

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# T. F. Torrance on theosis and universal salvation

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## Abstract

T. F. Torrance is widely thought to be one of the most important recent theologians in the Anglophone world. There has been quite a lot of research done on his soteriology. This essay contributes to that discussion by assessing five soteriological themes in his thought. These comprise: his account of the vicarious humanity of Christ, the notion of incarnation as atonement, his christological understanding of the divine image, his wholly objective view of the nature of justification and his atonement mechanism. I use this analysis as a means to investigate two broader notions in his theology. These are theosis and universal salvation. In keeping with several other recent treatments of his work I conclude his theology implies a doctrine of theosis. I also argue that it implies universalism, despite his emphatic rejection of the doctrine.

**Keywords:** incarnation; justification; T. F. Torrance; theosis; universalism; vicarious humanity

Thomas Forsyth Torrance is without doubt one of the most important theologians of the latter half of the twentieth century. There was a time when he was thought of as principally the transmitter of Karl Barth's dogmatics to the Anglophone world, and as a churchman and ecumenist committed to 'theological science'. But with more work being done on his own dogmatic project in the last few decades, it has become clear that he is also an important and original systematic theologian in his own right. Perhaps his most significant contribution to modern theology, and especially modern Reformed theology, has to do with his account of the nature and scope of salvation in Christ – that is, his understanding of soteriology. There is an increasing amount of work being done on Torrance's theology, and much of that is focused on issues around his soteriology. This article is a contribution to that discussion.

The main task of the essay is to offer an analysis and assessment of five of the main load-bearing structures in his soteriology, with a view to assessing how they contribute to his understanding to two overarching themes in his thought, namely, theosis and universal salvation. We might analyse the main structures that hold up the roof of a cathedral in order to assess whether they are sound, and, having done so, consider whether the roof itself is properly supported by the buttresses and pillars. What I am suggesting is that we treat Torrance's soteriology in a similar manner. We will look at some of the load-bearing structures, assess them and then step back to look at what it is that they support – that is, look at how these different structures together inform the broader themes of theosis and universal salvation. Although I shall be

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somewhat critical of Torrance's views, I hope it is clear that I consider myself a friendly critic. My own theological formation owes much to the theological sensibility of Torrance's theology, and even when I have departed from some of its central claims, it has often been in conversation with Torrance, or with Torrance in the back of my mind as an interlocutor. The more I have thought about soteriology over the course of the last fifteen years, the more I have returned to Torrance's work as a model. It is steeped in the patristic and Reformation traditions, and has done much (I think) to press the bounds of Reformed theology in a more catholic direction, which I for one applaud.

We shall proceed as follows. First, I shall analyse five of the central structures in Torrance's understanding of soteriology. The second section provides a summary dogmatic statement of Torrance's soteriology, followed by a critical assessment of the overarching motifs of theosis and universal salvation as they are informed by the five soteriological themes. Torrance's soteriology clearly implies a doctrine of theosis, as other recent work on his theology has demonstrated.<sup>1</sup> I argue that it also implies universalism, even though Torrance claimed to be adamantly opposed to universalism.

### Five central structures in Torrance's soteriology

Let us begin by considering five of the central dogmatic structures in Torrance's soteriology. These comprise his account of the vicarious humanity of Christ, the notion of incarnation as atonement, his christological understanding of the divine image, his wholly objective view of the nature of justification and his atonement mechanism (mysterianism). These are not necessarily the only important aspects of his soteriology, but they are central dogmatic structures that are load-bearing. They are also characteristically Torrancean themes.

#### (a) *The vicarious humanity of Christ*

This aspect of Torrance's soteriology has been important in the recent discussion of whether Christ had a fallen human nature.<sup>2</sup> There is a close connection between the question of whether Christ had a fallen human nature and Torrance's understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ, that is, the way in which the very act of incarnation is part of the salvific work of atonement in which Christ stands in for fallen humanity and acts on behalf of fallen humanity. Torrance writes that, although Christ 'assumed our fallen and corrupt humanity when he became flesh', in this act of assumption 'he sanctified it in himself, and all through his earthly life he overcame our sin through his purity, condemning sin in our flesh by sheer holiness of his life within it. That is why death could not hold him even when he entered into and submitted to it, for there was no sin in him.'<sup>3</sup>

Recently, Jerome van Kuiken has argued that there is an important change in Torrance's theological anthropology that bears on this matter in his soteriology.

<sup>1</sup>There are a number of different studies relevant here, but the most comprehensive is Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>Useful discussion on the background to this claim, as well as engagement with Torrance's position, can be found in Jerome van Kuiken *Christ's Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), esp. pp. 31–43.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), p. 45.

