

Thomas F. Torrance and the problem of universalism

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Abstract

While Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance both believed in the possibility of universal salvation, they also rejected the idea that we could make a final determination about this possibility prior to the second coming of Jesus Christ. Hence, both theologians rejected what may be called a doctrine of universal salvation in the interest of respecting God's freedom to determine the outcome of salvation history in accordance with the love which was revealed in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. This article explores Torrance's reasons for holding that 'the voice of the Catholic Church . . . throughout all ages has consistently judged universalism a heresy for faith and a menace to the Gospel'. Torrance expressly believed in the 'universality of Christ's saving work' but rejected 'universalism' and any idea of 'limited atonement'. He considered both of these views to be rationalistic approaches which ignore the need for eschatological reserve when thinking about what happens at the end when Christ comes again and consequently tend to read back logical necessities into the gospel of free grace. Whenever this happens, Torrance held that the true meaning of election as the basis for Christian hope is lost and some version of limited atonement or determinism invariably follows. The ultimate problem with universalism then, from Torrance's perspective, can be traced to a form of Nestorian thinking with respect to christology and to a theoretical and practical separation of the person of Christ from his atoning work for us. What I hope to show in this article is that those who advance a 'doctrine of universalism' as opposed to its possibility also have an inadequate understanding of the Trinity. Interestingly, Torrance objected to the thinking of John A. T. Robinson and Rudolf Bultmann because both theologians, in their own way, separated knowledge of God for us from knowledge of who God is 'in himself'. Any such thinking transfers our knowledge of God and of salvation from the objective knowledge of God given in revelation to a type of symbolic, mythological or existential knowledge projected from one's experience of faith and this once again opens the door to both limited atonement and to universalism. Against this Torrance insisted that we cannot speak objectively about what God is doing for us unless we can speak analogically about who God is in himself.

Keywords: atonement/limited atonement, determinism/free will, election (predestination), salvation by grace/conditional salvation, trinitarian theology, universalism.

Knowing that Karl Barth often has been accused of ‘universalism’ even though he believed only in its possibility and directly rejected the idea that we could make a final determination with regard to the issue this side of the *parousia*,¹ you can imagine my surprise when I read Jürgen Moltmann’s recent book, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*, only to find him confidently and directly asserting a version of universal reconciliation. He even claimed that hell itself would be destroyed.² Then I turned to a recent book titled ‘*All Shall Be Well*’: *Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* and learned that various versions of belief in universal salvation now seem to be very widely held. In the introduction to that volume we are told that Christian universalism should be located somewhere between heresy and dogma.³ Christians do not need to adhere to it as they do to the doctrine of the Trinity or ‘the union of deity and humanity in the one person of Christ’.⁴ Rather it should be seen as a *theologoumenon*, that is, a teaching about which orthodox Christians may disagree within the bounds of orthodoxy. In this context, the author concludes that one may not preach universalism as ‘the Christian view’; nonetheless one ‘may believe in it and one may also develop a universalist version of Christian theology’.⁵ At one and the same time the author proposes that we should not claim universalism as a straightforward orthodox Christian teaching but that he himself is ‘a convinced universalist’ and that therefore those who do not accept the proposition that ‘God will save everyone through Christ’ are mistaken.⁶ It did seem a bit odd to me that this same author went on to stress that he never taught or preached

¹ For an excellent summary of four ancient and modern views of hell and damnation see George Hunsinger, ‘Hellfire and Damnation: Four Ancient and Modern Views’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 51/4, pp. 406–34; reprinted in his *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), ch. 10. Hunsinger offers an insightful, accurate and helpful understanding of Barth’s view of universal redemption, concluding that for Barth, ‘Although universal salvation cannot be deduced as a necessity, it cannot be excluded as a possibility’ since these alternatives (logical deduction and definite exclusion) would not respect God’s freedom (p. 429). For a very interesting discussion of how the second coming (*parousia*) of Jesus shapes and should shape our view of Christian action and of the church in light of Christ’s resurrection, ascension and impending return, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III/2, The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Harold Knight, G. W. Bromiley, J. K. S. Reid and R. H. Fuller (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1968), pp. 506–11.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness, Arise! God’s Future for Humanity and the Earth*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), p. 142.

³ Gregory MacDonald (ed.), ‘*All Shall Be Well*’: *Explorations in Universalism and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. 4, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

universalism ‘in a church context’ and that if he did, he never would claim this was ‘the Christian teaching’, while simultaneously offering the book with the intention of gaining respect for universalism as ‘an authentically Christian attempt at faith seeking understanding’.⁷

Having said all of this, I must mention that I had already read Thomas F. Torrance’s response to John A. T. Robinson on this subject in a 1949 article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* where Torrance roundly condemned universalism, saying that ‘the voice of the Catholic Church . . . throughout all ages has consistently judged universalism a heresy for faith and a menace to the Gospel’.⁸ These are indeed sharp words and it is my task in this article to try to explain exactly why Torrance so forcefully opposed what he called the doctrine of universalism.⁹ It is important to make a distinction at the outset between the doctrine of universalism and the possibility that God might save all humanity, a possibility that both Barth and Torrance affirmed. In typed notes of an address he was preparing on ‘Karl Barth and Universalism’ Torrance opened his remarks noting that ‘Karl Barth believed in the universality of Christ’s saving work, but did not subscribe either to universalism or to limited atonement’.¹⁰ Here we get a hint of what it is that bothered Torrance so deeply about universalism; in his mind it is a form of rationalism which ignores the need for eschatological reserve and reads logical necessities back into the gospel of free grace. It thereby undercuts the true meaning of election as the ground of hope and leads both to ideas of limited atonement and determinism. The ultimate problem with this notion, from Torrance’s perspective, can be traced to some form of Nestorian thinking with respect to christology and to a theoretical and practical separation of the person of Christ from his atoning work for us. In the end, those who embrace a doctrine of universalism as opposed to its possibility also have an inadequate understanding of the Trinity, as I hope to show.

⁷ *Ibid.*, and p. 24.

