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The Doctrine of Election in Evangelical Calvinism: T. F. Torrance as a Case Study

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Representing what may be termed 'evangelical Calvinism,' Thomas Forsyth Torrance's doctrine of election is, with critical modifications, recommended as a model worthy of contemporary acceptance. Torrance follows Barth's christologically conditioned doctrine of election closely, but not slavishly, and presents a view of universal atonement and even universal pardon, but not universal salvation. Torrance contends that the word 'predestination' emphasizes the sovereign freedom of grace and so the 'pre-' in predestination refers neither to a temporal nor to a logical prius, but simply to God Himself, the Eternal. For God, election is not an event of the past but rather an action internal to God (a se). Because Christ is the ground of election, and Christ came in space–time, election took on a temporal component. Election derives from the Divine initiative of grace and Torrance is highly critical of Arminian theology at this point, accusing it of being semi-Pelagian; he is equally critical of Roman Catholicism which, according to Torrance, is also semi-Pelagian if not Pelagian outright.

KEYWORDS: Karl Barth, John Calvin, Christology, election, Thomas Forsyth Torrance, union

The doctrine of election is often considered the central dogma of Reformed theology. While this estimation is of course inaccurate, the doctrine of election is important in a Reformed soteriology. Numerous elucidations of election have been offered by Reformed theologians, many of which fall into the category of determinism and sometimes fatalism. This is especially the case in some scholastic presentations of the doctrine. Reacting to this determinacy many believers have adopted a form of Arminianism to explain those passages of Scripture which speak of God's electing will. For many, an Arminian explanation of election is more compatible with modern sensibilities and with the existential requirements of contemporary people. Calvinism has fallen on hard times in recent years as a result. Instead of defending a classical federal view of election, in which the divine decrees hold pride of place and every other aspect of God's redemptive plan is drawn from there, what is required is a doctrine which adheres much closer to the presentation of election as it is

found in Scripture, and also one which avoids the hard determinacy of the federal Calvinists. In short, what is required is an evangelical Calvinism. Such a position is formulated by Thomas Forsyth Torrance and with critical modifications recommends itself as a viable model of election today.

While election is examined in various places throughout Torrance's enormous range of publications, characteristically he does not treat this doctrine in any final or systematic way.¹ He lays the blame for the doctrine of election occupying pride of place in much Reformed theology at the foot of Protestant scholasticism which, unlike Calvin, raised the decree of predestination to a separate article of Christian theology and came very near to becoming an independent principle (a '*Denknotwendigkeit*').² According to Torrance, 'predestination is not to be understood in terms of some timeless decree in God, but as the electing activity of God providentially and savingly at work in what Calvin called the "history of redemption."³ Torrance's objection against Westminster theology in particular, his appreciation of a version of universal atonement, coupled with his acceptance of much of Barth's theology require a thorough examination and at times critique.

I. The Prothesis of the Father and the Eternal Decrees

Torrance adopts the language of *prothesis* to refer to divine election whereby the Father purposed or 'set-forth' the union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ. Divine election is a free sovereign decision and an utterly contingent act of God's love; as such, it is neither arbitrary nor strictly necessary.⁴ Torrance holds to the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election,⁵ one which represents a strictly theonomous way of thinking, from a centre in God and not in ourselves.⁶ 'Predestination' simply

1. The doctrine of election is dealt with specifically in one of Torrance's first published essays, Thomas F. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 13 (1941): 108–141. Also see: 'Introduction,' in *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church*, trans. and edited by T. F. Torrance (London: James Clarke and Co, 1959), xi–cxxxv; Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 2, *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 83–88; Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (New York: Oxford University, 1981), 127–137; and Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

2. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 108. See his further comments in 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' in *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society, and Family. Essays in Honor of Ray S. Anderson*, edited by C.D. Kettler and T. H. Speidell (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1990), 4–5.

3. Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 4.

4. That is, it must not be constructed in the fashion of Protestant scholasticism or of process theology. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 131.

5. It is based on unconditional election 'for it flows freely from an ultimate reason or purpose in the invariant Love of God and is entirely unconditioned by any necessity, whether of being or knowledge or will, in God and entirely unconstrained and unmotivated by anything whatsoever beyond himself' (*ibid.*, 131).