Whereas in an earlier phase of his thought Torrance believed that sin was a property of persons, he later came to think that sin is a property of natures. This, as van Kuiken explains, ‘allows him to affirm that in assuming fallen human nature, Christ assumed original sin, only to annihilate it upon assumption’.<sup>4</sup> Evidence for this can be found in Torrance’s lectures on atonement. There he writes, ‘it was not only our actual sins, but it was original sin and original guilt that the Son of God took upon himself in incarnation and atonement in order to heal, convert and sanctify the human mind and reconcile it to God’.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, in his lectures on the incarnation, he says, ‘there is no doubt at all that by “human nature” the fathers wanted to stress the actuality of Christ’s union with us in our true humanity, that Christ was human in all points exactly like us, yet without sin’.<sup>6</sup> And in an essay on the doctrine of justification, he writes: ‘In this union He both assumed our fallen human nature, taking it from the Virgin Mary, and sanctified it in the very act of assumption, and all through the holy Life He lived in it from the beginning to the end.’<sup>7</sup>

The idea seems to be this: the human nature assumed by the Son in its native state (that is, abstracted from the act of incarnation, as it were) is fallen and sinful, bearing original sin and original guilt; in the very act of assumption, the Son purges his human nature of sin as part of his vicarious action of atonement. This is rather like the way in which alcohol disinfects surfaces upon contact. When wine is poured into a chalice in, let us say, the celebration of the eucharist, it cleanses the receptacle. Similarly, on this way of thinking, God the Son assumes his human nature at the first moment of incarnation, and, *in that very act of assumption*, purges it of sin. Thus, he is not personally united to a *sinful* human nature. Nevertheless, his human nature may still feel the effects of the fall, such as weakness, physical sickness, hunger and so forth.<sup>8</sup>

What then of the claim that Christ’s vicarious action in the incarnation heals human nature as such? This is more difficult to understand. It appears that Torrance was influenced in this matter by the Eastern fathers for whom human nature was a kind of universal that the Son somehow instantiates as a particular that (unlike my human nature or your human nature) is somehow able to causally affect and change the universal human nature that his particular human nature exemplifies.<sup>9</sup> In commenting on this view in the Eastern fathers, Benjamin Myers says: ‘The view that humanity is essentially one – that there is a universal human nature in which individuals participate – is so widely taken for granted in early Christianity that it is seldom discussed or defended.’<sup>10</sup> But this is a difficult metaphysical claim to understand. Recently,

<sup>4</sup>Van Kuiken, *Christ’s Humanity*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. R. T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 440.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 201.

<sup>7</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, ‘Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 13 (1960), p. 231.

<sup>8</sup>I have argued that a view structurally similar to this is theologically defensible in Oliver D. Crisp, ‘On the Vicarious Humanity of Christ’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21/3 (2019), pp. 235–250.

<sup>9</sup>In commenting on this problem in Torrance’s theology, Christopher Woznicki, in a moment of scholarly understatement, says, ‘The idea of a universal that is capable of being acted upon is unheard of in the philosophical literature.’ Christopher Woznicki, ‘The One and the Many: The Metaphysics of Human Nature in T. F. Torrance’s Doctrine of Atonement’, *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (2018), p. 123, n. 86.

<sup>10</sup>Benjamin Myers, ‘The Patristic Doctrine of Atonement’, in Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (eds), *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2015), p. 82.

Christopher Woznicki has made a study of this problem in Torrance's theology.<sup>11</sup> He suggests the best way to understand Torrance's view is as the claim that Christ's human nature is an abstract universal: 'Christ instantiates an abstract universal human nature and the rest of humanity participates in an abstract universal human nature.'<sup>12</sup> Thus, the difference between my human nature and Christ's human nature turns on the fact that Christ's human nature is the instantiation of the universal human nature – that is, a particular human nature like mine. Yet it is (somehow) also able to causally act upon, and change, the universal human nature that it exemplifies. By contrast, my human nature is an instance of the universal human nature, like Christ's human nature. But unlike Christ, my human nature cannot causally affect the universal human nature of which it is an instance. It is for this reason, according to Woznicki, that Torrance says things like this: 'Since in Jesus Christ the Creator Word of God has become man, in such a way that in him Divine Nature and human nature are indivisibly united in his own Person, the humanity of every man, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes it or not, is ontologically bound up with the humanity of Jesus.'<sup>13</sup>

Woznicki discerns two principles in Torrance's thought here. The first of these is *the generality of Christ's human nature*, according to which whatever happens to Christ's human nature happens to human nature in general. The second is *the particularity of Christ's human nature*, which is that Christ must be able to act as a person with an individual human nature.<sup>14</sup> This is linked to Torrance's use of the an/enhypostasia distinction – a distinction derived from patristic theology. It has to do with the way in which the human nature of Christ is not a person (and thus is 'anhypostatic') independent of the incarnation, but is 'personalised' (i.e. enhypostatised) by being united to God the Son. Yet Torrance gives this distinction a particular metaphysical twist, investing it with rather more meaning than it sometimes has in traditional discussion of the topic. He writes:

the anhypostasia and enhypostasia taken together tell us that the incarnation was the union of the Word of God with mankind in solidarity with all men and women; yet it was union with one man or rather such a union with all humanity that was achieved and wrought out in and through this one man, Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth for all men and women.<sup>15</sup>

Somehow the assumption of human nature draws all human natures into a kind of union with his particular human nature so that what happens to his particular human nature has ontological effects that distribute to all other human natures via changes to the universal human nature of which they are instances, irrespective of whether the person in question is aware of these effects.