⁸ T. F. Torrance, ‘Universalism or Election?’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949), pp. 310–18, at p. 310.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 313. Torrance held that ‘At the very best universalism could only be concerned with a hope, with a possibility, and could only be expressed apocalyptically’, so that if it is made into a ‘dogmatic statement, which is what the doctrine of universalism does’, then that destroys ‘the possibility in the necessity’.

¹⁰ Unpublished typescript of notes from an address dated 31 Oct. 1994 taken from the Princeton Seminary archives, p. 1. For Torrance’s defence of Barth against the charge of universalism or ‘universal salvation’, see Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), pp. 236–40.

The doctrine of God

Let me begin by pointing out why I think that the problem of universalism ultimately is a problem grounded in the doctrine of God. In the article which elicited Torrance's response, John A. T. Robinson connects eschatology with the doctrine of God precisely in order to refute Emil Brunner's view that 'a doctrine of universal restoration is wholly incompatible with a truly Biblical theology'.¹¹ Problems immediately arise, however, because Robinson claims that for the Bible 'God's nature is to be known and studied, not as He is in Himself, but always as He reveals and vindicates Himself in relation to the purposes He has to achieve and the powers He has to conquer'.¹² A comparable statement already concerned Torrance when, in his famous book, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, Rudolf Bultmann wrote that 'we cannot speak of what God is in Himself but only of what He is doing to us and with us'.¹³ In Torrance's estimation Bultmann had confused mythological statements about God with analogical statements and thus he rejected the idea that statements about God as creator could be understood as objective. Since they were mythological, they had to be understood 'as existential statements'.¹⁴ And to this Torrance reacted with the following question: 'But if we can say nothing about God in himself or about what he does objectively, can we still give any content to his actions in relation to ourselves, and can we really say anything at all of God, even in analogical language?'¹⁵ An excellent question which becomes even more significant, if that is possible, when the results of such analysis are seen in Bultmann's view of the resurrection as 'purely mythical'¹⁶ and thus only as something which takes place in us and not objectively in the history of Jesus himself. No wonder Torrance accused Bultmann of embracing a docetic christology and a christology which denied Christ's true divinity.¹⁷ In Torrance's view, such christology resulted from an attenuated concept of God such that God is thought to be 'present and active

¹¹ J. A. T. Robinson, 'Universalism: Is it Heretical?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949), pp. 139–55, at p. 139. See also John A. T. Robinson, *In the End, God . . . A Study of the Christian Doctrine of the Last Things*, ed. Robin Parry, foreword by Gregory MacDonald, intro. by Trevor Hart (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), p. 125.

¹² Robinson, 'Universalism', p. 139. Also, *In the End, God*, pp. 125–6.

¹³ Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 73.

¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), p. 288.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

in the death of Jesus Christ in no other way than he is present and active in a fatal accident in the street'.¹⁸

By conceptually marginalising the immanent Trinity in relation to the economic, Robinson himself is led to embrace a view of eternity which is more than a little doubtful because he makes God's eternity dependent on what God will do in relation to history as when he writes:

How He maintains Himself as God and the nature of his final lordship is therefore at the same time the answer to what He essentially is. The truth or falsity of the universalistic assertion, that in the end He is Lord entirely of a world wanting His lordship, is consequently determinative of the whole Christian doctrine of the nature of God.¹⁹

What happens at the end of history therefore determines the nature of God. God is not who God is prior to and even without creation; God is God rather as one who is eternal in the sense that he 'outstays the assault of the final enemy and yet abides'.²⁰ By confusing God's being with his actions in history, Robinson makes God's nature dependent on what happens in history, whereas in a proper Christian doctrine of God, what happens in history at the end must be understood with what Torrance called an 'eschatological reserve' because God is not determined by historical events but acts in history as one who is both loving and free. It is no accident that by thinking of God and of salvation in mythological terms Robinson reduces God to his will and thus to his purposes in history.²¹ By confusing God's nature and will Robinson is led to espouse the idea that because God wills the salvation of all, all must be saved. And, if they are not, then that is a failure of his omnipotent love. Hence, because God is both loving and omnipotent, Robinson argues that if God's love 'cannot draw out men's wills to free response, then it has no other resource: it is finished'.²²

¹⁸ See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 277.

¹⁹ Robinson, 'Universalism', pp. 139–40, and *In the End, God*, p. 126.

²⁰ Robinson, 'Universalism', p. 139.

²¹ For Robinson's understanding of myth see *In the End, God*, pp. 26–8, 55–63, 83–92. Since myth for Robinson is 'not free speculation' but 'a picture designed to bring out the true depths of the present awareness' (p. 56), his very understanding suffers from the same existentialising difficulty that Torrance objected to in Bultmann's thinking. One can offer a mythological view of the resurrection, for example, without actually allowing the risen Lord himself to dictate the meaning of what is said; not a word about Christ's bodily resurrection determines Robinson's analysis of what bodily resurrection means for us because for him 'The doctrine of bodily resurrection is not forecast but myth' (p. 84).

²² Robinson, 'Universalism', p. 147 and *In the End, God*, p. 134.

This is exactly what Torrance found objectionable, since it introduces a logical necessity into the picture where God's free actions of love should be recognised, by attempting to get behind God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ to construct an idea of God's love abstractly by taking 'omnipotence and love as logical counters' and thus setting up the problem in a way which requires a 'logical answer'.²³ In that scenario Torrance insists that Robinson's 'desired conclusion, universalism, follows easily'²⁴ since Robinson introduced a 'logical-causal relation between the atoning death of Christ and the forgiveness of our sins' so that 'If that atoning death applies to all men then logically and causally all men must of necessity be saved: but if some men actually go to hell then logically and causally the efficacy of that atoning death does not and cannot apply to them.'²⁵

Universal salvation and limited atonement: twin errors

Here the twin errors of universal salvation and limited atonement arise as a result of a failure properly to acknowledge God's free love in himself and in God's acts of incarnation and atonement in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Limited atonement, in Torrance's view, arises as a possibility only in the thought of those who introduce 'a limitation of the very being of God as love'. In other words it rests upon what Torrance candidly calls 'a schizoid notion of the incarnation, i.e. upon a basic Nestorian heresy'.²⁶ In his book on atonement, Torrance explains that it is vitally important that we recognise the impossibility of separating Christ's deity from his humanity or Christ from the Father. While he rejects patripassianism, he nonetheless insists that 'God the judge made himself also the one judged in our place'.²⁷ But this means that what Torrance labels the 'hyper-Calvinist' view, that 'He suffered only in his humanity' and that what Christ did on the cross was efficacious 'only for those whom the Father had given him'²⁸, will never do. Torrance unequivocally rejects this view because it keeps God in heaven and thus utterly apart from what Christ did on the cross for us. And that would have

²³ Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?', p. 311, and Robinson, *In the End, God*, p. 144.

