglect in modern theology in "The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T.F. Torrance," *Participatio* 3 (2012): 93–94.

the firstborn.¹⁶ The same is true of the ongoing operations of the eternal and indwelling Spirit who works in tandem with Jesus. Regarding the Spirit's vicarious activity, Torrance writes, God's Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, "intervenes in vicarious intercession on our behalf and pours out the love of God into our hearts."¹⁷ Torrance writes about their joint activity of Ascension and Pentecost:

It is as our Brother, wearing our humanity, that he has ascended, presenting himself eternally before the face of the Father, and presenting us in himself. As such he is not only our word to God but God's Word to us. Toward God he is our Advocate and High Priest, but toward man he is the acceptance of us in himself. The very Spirit through whom he offered himself eternally to the Father he has sent down upon us in his High-Priestly blessing, fulfilling in the life of his Church on earth that which he has fulfilled in the heavenlies.¹⁸

Jesus eternally serves as our pastoral, high priestly advocate. Similarly, the Spirit advocates for us. Together they intercede on our behalf.

Paul writes about Jesus' intercession on our behalf in the Epistle to the Romans:

Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in

¹⁶ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 109–110.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Royal Ministry: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (London: Continuum, 1993), 14–15.

Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:34-39; NRSV).

Earlier in this same passage, the Apostle writes about the Spirit's unique intercessory work: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Romans 8:26-27; NRSV).

Further to the dying soldiers' question, "Is God really like Jesus?" for which the answer is "Yes," one can again expect a favorable response to the question, "Are we really like Jesus?" "Yes," not because of moral gymnastics on our part, but Jesus' vicarious elevation of us through the Spirit. "Yes," not because of some formulaic prayer we offer, but based on Jesus' eternal advocacy and the Spirit's equally vicarious activity and unceasing intercession involving mysterious groans that God alone comprehends.

We now return to Purves' article where he reflects upon this same kinetic mode of theological thinking in keeping with God's activity. Jesus is "the mediating center of revelation."¹⁹ For Torrance, as stated earlier, God really is made known to us *in Jesus*. God is *not behind* Jesus' back, as if there were some "dark unknown,"²⁰ or operating according to a timeless logic.²¹ As is true of Barth's theology, "God is greater than what he is in revelation, though not different from it."²²

Moreover, God does *not operate above* Jesus, or *above* us, but *within* humanity as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. Purves points out that for Torrance, "atonement takes place within Jesus Christ, in the ontological depths of his incarnate life in such a way that the incarnation itself is essentially

¹⁹ Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," 26.

²⁰ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 135.

²¹ Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," 154.

²² Paul Louis Metzger, "The Gospel of True Prosperity: Our Best Life in the Triune God Now and Not Yet," in *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 285.

redemptive.”²³ Purves later asserts: “Redemption through the atoning exchange is not accomplished by divine *fiat*, or by some transaction conducted above our heads, but by a real incarnation into the heart of our humanity to save us from within and from below by an act of love and grace. In this way too we see the kinetic ‘shape’ of Torrance’s theology.”²⁴

Lastly, in keeping with the kinetic quality of revelation and reconciliation, there is a kinetic quality to our union with Christ in the Spirit. We are *not props* on a stage or independent agents, but *vital participants* in Jesus’ ongoing mission through the Spirit in history. The church does *not extend* Christ or operate in place of him but participates in his ongoing vicarious human activity as our ascended High Priest with and through the Spirit of Pentecost in history. Purves puts it this way. For Torrance, “The ministry of the church is not another ministry, different from the ministry of Christ or separate from it but takes its essential form and content from the servant-existence and mission of Jesus. The mission of the church is not an extension of the mission of Jesus but is a sharing in the mission of Jesus.”²⁵

Torrance’s theology has a bearing on pastoral care for those experiencing various maladies and critical care situations, not unlike those dying soldiers. Pastors and chaplains can provide confident and empathic assurance that God really is like Jesus. They can provide comfort to the downtrodden, the critically ill, and dying that God does not hover above them, but gets down on eye level, and identifies with them in their struggle through Jesus. His robust, vicarious faithfulness secures them and fosters *resilient faith*. Moreover, pastors and chaplains can encourage the downcast that God in Christ breaks into our situation and addresses our condition beyond timeless and faceless logic. His actuality makes all things possible, offering *realistic hope*. Lastly, they participate in Jesus’ and the Spirit’s ongoing vicarious work. They respond to the divine outpouring of divine affection whereby it becomes

²³ Purves, “The Shape of Torrance Theology,” 27.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

resounding love that reverberates in their engagement with others. To this threefold subject of faith, hope, and love, we now turn.