How are we to understand this? The controversial claim on which this whole picture hangs, and which Woznicki has helpfully clarified for us, is that Christ's human nature

<sup>11</sup>Woznicki, 'The One and the Many', pp. 103–26.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>13</sup>T. F. Torrance, 'The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition', *Modern Theology* 4 (1988), p. 317, cited in Woznicki, 'The One and the Many', p. 111.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>15</sup>Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 230. Torrance says similar things about the an/enhypostasia distinction elsewhere. See e.g. his essay 'The Atonement: The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross; The Atonement and the Moral Order', in Nigel M. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), p. 230.

is both an instantiation of the universal human nature and also somehow capable of causally affecting and changing the universal human nature of which it is a particular instance. That is very strange indeed, and a notion I struggle to comprehend. For it is one thing to say that a particular entity instantiates a universal, like the blue shirt instantiates the colour blue. It is quite another to say that the particular entity in question is capable of causally affecting and changing the universal it instantiates. For, as Woznicki points out, universals are usually thought to be part of the Platonic horde, that is, forms that are causally inert and that are essentially unchanging. Yet, as he also observes, strange though Torrance's idiosyncratic understanding of the generality and particularity of Christ's human nature claim might be, 'such a universal is needed if we are to make sense of Torrance's doctrine of atonement'.<sup>16</sup>

Not only is this a tall metaphysical order, it also has peculiar theological consequences. For it means that Christ's human nature is significantly unlike every other human nature – surely a result that Torrance would find objectionable. One of the most important things motivating Torrance's account of the vicarious humanity of Christ is his concern to ensure Christ's humanity is like ours in every respect, sin excepted (Heb 4:15). Christ's vicarious act on our behalf is all about Christ taking on a particular human nature that is qualitatively similar to our own, sharing the same limitations. But if Woznicki is right, then the most plausible way of understanding the metaphysics underpinning Torrance's claims about the vicarious humanity of Christ require him to posit a human nature for Christ that is unique in very significant respects. That is surely a notable theological cost. It is ironic that the very notion of vicarious humanity Torrance utilises in order to reinforce the solidarity of Christ with us in the assumption of human flesh ends up creating a significant ontological gulf between Christ's humanity and ours.

### *(b) Incarnation and atonement*

Some theologians, like Anselm of Canterbury, think that the atonement should be identified with the satisfaction of Christ on the cross. The incarnation is a necessary prerequisite to this act, but it is not in itself atoning or part of the act of atonement. Torrance appeals to an older way of thinking, especially that of patristic theologians like Athanasius and Irenaeus, for whom the incarnation is something like a phase or an aspect of Christ's atoning work. This is not the same as the physical doctrine of atonement. According to the physical doctrine of atonement, in virtue of becoming incarnate Christ atones for fallen humanity. Torrance argues, in effect, that this is a condition of atonement, but not a sufficient condition.<sup>17</sup> It must be by means of his vicarious action in healing human nature from the inside out, so to speak, that we come to salvation. But Torrance also has an important place for the work of Christ on the cross and in resurrection. These are not incidental to the atonement, but express divine love to humanity as God works from both the Godward and human side in the sacrifice of Christ to atone for human fallenness. In this way, atonement is, as he puts it, an *internal* divine act, not an act *external* act directed from God to humanity independent of the incarnation. In other words, God brings about atonement through the incarnation. But he needs to become incarnate in order to heal human nature, and then to offer up a perfect sacrifice as a human being to God on behalf of humanity, whilst also acting

<sup>16</sup>Woznicki, 'The One and the Many', p. 123, n. 86.

<sup>17</sup>This point is brought out well by Paul D. Molnar in his *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), p. 142.

as a divine person in doing so. In this way, it is God the Son, as both God and human in the incarnation, who brings about atonement on behalf of humanity. The whole act of atonement happens within the divine life, so to speak.

Some interpreters of Torrance seem to suggest something stronger than this, namely, that the incarnation is where the atonement takes place.<sup>18</sup> But that seems to be at best a kind of half-truth. Torrance is sometimes rather effusive and unguarded in his language about the way in which the incarnation is (an aspect of) atonement, and sometimes does say things that seem to indicate something approaching a physical doctrine of atonement. But a charitable and, perhaps, more expansive, reading of his work suggests the more rounded account given here.

### (c) *The christological image*

Related to the questions of Christ's vicarious humanity, and Torrance's incarnation-focused doctrine of atonement, is his understanding of the divine image. The way in which Torrance thinks of this matter, as with the previous soteriological themes we have considered, is dependent in important respects upon his appropriation of aspects of patristic theology, refracted through a Reformation lens. Torrance thinks that we are made in the divine image, which is marred through the fall. Christ comes to restore the divine image to its properly functioning state in human beings by his vicarious action. As he puts it,

God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that through him mankind might be restored to divine sonship, that is restored to the image of God. In the language of Paul, man was predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.