²⁴ Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?', p. 311.

²⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, '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: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics, 1991* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 225–56, at p. 246.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p. 184.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

to mean that all that Christ did for us humanly was not necessarily what God did. Hence Christ's sacrifice may be seen 'as satisfaction only for the number of the elect that God has previously chosen or determined'.²⁹

Torrance adamantly rejects this thinking as arbitrary because it conflicts with the fact that in the incarnation God assumed our burden of guilt and judgement. Consequently, he holds the view that God stands with humanity under judgement in the incarnate Word by becoming 'himself the man judged and bearing his own judgement upon the sin of humanity'; therefore, 'we cannot divorce the action of Christ on the cross from the action of God'.³⁰ In his mind this would amount to a view of limited atonement which only becomes possible by separating Christ's divinity and humanity. In that sense such thinking is based upon 'a basic Nestorian heresy'.³¹ Limited atonement in the end would mean that God had not uttered a final No against sin; Christ's substitutionary act then would have only been partial and this would in reality detach final judgement from the cross and open the door to the idea that sinners still must face their final judgement instead of realising that this is what Christ experienced on our behalf. Dividing God from Christ in this way would have to lead to the idea that God will still judge humanity apart from the cross and eliminate the idea that all judgement was committed to the Son.³² This thinking originates in a type of thinking that presumes there really is a God 'behind the back of Jesus Christ'.³³

Several other questionable ideas are at work here as well. First, there are the notions of irresistible grace and absolute divine causality based on a 'philosophical or metaphysical conception' which must be rejected.³⁴ On the one hand, it must be the case that 'all for whom Christ died efficaciously must necessarily be saved'.³⁵ On the other hand, a doctrine of 'absolute predestination' seems to offer a notion of causal efficacy to Christ's death which makes it applicable only to the elect; 'otherwise all would be saved'.³⁶ If, however, divine causality is conceptualised this way, then

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 185. Torrance reiterates this point frequently and never wavers from this position. See e.g. *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 185, and *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 249.

³¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 185.

³² Ibid. See also Torrance, 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 245.

³³ For a concise presentation of this see Torrance, *Karl Barth*, pp. 239–40.

³⁴ Torrance, *Atonement*, pp. 186–7. Torrance traces the fatuous idea that 'while the death of Christ was sufficient for all people it was efficient only for some' to Alexander of Hales: 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 245.

³⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 186.

³⁶ Ibid.

the crucial question arises as to exactly how we can 'preserve the freedom and transcendence of God'. Some theologians attempted to preserve God's freedom by grounding atonement in God's free will as an arbitrary act in order to avoid suggesting that atonement flows from God's nature. Others claimed that atonement does indeed flow from God's nature. But, according to Torrance, 'if the nature of God is only to love some and not to love others . . . then the nature of God is attacked'.³⁷

In any case it is just such thinking which logically leads to the idea of universal salvation because 'if the nature of God is absolute causality and if atonement flows out of that divine nature, then an atoning death for all means the necessary salvation of all'.³⁸ This leads to two more problematic ideas which Torrance rightly rejects. The first one is that what God provided was only the possibility of salvation on the cross of Christ so that every person must 'translate that general possibility into actuality in their own case'.³⁹ But that thinking opens the door to Arminianism which makes salvation contingent on people's responses of faith. That unfortunately advances the distasteful idea of conditional salvation which, in Torrance's view, ultimately teaches that 'everyone is their own saviour, in so far as they have to co-operate with Christ for their salvation'.⁴⁰ Regarding salvation only as a possibility and not as a completed reality creates uncertainty regarding our salvation and transfers the weight of salvation itself to those who are powerless to save themselves. The 'hyper-Calvinists' resolved this problem by claiming that atonement was 'efficacious' only for those 'for whom it was intentionally undertaken, and for them alone'.⁴¹ But this was to separate the cross from God's love and ultimately to separate Christ's person from his work and thus 'to destroy the atonement as well as the incarnation'.⁴² Not a small issue! Here Torrance claims both universalism and limited atonement are ideas put forward by those who have yet to bow their reason to the cross of Christ. In other words these logical explanations of atonement are rationalistic attempts to explain Christ's atoning action which do not do justice to the mystery of salvation which actually took place on the cross and was revealed in the resurrection and ascension.

Torrance's own argument runs like this. Since we have access to God both ontologically and epistemologically only through Christ's atoning death on

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

the cross, this must mean that what God does as God for us in the incarnation and atonement is anchored in the eternal triune being of God himself as the one who loves. So, following St Paul (Eph 2:13ff.), when Torrance says that both Jews and Gentiles have access 'by one Spirit to the Father'⁴³ because of Christ's atoning propitiation, he certainly does not mean that God needed a propitiating act to be placated in order to reconcile us to himself. Rather, he meant that in that act of Jesus on the cross, God had drawn near to us and 'draws us near to himself through the blood of Christ' – in other words 'God acts from both sides of the barrier of enmity between us, from the side of God toward us sinners, and from our side toward himself, thereby effecting reconciliation between us'.⁴⁴ But this act of God for us must mean that 'Christ died for all humanity – that is a fact that cannot be undone'.⁴⁵ Because the person and work of Christ are one, God has loved us unconditionally in the incarnation and in Christ's death on the cross and that cannot be undone. It is a fact 'that God has taken the great positive decision for man'.⁴⁶ For that reason we must acknowledge that 'God does not withhold himself from any one, but he gives himself to all whether they will or not – even if they will not have him'.⁴⁷