4. More Than Minimal Consciousness: Mindful of Personalist Ethics in Palliative Care

“Is God really like Jesus?” My answer to this question has a significant bearing on how I approach my adult son Christopher’s catastrophic brain injury in January 2021 and its unceasing aftermath, including his minimally conscious state. The following life and blood theological reflections extend consideration of Torrance’s kinetic theology far beyond the pale of paper dogmatics and pulp fiction.

First, I will reflect upon *resilient faith*, namely how Jesus’ vicarious humanity in the Spirit grounds us in faith and worship even when we experience trauma and feel abandoned by God at the margins of vulnerable human existence in the shadow of death. Second, I will account for how a personalist framework in palliative care resonates with and extends Torrance’s emphasis on the logic of Jesus as God’s incarnate Word. His actuality as God’s personal and particular Word and logic frames all probabilities and possibilities in attending to people with various significant health struggles and those in critical care situations, including my son. I refer to this theme as *realistic hope*. Third, I will conclude by considering how the church participates in Jesus’ life-giving love through the Spirit in which he humanizes humans as the personalizing person. I refer to this feature as *resounding love*.

Resilient Faith

First, we must account for Jesus’ faithful identification with us in his vicarious humanity in palliative care situations. Jesus fully embraces our human condition, including all the suffering, doubt, and fear that we experience in the shadow of death. He operates with resilient faith that makes our own faith possible. Even when we are not conscious, or only minimally conscious, of God’s abiding care, God remains completely conscious, empathically engaged, and faithful to us at the margins of human existence.

As stated earlier, there is no “dark unknown” to God behind Jesus. Still, we do at times experience severe doubt, disbelief, and anxiety at the margins of temporal existence, overcome by deafening silence and dreaded shadows, or what in another context St. John of the Cross calls the “dark night of the soul.”²⁶ Jesus enters our situation and immerses himself in what Torrance calls “the abysmal chasm that separates sinful man from God” and the “atheistical shout of abandonment and desolation.” And yet, far from giving into our desolation and despair, Jesus turns it “into a prayer of commitment and trust.” Torrance makes this point while reflecting on the God-despairing outlook among Jewish people in Israel who had endured the horrors of the Holocaust. Here is the larger context:

I felt that the terrible cry of Jesus on the Cross was meant for them: *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?* “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” That was a cry of utter God-forsakenness, the despairing cry of man in his dereliction which Jesus had made his own, taking it over from the twenty-second Psalm, thereby revealing that he had penetrated into the ultimate horror of great darkness, the abysmal chasm that separates sinful man from God. But there in the depths where we are exposed to the final judgments of God, Jesus converted man’s atheistical shout of abandonment and desolation into a prayer of commitment and trust, “Father into thy hands I commend my spirit.” The Son and the Father were one and not divided, each dwelling in the other, even in that ‘hour and power of darkness’ when Jesus was smitten of God and afflicted and pierced for our transgressions. In Jesus God himself descended to the very bottom of our human existence where we are alienated and antagonistic, into the very hell of our godlessness and despair, laying fast hold of us and taking our cursed condition upon himself, in order to embrace us forever in his reconciling love.²⁷

²⁶ See St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night*, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD and Otilio Rodríguez, OCD, rev. ed. (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).

²⁷ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 52–53.