Christ does this, he says, 'in order that he might restore mankind to the image of God'. He does this by being

the perfect image of God on earth ... He was the perfect man and as such the perfect reflection of the glory and grace of God. Therefore in him our humanity is restored to its perfection in communion with God.<sup>19</sup>

Elsewhere, Torrance writes about the way in which Christ is now the only true human-divine image because the fall all but obliterates the image in mere humans. Although fallen humans retain a capacity for union with the divine image, this union must now be supplied by Christ.<sup>20</sup> He is the renewed divine image into whose likeness the redeemed will grow. Thus, the renewal of the divine image in fallen

<sup>18</sup>This is how James Cassidy interprets Elmer Colyer's treatment of Torrance. See James J. Cassidy, 'T. F. Torrance's Realistic Soteriology Objectivism and the Elimination of Dualisms: Union with Christ in Current Perspective', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008), p. 167.

<sup>19</sup>Torrance, *Incarnation*, pp. 115–16.

<sup>20</sup>See the discussion of this in Habets, *Theosis in Torrance*, pp. 32–3. In his book *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 108–9, Torrance sounds like Calvin when he writes: 'Fallen man is utterly corrupt inasmuch as he is mastered by the contradiction of sin, which, just because it opposes the grace of God, means the obliteration of the *imago dei* in man ... fallen man is utterly destitute of the *justitia originalis* or *imago dei*.' Habets struggles with the tension in Torrance's thought here. Do fallen human beings possess the divine image or not? His solution is that Torrance's approach is perspectival: from a certain point of view the image in fallen human beings is effaced; but looking forward eschatologically to the image we have in Christ, we do possess the image.

human beings through the agency of Christ as the true image is something that, as Torrance puts it, ‘can be interpreted only in eschatological terms’.<sup>21</sup>

This is interesting, not least because Torrance seems to stop short of the patristic claim that Christ is the prototypical image of God in whose image we are created, and to whose image we are being conformed in the process of sanctification. Instead, what he says is that Christ perfects the image that is damaged in fallen humanity by being the perfect image. Christ’s vicarious action restores the image to its fullness so that we may commune with God as our aboriginal parents did. But of course, being the perfect instance of a thing does not mean being the prototype in whose image all other instances of the thing in question are made. (To see this point, just think of the difference between the perfect instance of a model-T Ford automobile, and the prototype model-T Ford in the ‘image’ of which all production line model-T Ford cars are made.) It seems to me that Torrance could have said more on this score – more that would have made his account of the divine image more fully christological. Such a more developed account would also have the benefit of making clearer how it is that we may participate in the divine life. For if Christ is the hub between divinity and humanity, then it makes sense to think that his vicarious work in incarnation and atonement involves conforming us to his theandric image. Such a more completely christological account would also help explain how it is that Christ, as the hub between divinity and humanity, is the means by which we fallen human beings may be ‘divinised’, since it is by being united to Christ in his divinised humanity that we, too, are divinised. Although this falls short of being hypostatically united to a divine person, it could be that through the agency of the Holy Spirit we are joined to Christ, and via his theandric person, enabled to participate in God’s life.<sup>22</sup>

#### *(d) A wholly objective, extrinsic and effectual view of justification*

Torrance thinks that Christ’s saving work objectively justifies all humanity. This is because he thinks that it is Christ who is justified by God, and it is Christ who, in his incarnation and atonement, redeems human nature. On Torrance’s way of thinking, by assuming and healing fallen human nature, Christ heals human nature *per se*. That is, he heals the universal human nature of which his particular human nature is an instance. Not only that: because he heals and reconciles human nature in himself – in his own hypostatic union with fallen humanity – Christ is justified before God. But how? Because the atoning act of Christ (somehow) heals both his own particular human nature and human nature *per se*, the act of atonement that brings about the justification of Christ is also an act of justification that distributes to all of humanity. It would be like finding a water source that is brackish and undrinkable and adding some cleansing agent that clears the water and makes it potable again, so that, as it flows downstream, it becomes a source of living water once more. Christ’s vicarious action affects the ‘water source’ of the universal human nature, which is then distributed ‘downstream’ to the rest of humanity.

Since this is a controversial claim that jars with much traditional interpretation of Reformed theology on the doctrine of justification, and has led to various different interpretations of what Torrance actually thinks about this topic,<sup>23</sup> it is worth letting

<sup>21</sup>Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup>I have argued for this claim more fully in Oliver D. Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), ch. 4.

<sup>23</sup>This is documented in Cassidy, ‘Realistic Soteriology Objectivism’.