It is Torrance's view that the New Testament stresses that the Holy Spirit is mediated to us only through Christ's atoning death on the cross so that through the Spirit we are united to Christ in his 'vicarious humanity' and we participate in his saving work. That means that it is only through Jesus himself, and thus through the Spirit uniting us to him, that we are given access 'to knowledge of him as he is in himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.⁴⁸ Apart from his death on the cross and his resurrection then, we never really know God in himself in his internal relations and to that extent we do not know the love of God which was and is revealed in Jesus Christ. Indeed, apart from these events Torrance says 'we may not know God in the inner relations of his triune being, but only in the undifferentiated oneness of his unnameable being as is claimed in Judaism'.⁴⁹ It is crucial to ground what Christ did on the cross in the eternal being of the Trinity. Without this, one might reasonably claim that what Jesus did on the cross was immoral because one human being cannot really stand in for another before God; Christ can do this, Torrance insists, only because he is God himself acting both from

⁴³ Torrance, 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 242.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 188.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁴⁸ Torrance, 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 243.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the divine and from the human side simultaneously as our representative and saviour. It is in this context that Torrance unequivocally rejects any sort of limited atonement because by conceptually limiting the range of atoning redemption to some, we also would be limiting 'the range of the nature, being and love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'.⁵⁰ But it is also in this context that he insists that a doctrine of universalism destroys the possibility of universal salvation as an object of eschatological hope by transforming it into a necessity, thereby undermining the need for the free decision of faith and obscuring the seriousness of sin and evil as realities which cannot be explained logically, if at all.⁵¹

Universalism and election

It is in his understanding of election or predestination that Torrance offers a proper view of God's omnipotence which avoids determinism and preserves both divine and human freedom. 'Omnipotence is not causality absolutised, potency raised to the nth degree' because that is not the power of God which meets us in revelation.⁵² As opposed to the God we might imagine in a natural theology which, Torrance says, 'causes all the mischief'⁵³ with regard to predestination, a proper view of the doctrine, which is often overlooked, sees that it primarily has to do with Christ. 'Just because Christ is, therefore, the author and the instrument of election, we may not think of it in any deterministic sense.'⁵⁴ Predestination, writes Torrance, 'has nothing whatsoever to do with it [determinism]'.⁵⁵ Rather, he insists, it has to do with the love of God 'as related to the divine aseity' and thus with God's grace. While Torrance freely admits that scripture tells us that some people are elected and others are apparently damned, this cannot be understood to mean that 'there can be no election without damnation'.⁵⁶ It cannot mean that one person is damned and the other elected 'simpliciter'. Such a view would introduce 'the element of necessity'. Nonetheless, Torrance opposes any idea of free will which might be neutral because he thinks it is this false idea which leads people to reject

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

⁵¹ Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?', pp. 313–14, and Robinson, *In the End, God*, pp. 147–8. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), pp. 104–8 where Torrance insists on the need to hold predestination and eschatology together, as Calvin did.

⁵² Thomas F. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', *Evangelical Quarterly* 13 (1941), pp. 108–41, at p. 114.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 115.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

belief that some actually are elect and some damned. In a manner intended to be more consistent than the Reformers, Torrance wanted to stress that the grace of God must be understood both ‘extensively’ and ‘intensively’.⁵⁷ It must never be understood in an impersonal way which could lead to an extreme Augustinianism where theologians could assume cause and effect when viewing one who is taken and one who is left. Torrance insists that no such thought occurs to Paul, especially in Romans 9–11. For Paul ‘Christ died for all’ and ‘Grace extends freely to every man’.⁵⁸ Because grace is grounded in the divine aseity, it must be seen as wholly grounded in itself and therefore as free in the sense that God’s freedom is not bounded by any other. Torrance thus unequivocally rejects the idea that God’s freedom is in any sense ‘bounded by ours’. The ‘pre’ in predestination then neither refers to a temporal nor a logical *prius*, ‘but simply to God Himself, the Eternal’.⁵⁹

Predestination could only be falsely interpreted in terms of cause and effect if our understanding of it became a projection of our view from within time, that is, from within our fallen world. Yet, for Torrance, the ‘pre’ in predestination is ‘the most vigorous protest against’ such a view available in Christian theology. Election, Torrance insists, must be seen to be an act of the ‘Eternal’ which is “‘per se” or “a se””. That means it is grounded ‘in the personal relations of the Trinity. Just because we know God to be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we know the Will of God to be supremely Personal – and it is to that Will that predestination tells us our salvation is to be referred.’⁶⁰ But this is possible only if God himself has come among us and made himself personally known, as he did in the incarnation, so that in Jesus Christ ‘the act of predestination is seen to be the act of creative Grace in the communion of the Holy Spirit’.⁶¹ Because election is God’s sovereign act of grace, his omnipotence can never be conceived as an arbitrary act, a necessity or some ‘immanent force acting under the compulsion of some *prius* or unknown law within His being. A doctrine of election which involves the element of necessity at the human end cannot escape asserting the element of necessity at the divine end.’⁶² Because election means that God acts personally from the divine side and from the human side to overcome our bondage to sin, this view of the matter utterly negates equating predestination with determinism. The divine freedom, Torrance repeats, ‘is independent “a se” freedom; the

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

freedom of the Creator as distinguished from the freedom of the creature'⁶³ and as such is an act of love. God has chosen us because he loves us. But he simply loves us because he loves us. There is a danger in this. To give any other reason for God's love than his love itself, even if that reason is grounded in some divine *prius* that is thought to precede grace, or in human experience itself, is 'to deny love, to disrupt the Christian apprehension of God and to condemn the world to chaos!'⁶⁴

Because God's omnipotent love is his electing love, it is true before we know it to be true. Consequently, 'we are not free to make it true – we can only acknowledge its truth in obedience, or of course deny it by our disobedience'.⁶⁵ Those who know they are chosen by God will never claim that they chose God of themselves. They will always recognise that their choices can add nothing to the fact that God has already chosen us in Christ. This is a crucial insight for Torrance with wide-ranging effect. Because election is grace as just described, the love of God cannot be known by exploring human love. Rather, this decision of God for us is 'absolutely decisive'.⁶⁶ And this means that it literally cannot be understood in terms of anything else. Its character does not come from us but from God alone. If its meaning came from us in any sense at all, then it could be understood as 'an event in a series, a worldly event, part of the causal continuum'.⁶⁷ Yet, strangely, Torrance says, this very idea that we have some choice with regard to our salvation is precisely the idea which opens the door to determinism.