Jesus does not abandon us in our abandonment of God. He is there amid the destitution and alienation in various health crises and critical care situations. He will not let us go, praying for us as one of us, so that we might experience the fullness of God's love. His faithfulness and devout obedience in taking up and reorienting our cry of dereliction sustains us and makes it possible to believe again. As Purves claims, our "participation in Christ's mediation of our human response to God" entails "faith, worship, and service."²⁸ Jesus keeps the faith for us and worships God in total trust and obedience amid "the ultimate horror of great darkness"²⁹ at Golgotha and in the grave. Rather than condemn people for their atheism and agnosticism, we realize that his cry of dereliction followed by obedience was intended for them in the hope that they might experience his love and in turn respond in total confidence and adoration. Jesus' vicarious human activity is the ontic ground who makes it possible through the Spirit's own vicarious work to help us move beyond wrestling *from* God to wrestling *with* and *for* and *in* God.

Jesus' vicarious work on our behalf and in which we participate respects rather than discounts our suffering, makes space for lament rather than bypass it, and promotes Jesus' faithfulness rather than demeans us for our seemingly insufficient faith in crisis situations. It is a dereliction of Christian duty to tell others to "get over it" when they grieve in the face of intense suffering and personal loss. It is a distortion of Christian devotion to foster a paper theology and liturgy of celebration that makes little to no space for lament.³⁰ It is a deprivation of human dignity to pressure others into thinking that the reason their loved one does not get better, or dies, is because they lack faith.

²⁸ Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," 33.

²⁹ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 52–53.

³⁰ I discuss the loss of lament and warped emphasis on celebration in the American church in *Setting the Spiritual Clock: Sacred Time Breaking Through the Secular Eclipse* (Eugene: Cascade, 2020), 73–76. See also Soong-Chan Rah's discussion of the loss of lament in American Christian worship in *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times*, Resonate Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 13. See also Walter Brueggemann's analysis of a distorted emphasis on celebration that prizes the "haves" and discounts the "have-nots" in *Peace* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 26–28.

Missing in all of this is Jesus' vicarious identification with us. He totally assumes our fallen human condition without sinning. He assumes it to heal us. He does not ignore or discount our plight. He even cries our cry of dereliction, while also submitting himself in devout obedience to the Father, as Torrance claims. He believes for us when we have no strength to believe. As the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord, he embraces the totality of our human existence, not discounting our suffering, nor allowing it to consume us. We can have confidence that he will remain faithful to the end and dissolve sorrow and swallow death in his joyful, victorious life. Far from being a moralistic therapeutic deistic deity that gives us happiness if we are nice people,³¹ he remains faithful even in those moments when we are not lovely or upright. He does more than provide happiness. He engenders "therapeutic joy"³² that accounts for God's presence amid suffering, triumph over the grave, and ascent into glory all on our behalf. Only in view of him and the vicarious work of the Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts³³ can we respond in faith and obedience. The triune God makes possible a form of worship that accounts for Lenten lament, not as an end all, but as part and parcel of baptismal spirituality involving our union with Jesus in the totality of his existence by the Spirit.³⁴

³¹ See Chapter 4 of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, "God, Religion, Whatever: On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118-171.

³² Jonathan Sacks highlights the importance of Purim and how it provides "therapeutic joy" for the Jewish community. Purim recounts how God delivered his people from ethnic cleansing while they lived in exile. See "The Therapeutic Joy of Purim." *The Office of Rabbi Sacks*, March 1, 2015; <http://rabbisacks.org/therapeutic-joy-purim-purim-5775/>.

³³ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 109-110.

³⁴ On the importance of including but not limiting Christ's vicarious work to his atoning death by crucifixion, see David W. Torrance, "The Vicarious Humanity of Christ: Incarnate, Crucified, Risen, and Ascended," *Participatio: The Journal of the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship* Supplement 2 (2013): 102-115. On the importance of Lenten lament, not simply for reflecting at length on Christ's suffering and death but including it as part of our union with Christ in the totality of his being and activity, see Carrie Steenwyk and John D. Witvliet, *The Worship Sourcebook*. 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2013), 557-558.

Realistic Hope

Second, we must account for a personalist framework in palliative care, which resonates with Torrance's kinetic emphasis on the particular and dynamic reality of God's personal Word made flesh in space and time. It stands in marked contrast to the generic and timeless logic of a hidden impersonal logos. This personalist emphasis engenders realistic hope.