Torrance speak for himself on the matter. In an important essay on justification, he says things like this: 'justification means not simply the non-imputation of our sins through the pardon of Christ, but positive sharing in His divine-human righteousness'.<sup>24</sup> This happens through union with Christ. What is more

Once and for all we have been sanctified and consecrated in Christ's vicarious work ... Christ has already consecrated or sanctified Himself for our sakes, so that we are already consecrated or sanctified in Him – therefore sanctification or consecration is imputed to us by His free Grace just like justification.<sup>25</sup>

Christ is the 'embodiment of our act of faith and trust and obedience toward God'.<sup>26</sup> He stood in our place, offering 'to God a perfect obedience and trust, a perfect faith and response which we are unable to offer, and he appropriated all God's blessings which we are unable to appropriate'.<sup>27</sup> We share in Christ's justification, says Torrance, because through union with him we are incorporated into his faithful act of contrition and penitence on our behalf. Thus he can say, 'Justification has been fulfilled subjectively as well as objectively in Jesus Christ, but that objective and subjective justification is objective to us'.<sup>28</sup> His is a doctrine of justification by Christ alone.<sup>29</sup>

Put in the language of dogmatic theology, it is a *wholly objective, extrinsic and effectual doctrine of justification*. It is wholly objective because it is wholly on the basis of Christ's justification that all of humanity is justified. So there is no subjective component. Union with Christ by the secret working of the Holy Spirit simply provides me with access to the objective act done on my behalf. For this reason it is also extrinsic. That is, it is performed outside of me and for me by Christ. And it is also effectual, such that the justification of all humanity in Christ is not merely potentially effective (that is, it is not just that because of Christ's justification I *may* appropriate the benefits of Christ's justification by faith); rather, Christ's act of justification through the incarnation immediately and effectually justifies all humanity. Thus Torrance:

Because in Jesus Christ human nature is perfectly and indivisibly united to God the Creator, he constituted in his humanity the ontological source and ground of being of every man and woman, whether they know him or not, but to those who receive and believe in him he is the One in whom and through whom they may be born anew as sons and daughters of the heavenly Father.<sup>30</sup>

One important – indeed, momentous – consequence of this view is that all human beings have already been made new creatures in Christ. Torrance writes, 'He died for all men, the good and the bad, and all alike come under the total judgment of His Death and Resurrection; all alike have to be born again in Him, and made new creatures'.<sup>31</sup> As Woznicki summarises it, the 'regeneration of human nature is not a subjective act; rather, it has occurred objectively in Christ at the moment of incarnation'.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Torrance, 'Justification', p. 231.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 233–4.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 235–6.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>30</sup>Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992 [1983]), p. 72.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>32</sup>Woznicki, 'The One and the Many', p. 109.



Even faith is vicarious, on Torrance's way of thinking. 'He has believed for you, fulfilled your human response to God, even made your personal decision for you,' says Torrance,

so that he acknowledges you before God as one who has already responded to God in him, who has already believed in God through him, and whose personal decision is already implicated in Christ's self-offering to the Father, in all of which he has been fully and completely accepted by the Father, so that in Jesus Christ you are already accepted by him.<sup>33</sup>

Torrance writes this in a moving passage in his little book, *The Mediation of Christ*, focused on the need for evangelical, heartfelt penitence on the part of the believer. But it is odd that he does so. For the implication of his view is surely that Christ has already responded to God on behalf of all humanity quite apart from any subsequent faithful response by other human beings. As James Cassidy points out in commenting on this passage, although Torrance wants to stress that personal faith is still important, 'it is in no way essential to being united to Christ. Furthermore, it is not necessary to salvation. Salvation is accomplished by Christ for us *in his faith*, not ours.'<sup>34</sup>

To better understand what Torrance means here, imagine a situation in which a group of laptop computers are linked via radio signals to a wireless internet hub.<sup>35</sup> Their connection to the worldwide web is solely via the hub. All these computers have a qualitatively identical fault in their operating systems that can only be corrected by receiving an update from the internet via the hub. Now, imagine that the connection that hardwires the hub to the internet is faulty. However, an engineer is called and corrects the fault, hooking up the hub to a high-speed fibre-optic cable connection. Once this is achieved, the hub works perfectly, and the computers that are virtually linked to the internet via the radio signals sent and received from the hub have their operating systems automatically updated and fixed. This is akin to Torrance's understanding of the way in which the vicarious humanity of Christ is both particular (that is, having to do with the assumption of a particular human nature, like the hub), and yet also general (that is, having to do with the transformation of all human natures as a consequence of what happens to his particular human nature, via the hardwired link to the internet).<sup>36</sup> Notice that, according to the laptop analogy, the operating systems are *automatically* updated and corrected; the same is true according to Torrance of justification: the change brought about through the incarnation immediately and effectually distributes to all humanity. That is important. It is for this reason that critics like Cassidy worry that Torrance's account of justification makes human faith entirely redundant.

<sup>33</sup>Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, p. 94.

<sup>34</sup>Cassidy, 'Realistic Soteriological Objectivism', pp. 182–3; cf. p. 184, where he goes on to say, 'Christ unites us to God in the incarnation and he unites us to himself through pouring out the Holy Spirit upon the church at Pentecost. There is then no need to speak about a work of the Holy Spirit regenerating the hearts of people today in the subjective life of the believer.'