In electing us in Christ, God does something new, new even for himself. This has become a somewhat controversial point today. But it was crucial for Torrance because with this idea he could stress that God was always Father and always Son but not always creator and not always incarnate, thus avoiding projecting necessities back into the immanent Trinity. Like Karl Barth, Torrance wanted to think in terms of *wholes* with subsidiary relations to parts in their essential relations to wholes and therefore 'never of wholes as the sum of their parts'.⁶⁸ In this way he could say at one and the same time that these new acts are new even for God and 'yet they are indivisibly one with what he eternally is and does'.⁶⁹ Hence, as new actions even for God,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 118.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See the Torrance typescript on 'Barth and Universalism', p. 1. Thus he could say that 'the Trinity is a whole with differentiations such that while remaining distinct each Person is whole God, while whole God is three distinct Persons' (p. 1).

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

creation and incarnation imply ‘staggeringly, that even in the life of God there is change: God was not eternally Creator . . . Nor was God eternally incarnate, for in Jesus Christ he became what he never was eternally, a creature, without of course ceasing to be the eternal God.’⁷⁰ Yet precisely as these new actions, they belong to ‘the dynamic wholeness of God’s perfect work’⁷¹ and as such God can be understood to bring about new actions and yet remains ‘what he ever was and is and ever will be, in his eternal being and activity’. This does not detract from what is really new and so, with Barth, Torrance could speak of ‘the history of God’⁷² in a way similar to the way he could speak of God’s time and our time.⁷³

Free will and sin

In reality, deterministic thinking is based on a false idea of free will. Torrance often characterises our free will as our self-will just because he takes sin seriously, claiming that in the history of human thought the ambiguous concept of free will ‘is the correlative of determinism’.⁷⁴ Freedom, Torrance contends, must not be seen as something that is neutral. That is a ‘pure figment’ and the cause of a good deal of mischief with regard to this and other doctrines. The question is ‘Freedom for what?’⁷⁵ Torrance freely admits, with Luther, that we have freedom with respect to things in this world, even though that is ‘impaired’. But we have none in relation to God and thus with regard to our salvation. While we may direct ourselves towards God, even that will be empty unless God himself wills to give himself to us. Strictly speaking, in Luther’s view, only God has free will for ‘He alone “doth (as the Psalm sings) what He will in Heaven and earth”’.⁷⁶ Because of sin, however, when we do direct ourselves towards God we are met by the criticism of

⁷⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), p. 66.

⁷¹ Torrance typescript on ‘Barth and Universalism’, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid.* See also *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 242.

⁷³ For how Torrance understands God’s time and ours see Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 253–9. See also Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 69–71, where he speaks of a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in God’s life because in some sense, without being limited as we are, God’s uncreated life is marked by time inasmuch as for God there is a before and after creation and incarnation. Cf. also *The Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 241–2.

⁷⁴ Torrance, ‘Predestination in Christ’, p. 120. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry*, ed. Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), pp. 30–2.

⁷⁵ Torrance, ‘Predestination in Christ’, p. 120.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, and p. 136, n. 45. Torrance here is quoting from Luther.

the divine judgement because our wills are neither neutral nor objectless but wills which have only ourselves for an object! In other words 'The will of the sinner is free, but it is determined by a usurped freedom which is itself sin'.⁷⁷

Here, in a deeper way, we may see why Torrance is so opposed to universalism. Its thinking actually becomes possible only where there is a 'shallow view of sin'.⁷⁸ Torrance has no shallow view of sin because he understands sin in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Thus, he claims that because sin takes place *before* God there are two sides to it. First, there is 'the holy resistance of God to sin', which must take place since if God did not resist evil 'there would be no distinction between good and evil' and that would have to mean that 'God's nature was such that He did not care whether a man committed murder, for example, or not'.⁷⁹ Second, there is God's wrath which we experience as guilt. God's wrath refers to the fact that God does indeed resist and oppose our sin; and sin is real to God – so real, Torrance says, 'that it meant the Cross'.⁸⁰ It is real in the sense that it does not just refer to something which is defective in creation but to an opposition to God and to God's opposition to this rebellion in such a way that we have no freedom whatsoever to overcome this situation. In Torrance's words 'Sin is utter separation from God, alienation from God'.⁸¹ It really is rebellion against God in the sense that we utterly depend on God – 'The creature requires relation to the creator in order to be a creature'.⁸² But that relation is given in the Spirit of God and requires his Spirit; thus sin seen in light of the biblical witness presupposes our unity with God given in the Spirit and actualised by the Spirit in the community at Pentecost.