Contrary to one surgeon's premature prognosis a few weeks after my son's injury (for which his colleague, a neurosurgeon, later apologized), Christopher attained minimal consciousness within a few months following the tragic event. His story helps me be ever mindful of the importance of personalist ethics in palliative care. Along the way, I have drawn upon the counsel and expertise of Robert Lyman Potter, noted earlier, a palliative care specialist who is a personalist medical ethicist. Potter has shared with my wife and me that in Christopher's case, "The probabilities for meaningful recovery are slim, but the possibilities are real."

There is no way to predict how a given person will respond to a catastrophic injury. This much we know. Every time we see intentional activity, it extends both the possibilities and probabilities. The possibilities and probabilities may end with time. But with each advance in intentional activity, both possibilities and probabilities increase. According to Potter, "Minimal changes indicate maximal possibilities."³⁵ As more possibilities show up, it increases the probabilities, but we don't know how much statistically.³⁶ Potter also asserts that "Every patient, who is also a person, is the exception to the rule."³⁷

³⁵ Robert Lyman Potter: quoted in Paul Louis Metzger, "Small Steps Can Lead to Big Gains in Life," *Uncommon God, Common Good*, Patheos (September 17, 2022), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2022/09/small-steps-can-lead-to-big-gains-in-life/>.

³⁶ Paul Louis Metzger, "Hope Springs Eternal with Every Day and Year," *Uncommon God, Common Good*, Patheos (March 12, 2022), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2022/03/hope-springs-eternal-with-every-day-and-year/>.

³⁷ Robert Lyman Potter: quoted in Paul Louis Metzger, "Jesus the Master Physician: Every Patient an Exception to the Rule," *Uncommon God, Common Good*, Patheos (February 13, 2021): <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2021/02/jesus-the-master-physician-every-patient-an-exception-to-the-rule/>.

Statistical analysis can prove helpful. But it can easily end up as a form of timeless logic, abstracted from a given temporal, personal situation. Potter claims, "Learning statistics is learning probabilities," not actualities in each individual instance. The problem all too frequently arises that medical professionals "translate probabilities into individuals. That's not possible." They mistakenly turn their rightful pursuit of objectivity and realism into "thinking they know what will happen in each and every individual case. They need to understand that they have statistical knowledge, but not knowledge of any one particular case." One has no idea what will ultimately happen in an individual situation. "Probabilities only apply to a group of individuals, not an individual patient."³⁸

A neurologist who has given us incredible insight into Christopher's situation claimed that the statistics surrounding TBI are skewed. Why? Decisions were made in the past to pull the plug prematurely in most instances. This neurologist reasons that given Christopher's young age, that the brain damage is the result of an external source (blunt force trauma) rather than a preexisting chronic condition, that Christopher was/is in very good physical health, the possibilities for meaningful recovery expand with time. This perspective runs contrary to how many viewed TBI in the past.

Each human life is a mystery. We need to account for this 'fact' in attending to each individual patient. Individual persons are not numbers or statistics. When we go beyond probabilities to operate as if we have certainty, we are not objective and realistic enough. Objectivity and realism account for complexity and remote possibilities that may end up defying the statistical generalizations.

I fear that in some unintentional way medical professionals can project possible outcomes onto patients and turn them into self-fulfilling prophecies, if and when they operate according to one or both of the following dynamics: focusing only on generalizations based on statistical groupings, and failing to account for the mystery and agency of each critical care patient who is a person. Such presumed

³⁸ Robert Lyman Potter; quoted in Paul Louis Metzger, "Statistical Probabilities and Personal Possibilities in Patient and Pastoral Care," *Uncommon God, Common Good*, Patheos (March 13, 2021), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/uncommongodcommongood/2021/03/statistical-probabilities-and-personal-possibilities-in-patient-and-pastoral-care/>.

realism is not objective enough. That is why I have appreciated the realistic exhortation of a respiratory therapist to remain positive and hopeful, the objective evaluation of a neurosurgeon who left open the room for medical miracles, and a perceptive nurse who said we are waiting to see how Christopher will respond. The combined emphasis on hope, mystery, and a patient's unique personal agency speaks volumes to me.³⁹