<sup>35</sup>This is an analogy I have used for similar purposes in Crisp, *Word Enfleshed*.

<sup>36</sup>Torrance elaborates on this later in the same passage of his *Incarnation* lectures: 'The doctrine of enhypostasia insists here that within that anhypostatic solidarity of Christ with our common human nature, he came also as an individual human being in our humanity, seeking in addition a solidarity in terms of the interaction of persons within our human social life, in personal relations of love, commitment, responsibility, decision, etc.' Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 213.

Nevertheless, despite his views about the way in which all of humanity is justified together with Christ by means of Christ's justification, Torrance rejects universalism. He argues that universalism, like the doctrine of limited atonement, is a kind of blasphemy that attempts to reduce Christ's saving work to a formula that, once understood, infallibly generates certain results. It is, as he puts it, the 'recourse to a logic-causal explanation of why the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ avails or does not avail for all people'.<sup>37</sup> For anyone who comprehends Torrance's doctrine of justification, such an emphatic rejection of universalism must appear baffling. For, on the face of it, universalism seems to be implied by the claim that Christ is justified and through his justification all humanity is justified, objectively, extrinsically and effectually. When set alongside his views about election, this becomes an even more pressing concern. Thus Torrance,

The great fact of the Gospel then is this: that God has actually chosen us in Jesus Christ in spite of our sin, and that in the death of Christ that election has become a *fait accompli*. It means too that God has chosen all men, in as much as Christ died for all men, and because that is once and for all no one can ever elude the election of His love. In as much as no one exists except by the Word of God by whom all things were made and in whom all things consist, and in as much as this is the Word that has once and for all enacted the eternal election of grace to embrace all men, the existence of every man whether he will or not is bound up inextricably with that election – with the Cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup>

In light of such passages, Kevin Vanhoozer has recently asked, 'Are the elect "in Christ" simply by virtue of being human (ontology) or because they have somehow become beneficiaries of his life and work (soteriology)?'<sup>39</sup> It would seem that for Torrance the former rather than the latter is the case. Not only that, but given his views about justification, it would seem that the 'elect' number of human beings equals the total number of human beings.

Before leaving this theme, it might be worth briefly considering one option that might at first glance be thought to offer a possible way for the Torrancean to avoid universalism. In traditional doctrines of hypothetical universalism, a distinction is made between the sufficiency of the atonement and its effectuality. Christ's reconciling work is said to be sufficient for the salvation of all humanity because of its infinite value, but it is only effectual to those who appropriate the benefits of Christ's work by faith (hence, *hypothetical* universalism). Could Torrance's position be structurally similar to this, implying only a *potential* or *hypothetical*, but not *actual*, universalism? Unfortunately, no. Torrance's position cannot appeal to a similar distinction between the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ's work because his doctrine of justification entails that all humanity is justified objectively, extrinsically and effectually. If that is the case, then it is difficult to see how anyone is excluded from the ambit of salvation –

<sup>37</sup>Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 248.

<sup>38</sup>Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949), p. 315.

<sup>39</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Origin of Paul's Soteriology: Election, Incarnation, and Union with Christ in Ephesians 1:4 (with Special Reference to Evangelical Calvinism)', in Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (eds), *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament: Essays by Theologians and New Testament Scholars* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), p. 182.

universalism is the inevitable outcome.<sup>40</sup> This seems to be a serious problem of consistency in Torrance's thought that neither he nor his defenders have been able to effectively address.<sup>41</sup>

### (e) *Atonement mysterianism*

In the matter of the mechanism of atonement, Torrance is what in philosophical circles would be called a *mysterian*. By mechanism of atonement I mean the specific kind of action by means of which Christ brings about human reconciliation with God. Torrance does not have a clear view on this matter. By mysterianism I mean the view that we are not in the kind of epistemically advantageous position needed in order to have a settled view on a particular matter. Thus, it remains mysterious. 'The saving act of God in the blood of Christ', he writes, 'is an unfathomable mystery before which the angels veil their faces and into which we dare not and cannot intrude, but before which our minds bow in wonder, worship, and praise.'<sup>42</sup>

Consider the case of a medieval physician to whom Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood is unknown. When asked why it is that blood appears to be pumped around the human body so that human beings bleed upon having their skin punctured, and bleed profusely when veins or arteries are severed, the physician may have views about how this comes about, but at some point he is likely to admit defeat. He just does not have access to the explanations of modern medicine provided by the scientific method. We might say that he is a mysterian about blood circulation. One way of characterising Torrance's way of thinking is as a similar case of mysterianism. The idea is that we are not in a position this side of the grave to know exactly how Christ's atonement reconciles us to God. So we should adopt a kind of mysterianism toward mechanisms of atonement as they are presented to us in particular models or doctrines of atonement.