We are literally in bondage to sin. This cannot be described in terms of a metaphysical distance between creatures and God the creator. Rather, our distance from God is due 'precisely to the nearness of God' to us and thus to 'the antagonism between God's holy will of love and our sin'. This is why 'the nearer God comes, the more intense the conflict and we are forced to cry, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"'.⁸³ Because of this, any attempt by us to extricate ourselves from sin will only alienate us from God all the more. Sin is both objective and subjective and means something to God and to us; and we have no ability to control it. Into this picture Torrance

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 122.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 247.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

inserts the fact that in spite of all this God judges our sin by taking our place and experiencing hell and damnation for us on the cross of Christ. He justifies the ungodly apart from the law so as to fulfil the law. This is why Torrance characterises the wrath of God as the 'wrath of the lamb' which is 'the wrath of redeeming love'.⁸⁴ God's wrath then is part of God's atoning act in the person of the mediator in that it brings about the new creation. 'It is the rejection of evil, of our evil by the very love that God himself eternally is.'⁸⁵

Besides that, Torrance insists that the Bible nowhere offers a view of sin independent of God's grace and love. Nowhere is there a presentation of sin in an abstract or independent way in order then to show 'over against that background the grace and love of God in redemption'.⁸⁶ We must never forget, Torrance insists, that the cross has a light and a dark side; the former refers to the resurrection and our affirmation in Christ and the latter refers to our inhumanity. This is why Torrance claims that the more Jesus went about his ministry, the more he uncovered the depth of evil in the human heart which finally led to the cross and which needed to be overcome and was in fact overcome in the person of the mediator.⁸⁷ The cross was God's supreme judgement on humanity and it was 'pronounced by mankind themselves in this dastardly act of crucifixion, as well as pronounced by God who submits to man's outrage and bears it all in his love'.⁸⁸ Things are so bad that the only salvation there can be is that which is grounded in the Son's crucifixion for us. Here is our judgement:

mankind is so bad that it rose up, spat in the very face of God and slew him on a tree. None of us can dissociate ourselves from that, from those Jews and Gentiles, the representatives of church and state, and the crowd of the common people, who crucified Jesus . . . If Christ came today we would still crucify him.⁸⁹

Sin is so utterly destructive to us that it is a 'form of suicide', a rebellion against the 'innermost relation that constitutes their very being as creature'.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁸⁷ See e.g. *ibid.*, pp. 150–6, 246–56 and 323.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 247–8.

Law and sin

Perhaps one can understand the depth of Torrance's argument here by exploring briefly how he understands the law and sin. Following St Paul and the thought of Kierkegaard, Torrance argues for what he calls the 'teleological suspension of ethics'⁹¹ or the 'soteriological suspension of ethics',⁹² whereby we understand our justification as a miraculous act of God because it refers to God's act of righteousness which forgives our sin and thus justifies sinners. This is an act which literally cannot be understood from within the moral law as it now stands or as a legal transaction because from the point of view of morality and the law 'forgiveness is impossible – it is legally speaking immoral or amoral'.⁹³ Forgiveness as justification thus cannot be understood 'from any ground in the moral order as such' but 'only can be acknowledged and believed as a real event that has in the amazing grace of God actually overtaken us. It is a *fait accompli*'.⁹⁴ This does not mean that the law is put aside any more than God's judgement is put aside. What it means is that Christ brought about our regeneration from within his own personal activity from the divine and the human side so that he lived 'an altogether new way of life for us resulting from our being translated out of the bondage of law into the freedom of the children of God'.⁹⁵

Torrance maintains that the will of God is not manifest in abstract terms of ethics or law or even goodness but only in love, that is, in God's holy love which brings about peace between us and God. As sinners we use the law to 'escape from God's judgement, in order to escape from God'.⁹⁶ We use the moral law, 'seizing the ethical imperative of God, making it an independent authority which is identified with human higher nature' and thus escape God by 'deifying humanity – "you will be like God"'.⁹⁷ Human moral awareness in other words 'tends to sever its connection with God' becoming 'autonomous or semi-autonomous' so that our relations with God cease to be direct and become indirect, taking place through the ethical imperative, 'by inference from it'.⁹⁸ People thus attempt to relate themselves to God 'through the medium of the universal' by means of 'duty to their neighbour' instead of to God in particular.⁹⁹ This is why Torrance says that

⁹¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 118.

⁹² Torrance, 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 252.

⁹³ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 118.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Torrance, 'The Singularity of Christ', p. 253.

⁹⁶ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 112.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 112–13. Torrance here refers to Gen 3:5.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Torrance is here thinking of Kant's universal moral imperative.

sin always produces a 'legal outlook'. Sinners fall back upon legal observance of the law to validate their actions. But in that way they 'can yield obedience formally to the law without actually surrendering the citadel of the soul' and thus exchange the 'spirit for the deadness of the letter', and 'God for an ideal'.¹⁰⁰ The cross of Christ discloses 'the secret operations of the human heart in holding down the truth in unrighteousness and turning it into a lie'; hence sinners worship idols 'be they of gold and silver or of ethics and moral ideals' and thus the 'creature rather than the creator'. God's atoning action in Christ thus is actualised as 'God's truth' in the 'teeth of abstract truth' or as God's righteousness 'in the teeth of abstract justice' or God's personal presence in Christ 'in the teeth of religion, for religion becomes the highest form of sin'.¹⁰¹ God does not destroy this law but fulfils it by personally loving us in the substitutionary action of Christ himself on the cross. God will not let us go even in the exercise of his wrath because God always acts towards us in love. In Christ's perfect obedience we can see 'beyond the law to God himself' so that we now can realise that insofar as the 'law has become an end in itself, even relatively, a law in itself, it is suspended . . . as an intermediary between God and man'. It is not set aside or ignored, but here we look beyond the law to God himself who personally loves us in judging us in Christ's very own death. For those who are in Christ, Torrance says, there is no condemnation.¹⁰² In a very real sense, what has been overcome for us in Christ's atoning action is the type of dualistic view which threatens us as sinners, namely, our attempt to separate ourselves theoretically and practically from God by using the law which was given by God.

Sin must be understood here to mean that we do not just sin against love or goodness or even against others. Sin means 'it is sin against God . . . As such sin is "cursed" by God – it comes under his total ban'.¹⁰³ Even though we are sinners because of the fall, and even though we stand under God's wrath or opposition to sin and God's curse or 'banishment' to our own denial of our being in God – 'into the very darkness upon which God has for ever turned his back in creation and on the cross',¹⁰⁴ God has

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 114.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 117, referring to Rom 8:1.