How does this relate to Torrance's theology and dying soldiers' collective question about God being like Jesus? As was noted earlier, God does not operate according to "timeless logical connections"⁴⁰ but in accordance with the person of Jesus, "the living, acting, and reigning Lord."⁴¹ He is God's eternal logos made human flesh and blood for our sake. In no way does this suggest that medical science or statistics go out the window. Rather, in view of his particularity as the logos of God become flesh, all generalities account for what likely will happen or what may happen, but not necessarily happen. We must withhold judgment when addressing each situation one faces in palliative and pastoral care, whether as a doctor, a pastor, or a chaplain. We must be open to the element of surprise rather than approach patients in critical care situations, or parishioners with spiritual and emotional maladies, as self-fulfilling prophecies. Jesus makes possible realistic hope for how we encounter every person and every patient we meet. He is the humanizing human and personalizing person who is God's eternal Word or logic made flesh in time and space.

Resounding Love

Third, we must account for God's resounding or participatory love in palliative care. Speaking of our union with Christ, Torrance maintains that "the mission of the church is not an extension of the mission of Jesus but is a sharing in the mission of Jesus."⁴² Far from extending Christ, we participate in his life through the Spirit's

³⁹ This specific reflection first appeared in my blog essay, "Statistical Probabilities and Personal Possibilities in Patient and Pastoral Care."

⁴⁰ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 154.

⁴¹ See Purves, "The Shape of Torrance Theology," 23.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 34.

constitutive work. In this way, we become the community for others in and through Jesus, who is the man for others, to commandeer Dietrich Bonhoeffer's language.⁴³ We share in Christ's sufferings in a godless world.⁴⁴ Jesus poured himself out for us (*kenosis*). We in turn participate in his offering through the Spirit who pours God's love into our hearts in response to which we pour ourselves out for others. In so doing, we participate in his glory (*theosis*). Michael Gorman refers to this dynamism as "*Kenosis is theosis*."⁴⁵

Union with God and *theosis* is not based on meritorious love for God, but the meritorious mercies of God's love for us poured out in Jesus' life. Jesus made himself nothing so that we who are unworthy could partake of his fullness. Martin Luther maintained that God's love creates the attraction. Our attractiveness does not create God's love.⁴⁶ If this is true of us, we cannot exclude the critically ill and disabled. Moreover, God elevates that which is weak and foolish by the world's standards (1 Corinthians 1:27). In fact, those who appear weaker are "indispensable" (1 Corinthians 11:22), a point not lost on Henri Nouwen and the ministry of *L'Arche*.⁴⁷

As the humanizing human and personalizing person, Jesus gets down on eye level with us rather than looks down on us. Incarnation replaces condescension, aloofness, and disdain. We must operate in the same way toward the sick and dying through our participation in his life and humble, glorious love by the Spirit.

Participation in Jesus' humble love is resounding, compelling us to have a humble posture toward those in vulnerable healthcare situations. Jesus never operates in a manner that respects people in accordance with their relative mental

⁴³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 501, 503.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 480–482.

⁴⁵ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 37.

⁴⁶ Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 43–44, 48.

⁴⁷ See Henri J.M. Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Image, 1990).

capacities, social status, or market import. Nor should we. Some of our greatest teachers are those experiencing critical care ordeals, such as my son. They are indispensable to our wellbeing, just as we are called to support them in pursuit of a meaningful quality of life. Advocacy for those in critical care situations should never convey a condescending attitude or sense of superiority. Regardless of their vulnerable circumstances, they are not valueless and voiceless. We must take it upon ourselves to affirm their inherent dignity and agency and to amplify their voices in whatever way their persons communicate with us, whether through words, facial expressions, bodily movements, vitals, and/or a variety of other means.