Having said that, Torrance does employ a lot of the traditional terminology with respect to the atonement, including language of sacrifice, expiation and even propitiation – although he reinterprets propitiation so that it is a two-way divine action from the human and Godward side internal to the divine life, rather than a matter of the placating of divine wrath by some human act of sacrifice.<sup>43</sup> But he eschews any particular mechanism of atonement. These different atonement terms feature as themes or motifs in his understanding of the atonement, without commitment to a particular mechanism above and beyond the incarnation and vicarious work of Christ.

<sup>40</sup>It is also worth pointing out that Torrance rejects the sufficiency–efficacy distinction, which he (mistakenly) attributes to Alexander of Hales. He thinks that the distinction arbitrarily restricts God's grace in Christ. See Torrance, 'The Atonement', pp. 245–6. Yet in his lectures on the atonement, he uses the language of sufficiency and efficacy and applies it to the atonement in this way: 'Objectively, then, we must think of atonement as sufficient and efficacious reality for every human being – it is such sufficient and efficacious reality that it is the rock of offence, the rock of judgment upon which every sinner who refuses the divine love shatters himself or herself and is damned eternally.' Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup>Perhaps the most sustained attempt to address this can be found in the work of the Evangelical Calvinists. See the essays in Myk Habets and Bobby Grow (eds), *Evangelical Calvinism: Essays Resourcing the Continuing Reformation of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012).

<sup>42</sup>T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 239.

<sup>43</sup>'Propitiation has nothing to do with propitiating God as though he needed to be placated in order to reconcile us to himself, but with the two-way movement on the part of God who in his prevenient love freely draws near to us in order to draw us near to himself on the ground of the atoning self-sacrifice of Christ offered for us.' Torrance, 'The Atonement', p. 242.

### Critical engagement with Torrance's soteriology

Let us take stock. We have considered five load-bearing structures that are central to Torrance's soteriology. If we were to summarise these different themes in one dogmatic thesis, it might look like this:

THESIS: *In Christ, God assumes a human nature in order that we might be able to participate in the divine life.* This can be understood as follows. At the first moment of incarnation, God the Son acquires a fallen human nature, which he sanctifies in the very act of assumption. Throughout his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Christ acts vicariously in order to heal our fallen humanity in atonement. This vicarious action is entirely objective in nature: his redemptive act brings about the actual justification of all humanity. Those who by faith appropriate this saving work are able to enjoy the benefits of union with Christ and participate in the triune life of God.

Put differently, when considered synoptically, the five central structures of Torrance's soteriology yield a doctrine of theosis. Like several other western theologians, Torrance seldom uses the language of theosis or *theopoesis* (let alone 'divinisation' or 'deification') because of its unhelpful associations in much western thought with the loss of personhood in the divine, or the conflation of humanity and divinity.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, his position implies a doctrine of theosis.<sup>45</sup> For instance, in *The Mediation of Christ* Torrance writes, 'The hypostatic union took on the form of a dynamic atoning union which steadily worked itself out within the structures of human existence all through the course of our Lord's vicarious earthly life from his birth to his crucifixion and resurrection.' Later in the same passage, he goes on to say, 'Yet it is not atonement that constitutes the goal and end of that integrated movement of reconciliation but union with God in and through Jesus Christ, in whom our human nature is not only saved, healed and renewed but lifted up to participate in the very light, life and love of the Holy Trinity.'<sup>46</sup>

There are two crucial claims here. First, Christ's vicarious work in the incarnation and atonement are penultimate actions that are directed toward the ultimate goal of participation in the divine life. Second, the hypostatic union is the means by which we are placed in a position to be able to participate in the divine life. Without the incarnation there could be no participation because without the incarnation there would be no means by which our humanity could be united with divinity: an unbridgeable ontological gulf would exist. As Torrance glosses this elsewhere:

[T]he staggering thing about this is that the exaltation of human nature into the life of God does not mean the disappearance of man or the swallowing up of

<sup>44</sup>He does use this language on occasion, but in general he seems reluctant to name his doctrine a version of theosis as such, presumably because of its associations in western theology of the period in which he was writing. For discussion of this point, see Habets, *Theosis in Torrance*, ch. 1, esp. the chapter's conclusion, where Habets cites a notable case where Torrance uses the term theosis in his address to the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Frankfurt on 5 Aug. 1964.

<sup>45</sup>Habets concurs. In the conclusion to his study of Torrance's doctrine of theosis he writes, 'although the formal language of theosis may appear rather infrequently in Torrance's work, its material content is pervasive'. Habets, *Theosis in Torrance*, p. 193.