¹⁰³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 250.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 251. This is the meaning of *sheol* in the Old Testament, i.e. 'existence in man's self-chosen perversity and blindness. That curse lies upon all sinners as their destiny in their sin and it already casts its shadow over them . . . *sheol* is, however, a sort of suspended darkness, a suspended existence behind the back of God', awaiting God's final act of judgement as justification for those who cast themselves upon God's judgement and 'banishment for those who choose to remain in their alienation'.

‘established a new covenant founded upon and ministered by his direct, utterly gracious, and personal dealing with sinners in which he freely grants forgiveness and life’.¹⁰⁵ Hence, ‘the cross of Christ’ is an ‘interruption of the ethical order of the fallen world’ and sets ‘our life on the wholly new basis of grace’.¹⁰⁶ This is why all forms of self-justification are so horrible. In those actions we pretend to be something we are not – free for God when in reality, apart from grace, our free will remains our self-will.¹⁰⁷ We are guilty before God in that we are inclined away from God and also because God opposes and must oppose our sin. What is revealed, however, on the cross and in the resurrection is that God will not let us go as sinners. In his amazing love, God maintains relation with us even in our resistance against God. It is into this situation that the Son of God entered ‘to endure the contradiction of sinners against himself, and to shatter the bond of sin and death’.¹⁰⁸

Here God deals with our sin and our guilt, that is, with the full force of divine resistance against our sin. This is what Torrance means by hell. Christ descended into the ‘black abyss’ which separates us from God, namely, our self-willed independence of God and resistance to God’s will for us. In his incarnate person he bore our sin and our guilt in order to redeem us. Only Christ the mediator could and did bridge ‘the chasm of hell in his own incarnate person’, in both his bodily suffering and ‘in the fearful pain and judgement which he bore on his soul’.¹⁰⁹ Torrance insists that God cannot and will not go back ‘upon the death of his dear Son, for there is perfect oneness between the Son and the Father and he accepts his sacrifice on our behalf as full satisfaction for our sin and guilt, a satisfaction which he accepts because it is offered by himself and borne by himself’.¹¹⁰ The cross then means that God has finally and fully rejected our sin by taking it upon himself. God himself experienced his own rejection of sin in the person of Jesus Christ and that is the positive final act of divine love. That is what free forgiveness is. It does not rest upon our worth but only upon the blood of Christ and thus upon God’s ‘overflowing love’.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 253.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Torrance, *Atonement*, pp. 154–5. Here satisfaction means that ‘God has fulfilled the will of his love in taking our judgement on himself and in bearing it in our stead’.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

Hell and universalism

What then happens to those who do finally resist God's love as manifested on the cross and in the resurrection? Was hell eliminated? Can people actually go to hell? And what does that mean? Because Torrance thinks that Christ's death is the expression of God's unceasing love towards the human race, he argues that 'if a sinner goes to hell, it is not because God rejected them, for God has only chosen to love them, and has only accepted them in Christ'.¹¹² If indeed anyone does go to hell 'they go to hell, only because, inconceivably, they refuse the positive act of the divine acceptance of them, and refuse to acknowledge that God has taken their rejection of him upon himself . . . reprobation is the reprobation only of the man who refuses the election of grace'.¹¹³ Torrance insists that 'Because of the blood of Christ there is no positive decision of God to reject anyone'.¹¹⁴ That statement seems only a hair's breadth away from a universalist position. But it differs from universalism because Torrance wants to stress that what was enacted on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus was completed objectively and effectively for all; no one is excluded and yet one cannot assume that all are automatically saved because it is the Holy Spirit who actualises reconciliation in us subjectively.¹¹⁵ Hence our minds need to be healed through our acceptance of Christ's forgiving grace so that we may know God in truth and know also of our salvation in Christ. It is in our minds that we are alienated from God. And even though there are some people who 'strangely and un-understandably reject Christ and bring upon themselves the final judgment of God',¹¹⁶ Torrance insists that even though there is 'objective revelation' and 'objective forgiveness' as well as 'objective reconciliation' and an 'objective Christ', the fact is that 'we may pass all these by and pass Christ by and not know it, or blind ourselves to it'.¹¹⁷

Sin of course is not limited to our minds but affects us *in toto* ontologically so that in the depths of our minds, hearts and being we are sinners as those who oppose God and who are thus opposed by God.¹¹⁸ Into this 'black abyss' as we have seen, Christ came to reconcile us to God. But it is that abyss which

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 156–7.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 157.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. Interestingly, Pope John Paul II says something quite similar in his reflections on hell: "Eternal damnation", therefore, is not attributed to God's initiative because in his merciful love he can only desire salvation . . . it is the creature who closes himself to this love', <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2heavn.htm>, p. 5.

¹¹⁵ See Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 154, and *Atonement*, pp. 189–90, 326–9.

¹¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), p. 95.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

¹¹⁸ See esp. Torrance, *Atonement*, pp. 437–47.

Torrance calls hell. Christ descended into the 'blackness of man's alienation from God' to save us precisely by uniting us to God in his own person and bearing our guilt by bearing it away.¹¹⁹ That is what it means to be saved by grace. Apart from any work of ours and apart from any worthiness on our part, God acted as our reconciler in the divine-human person of the mediator. We are included both in his death and in his resurrection. But apart from the Spirit, we neither see that nor are able to live in that freedom which has been wrought for us.