In view of how Jesus humanizes and personalizes all people, especially those most vulnerable, we must make sure we approach those in critical care situations, whether they be of a physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual nature in a humanizing and personalizing way. In view of Jesus who does not operate by “divine *fiat*, or by some transaction conducted above our heads, but by a real incarnation into the heart of our humanity to save us from within and from below by an act of love and grace,”⁴⁸ we must account for the complexities in each individual patient’s care.

Once again, I call to mind palliative care specialist, Potter, who asks three questions from his unique personalist vantage point in dealing with palliative care patients. These points can serve pastors and chaplains equally well in advocating for the sick and dying who are entrusted to their care: “What is going on here?” “What ought I to care about?” and “What is the fitting response?”⁴⁹ From Potter’s personalist vantage point, the patient rather than the doctor, family, hospital shareholders, and/or insurance companies, is who medical ethicists — and hospital

⁴⁸ Purves, “The Shape of Torrance Theology,” 29.

⁴⁹ Robert Potter derives the first and third questions from H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, Library of Theological Ethics (1963; repr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 59–68. The second or intermediate question he takes from Harry Frankfurt, “The Importance of What We Care About,” in *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 80–94. Over against deontological and teleological ethics, Niebuhr presents a cathecontic approach, which emphasizes “an ethic of appropriateness or fitting response.” See the foreword by Schweiker to Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, xi. For all the differences between Barth with Torrance in comparison with the Niebuhr brothers, there is resonance when it concerns moving beyond abstractions to engage real life situations as human persons.

chaplains and pastors — should prioritize as most important in palliative care. We must be fully conscious of them and care most for their wellbeing, since it is their life that is most at stake.

We may not be able to ‘heal’ them, or those with other maladies. But they might help us become alert and maximally conscious of our own need for divine mercy and realize our own vulnerable human state of existence. In doing so, we might experience relational healing in solidarity with them at the margins of their temporal existence by clinging to Jesus’ unconditional love and vicarious humanity in which all participate.

Here I call to mind Nouwen’s words in *The Wounded Healer*. There he writes: “A minister is not a doctor whose primary task is to take away pain. Rather, he deepens the pain to a level where it can be shared.”⁵⁰ As we enter into Jesus’ identification with us in our suffering, may we share in one another’s suffering so that together we may experience relational healing, thereby affirming one another’s equality and dignity. In so doing, we follow Jesus in considering others, especially those most vulnerable, as better than ourselves. Such dignified solidarity is truly humanizing and personalizing and fosters a kinetic and kenotic theology of pastoral care.

Human dignity does not result from a divine decree uttered in the dark unknown. Nor is it a capacity like reason or physical prowess. Similarly, it does not result from individual preference or societal projection, including faceless market preferences and values.⁵¹ Rather, each individual’s dignity derives from the one who assumed our humanity to make us whole. Jesus’ dignifying care of all people, especially the sick and dying, as the humanizing human and personalizing person preserves their dignity.

⁵⁰ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Image, 1979), 92–93.

⁵¹ I resonate with Christian Smith’s account of human dignity not being a capacity or a preference. I complement his reflections with a theological rendering of dignity in view of the triune God in *More Than Things: A Personalist Ethics for a Throwaway Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 81–84. See Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 446–456.

Given that Jesus assumed our human condition in all its finitude, fragility, and fallibility, healed and transformed it, ascending to the right hand of God, our identity and dignity are secure. Jesus is our advocate, our pastor and chaplain, as we participate in his vicarious humanity. All of us, including those in critical care situations, have secure identity and dignity in him. To paraphrase Paul's glorious words in Romans 8, nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, no decree of a hidden and disinterested deity who is blind to our struggles and suffering, no diminished capacity, no comatose or minimal conscious state, no market society where economic value is all that counts.⁵² Jesus never throws in the towel on us in our throwaway culture, no matter our capacities and status. In view of him, may we never throw in the towel on one another.

My hope and prayer is that this flesh and blood, pastoral-theological meditation advances T.F. Torrance scholarship and serves as a benefit to others in their lives and pastoral ministries in and through Jesus by the Spirit in support of those who are seriously ill, critically injured, gravely sick, and dying.

⁵² On concern over market ideology's encroachment in every area of life, see Michael J. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of the Markets* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012).