<sup>46</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, pp. 65 and 66, respectively.

human and creaturely being in the infinite ocean of divine Being, but rather that the human nature, remaining creaturely and human, is yet exalted in Christ to share in God's life and glory.<sup>47</sup>

In this connection it is important to understand precisely that to which Torrance is committed. The idea is not that human beings are 'made divine' in some general sense, as if our human natures could simply be exalted by divine fiat, independently of the work of Christ. Rather, Torrance's claim is that the fallen humanity that we each suffer and instantiate is taken up and reschematised in Christ's hypostatic work, so that by being united with Christ our humanity may be renewed through union with Christ's renewed humanity. As Habets puts it, riffing on a Torrancean theme, theosis is 'the re-creation of our lost humanity in the dynamic, atoning interaction between the divine and human natures within the one person of Jesus Christ, through whom we enter into the triune communion of God's intra-trinitarian life'. Indeed this, he says, 'is what distinguishes *theosis* in Reformed thought from other expressions of deification or divinization'.<sup>48</sup> Torrance would surely agree with that.

One common criticism of the recent interest in western accounts of theosis is that they make of theosis a theme in a broader scheme of salvation. The worry for such critics is that theological *motifs* in a person's thought are not the same as theological *doctrines*.<sup>49</sup> Doctrines are comprehensive; motifs are features of some larger theological framework. But clearly Torrance does think of the whole of soteriology in terms that are recognisably a doctrine of theosis. In a recent introduction to Eastern Orthodox theology, Andrew Louth writes:

Orthodox theology insists on the doctrine of deification, theosis, because recovering the fullness of the image will involve real change in ourselves, changes that mean the image of God in which we are created becomes more and more evident ... deification, as St Maximos makes so clear, is the restoration of our true humanity, not its diminishment or abandonment. And it is a change grounded in the amazing change that God himself embraced, when he became human for our sakes, not abandoning what he is – divinity – but assuming what he is not – humanity.<sup>50</sup>

This sets theosis in its broader soteriological context, and in particular highlights the way in which theosis is linked to a specific theological anthropology and understanding of the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*). If some western theologians cherry-pick the notion of union with Christ or participation in the divine life whilst leaving behind the anthropological context in which these notions are set, the same cannot be said

<sup>47</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), p. 135; cf. *The Mediation of Christ*, pp. 62–7.

<sup>48</sup>Myk Habets, 'Reformed Theosis? A Response to Gannon Murphy', *Theology Today* 65 (2009), pp. 491 and 492, respectively. In an almost identical passage, Habets imputes the same sentiment to Torrance in *Theosis in Torrance*, pp. 137–8.

<sup>49</sup>For this concern, see Gösta Hallonsten, 'Theosis in Recent Research: A Renewal of Interest and a Need for Clarity', in Michael J. Christensen and Jerrifry A. Wittung (eds), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 281–93.

<sup>50</sup>Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), p. 95.

for Torrance. In fact, Louth's characterisation of theosis in this passage could have been written of Torrance's soteriology. There are significant differences from some later strands of Orthodox thought that depend on the distinction between the divine energies and essence, but Torrance clearly does hold that our transformation through the reconciling work of Christ involves our being united with his theanthropic person. His central focus on the vicarious humanity of Christ – the notion of incarnation as atonement; his christological understanding of the divine image; his christically focused view of the nature of justification; and his atonement mechanism (mysterianism) – all fit together as aspects of his Reformed version of theosis.

What, then, of universal salvation? As I have already indicated, this a real problem in Torrance's theology. His soteriology seems to imply universalism, but he refuses to draw this conclusion. A similar difficulty has afflicted interpreters of Torrance's *Doktorvater*, Karl Barth. However, there is an important difference between the two that is salient for our analysis. The difference is this. For Barth, Christ as the Elect One brings about the derivative election of all humanity who are elect in him, provided they do not reject that status (which he thinks of as an 'impossible possibility'). For this reason, we cannot presume to know whether all are finally reconciled to God. Hopeful universalism is the best option.<sup>51</sup> But, despite its name, hopeful universalism is not in fact a species of universalism. For to hope for the reconciliation of all humanity based on the gracious work of God in Christ is not the same as asserting that all humanity will be saved.

This is something Torrance cannot affirm, though he may wish to do so. For his soteriology commits him to the view that all humanity is reconciled to God through Christ's vicarious action in incarnation. Because Christ's vicarious action brings about the effectual justification of all humanity, there is no theological wiggle room for hopeful universalism. Though Torrance is very clear that faith is needed to appropriate the benefits of Christ's saving work, this seems at best to be a kind of evangelical residue in his thought that is inconsistent with his wholly objective, extrinsic and effectual soteriology.

But is this really a problem for Torrance? Clearly he would have thought so. After all, he was implacably opposed to universalism. However, someone enamoured of Torrance's soteriology may feel that what I am calling the evangelical residue of Torrance's emphasis on personal faith could be dropped as a requirement for salvation given the other load-bearing structures in Torrance's soteriology. Such a person might think that Torrance would have been better advised to have the courage of his convictions and embrace a doctrine of universalism, according to which all humanity is destined to participate in the triune life of God.

<sup>51</sup>The discussion of this topic in Barth's theology is enormous. My own thinking has been changed by reading David Congdon's essay, 'Apokatastasis and Apostolicity: A Response to Oliver Crisp on the Question of Barth's Universalism'. *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67/4 (2014), pp. 464–80.