Does Torrance think it is possible for some people to go to hell? His answer is yes. To deny this is to deny both divine and human freedom by failing to allow our understanding of God's actions for us to be the actions of one who has come, is present now in his Spirit and is coming again to complete the redemption. That is God's action. Therefore to make salvation an ontological necessity is to encroach upon God's free love. What is needed is an 'eschatological reserve'. So naturally he would not believe, with Moltmann, that hell itself will be done away with. But is hell a place that can be described with the lay preacher in the fictitious 'Church of the Quivering Brethren' where there is 'endless horrifyin' torment', with people's 'poor sinful bodies stretched out on hot gridirons in the nethermost fiery pit of hell, and demons' mocking them while cool jellies are waved in front of them?¹²⁰ No, because hell is not a place we can locate on MapQuest any more than heaven can be so located. Hell means God-forsakenness. Speaking of Christ's cry of dereliction recorded in Mark 15:34 Torrance writes that it indicated Jesus' 'descending into the hell of our darkness and godlessness. He was asking the ultimate question from the point of identification with man in his ultimate need.'¹²¹

In Torrance's view, the all-important point here is that in the hypostatic union, Christ assumed our sinful and damned human existence marked by sin and death and forged a union between divine and human being, demonstrating in his life of obedience that death could not control him. Jesus' resurrection indicated that death and sin were not natural to human life because the hypostatic union itself survived his descent into hell.¹²² Torrance will say that in his resurrection, with his perfect Amen to the Father, Jesus destroyed the power of hell. But he will also say that there is

¹¹⁹ Torrance, *Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, pp. 163–4.

¹²⁰ Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation', p. 407. This is taken from *Cold Comfort Farm*, a comic novel by Stella Gibbons, first published in 1932.

¹²¹ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 117–18. Torrance notes that these words were those of Psalm 22, which Jesus made his own.

¹²² Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), p. 54.

what he calls the 'enigma of Judas', namely, the inexplicable refusal of God's love. Nonetheless, even those who are damned cannot escape the love of God which is active and revealed in Christ. God's love resists the sinner's attempt to isolate himself. That is why a person's being in hell is not the result of God's decision 'to damn him' but 'the result of his own decision to choose himself against the love of God'.¹²³

Here, in contrast to Augustine's view that God 'consigns sinners to eternal death'¹²⁴, Torrance maintains that hell is a consequence of our own choice of ourselves in place of God who is the only source of life and light. Yet there is a puzzling aspect to this part of his explanation because, as we have seen, Torrance also stresses that the wrath of God is an action that God must take in opposition to our sin or he would cease being righteous himself. In that sense it would seem that one would have to say that our damned existence which Christ assumed in order to save us from hell and damnation is what it is also by an act of God in response to our rebellion. But the difference in each case is this. While God does indeed vent his wrath as Torrance puts it,¹²⁵ he does so by vicariously absorbing the divine resistance to sin in the incarnate Son so that it would not fall on us. Torrance of course insists that the New Testament nowhere refers to this as punishment but rather thinks of it as God's suffering his own active opposition to sin in order to bestow himself upon us.¹²⁶ In that sense Torrance clearly means that Christ is the one who descended into hell for us. Yet, it is still inexplicably possible for people even to reject that, and that is the hell they inevitably may bring upon themselves.

Conclusion

As is well known, T. F. Torrance consistently opposed what he called the 'Latin Heresy'. This heresy involved what Torrance often referred to as an epistemological and ontological dualism which led to such heresies as Arianism and Nestorianism historically and to the kinds of theology which would deny Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead as the factor that enables a serious theology of divine and human interaction even today. In this article I have attempted to explain why Torrance rejected universalism and limited atonement, as forms of understanding Christ's saving work in a way which detached that work from his person as the Incarnate Word.

¹²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), pp. cxiv–cxv.

¹²⁴ Hunsinger, 'Hellfire and Damnation', p. 413.

¹²⁵ Torrance, *Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, p. 171.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 171–2.

Any such logical or causal way of understanding atonement is, in Torrance's estimation, just one more example of the 'Latin Heresy' because it leads only to a moral explanation of our redemption instead of one which sees redemption as an act from the divine and human side that really took place for us in the person of the mediator. Such a view, Torrance contends, offers only a juridical and external moral view of Christ's sacrifice on the cross and misses the fact that what Christ did on the cross could only be explained by reference to the internal relations of the Son to the Father, with the result that we would then see that God himself had 'come down from heaven' and was active in Jesus Christ for our sakes but not for his own sake.¹²⁷

This implies that redemption and creation must be held together and 'allowed to interpenetrate each other'.¹²⁸ When reconciliation is seen as a creative and atoning act of God accomplished 'in the ontological depths of human existence' marked by sin, guilt and misery, then our regeneration and redemption will be understood to mean that in the resurrection, which belongs to the essence of atonement, our human nature was raised into 'union with the divine life embodied in Jesus Christ and exhibited in his resurrection from the dead'.¹²⁹ Moreover, when the incarnation is not understood in some dualistic way, it then can be seen that 'Jesus Christ does not mediate a reconciliation, any more than a revelation, other than what he is in himself, as though he were merely the intermediary or instrument of divine reconciliation'.¹³⁰ This for Torrance is the living heart of the Gospel, namely, that Jesus Christ as the Word made flesh is the 'content and reality of divine reconciliation. He is the propitiation for our sins; he is our redemption; he is our justification.'¹³¹ What all of this means is that there is an 'intrinsic oneness between Jesus Christ and God' and thus between his person and his work.¹³² Any dualistic separation of these affects every doctrine but here, where universalism is concerned, it is particularly problematic because, while we know that Christ died for all without exception, and that God wills the salvation of all, we also know that God is still at work in the risen and ascended Lord and will not complete the redemption until he returns. That calls for eschatological reserve when approaching the question of universalism. Hence, Torrance maintains that it is a possibility, but that any attempt to make it a necessity means intrusion into the mystery of God's continuing

¹²⁷ Torrance, 'Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy', in *Karl Barth*, pp. 228–9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

free actions of love in his Word and Spirit.¹³³ In Torrance's words 'the problem of universalism versus limited atonement is itself a manifestation of "the Latin heresy" at work within Protestant and evangelical thought'.¹³⁴ Having said this and having read what I have presented here, perhaps one can see a bit more clearly exactly why Torrance would consider a doctrine of universalism a 'menace to the Gospel'.

¹³³ See 'Universalism or Election?', p. 314. Torrance writes: 'True dogmatic procedure at this point is to suspend judgment . . . for here that is the most rational thing reason can do. Whether all men will as a matter of fact be saved or not, in the nature of the case, cannot be known'.

¹³⁴ Torrance, 'Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy', in *Karl Barth*, p. 239.