6. See *ibid.*, 131–132.

emphasizes the truth that God has chosen us in Christ *before* the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4), which Torrance links with the teaching that Christ as Lamb of God was slain before the foundation of the world. The eternal decrees of the Father are not to be thought of in exclusion of the Son, for the eternal purposes of God do not take place apart from Christ or 'behind his back' as it were. As such, 'predestination was understood simply as the *decretum Dei speciale* [special decree of God], a particular part of the *decretum Dei generale* [general decree of God].'⁷ This allows Torrance to distinguish between predestination and election in the following way: *predestination* refers 'everything back to the eternal purpose of God's love for humanity,' while the cognate term *election* refers 'more to the fulfilment of that purpose in space and time, patiently worked out by God in the history of Israel and brought to its consummation in Jesus Christ.'⁸ In one of his earlier works he writes: 'Election is not therefore some dead predestination in the past or some still point in a timeless eternity, but a living act that enters time and confronts us face to face in Jesus Christ the living Word of God.'⁹

One of the distinctive features of a Reformed doctrine of election is the recurring instance that election 'is *christologically conditioned*.'¹⁰ Following Calvin, Torrance claims that Christ is the 'cause' of election in all four traditional senses of 'cause': the efficient and the material, the formal and the final. 'He is at once the *Agent* and the *Content* of election, its *Beginning* and its *End*.'¹¹ Election proceeds from the eternal decree of God but this eternal decree of election assumes in time once and for all the form of the wondrous conjunction of God and humanity in Christ.¹² The hypostatic union is the heart of any understanding of election as Torrance makes clear when he writes, 'How are we to relate God's action to our faith? The secret of that is seen only in the God-manhood of Christ, for that is the very heart of election, and the pattern of *our* election, and is visible only there since it is election in Christ.'¹³

Torrance is adamant that election and predestination must be expounded in terms of christology for it has to do with the activity of God in Christ.¹⁴ As a direct consequence, it is to Christ and the salvation he purchased that one must look for the ground of election, not to some secret decree of God 'behind the back of Christ.'¹⁵ Torrance even subjects

7. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 108.

8. Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 4.

9. Thomas F. Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949): 310–318, 315.

10. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 14 (emphasis his).

11. Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 4.

12. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 14.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, 172.

15. *Ibid.* Torrance considers the one covenant of grace to be completely fulfilled in Christ so that the covenant idea is completely subordinated to Christ. See Torrance, 'Introduction,' lv–lvi and 'Predestination in Christ,' 111.

Calvin to criticism at this point for not holding strongly enough to the fact that Jesus Christ is the *ground* of election, not only the instrument and author of election.¹⁶ When Christ is seen as the object and subject of election then more deterministic conceptions of election are done away with. 'These then are the two sides of the Christian doctrine of predestination: that the salvation of the believer goes back to an eternal decree of God, and yet that the act of election is in and through Christ.'¹⁷ It is Christ's election which forms the basis of a correct understanding of his person and work, something Torrance affirms is central to the history of Scottish theology and reflected supremely in the *Scots Confession*. In general agreement with Torrance is Fergusson who, when referring to the *Scots Confession*, considers it to root election in the person and work of Christ so that it 'produces a strikingly evangelical exposition of election.'¹⁸

Because election is bound up with Christ, it must not be thought of in any impersonal or deterministic sense.¹⁹ The encounter between God and humanity in Christ is the exact antithesis of determinism; it is the 'acute personalisation' of all relations with God in spite of sin. Interestingly, because Christ is the ground of election there can be no thought of indeterminism in relation to the encounter between God and humanity either.²⁰ Owing to the adoption into Protestant scholasticism of deterministic thinking, something Torrance attributes to an artificial importation of Greek determinism, election is often thought of in terms of cause or force, and so forth.²¹ But this is to transpose onto God our thought and in the process distort the doctrine of election. It is here Torrance becomes most animated: 'Thus, for example, in the doctrine of "absolute particular

16. On Torrance's reading, Calvin attributed the ultimate ground of election to the inscrutable will of the Divine decree. He cites John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.22.1, which asserts that election precedes grace. A similar criticism of Calvin is given by Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–1975), II / 2, 111.

17. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 109.

18. David A.S. Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993): 457–478, 462. He also notes that 'Barth claimed [it] was without parallel in the other Reformed confessions,' (ibid., 462), referring to Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 68–79, and Barth *Church Dogmatics*, II / 2, 308. And yet, Fergusson does admit that even the *Scots Confession* does not entirely escape the 'errors of double predestination,' (ibid.).

19. See, for example, 'In the early centuries of the Church, theology was marked by an emphasis upon the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, largely to combat Stoic determinism and astrological fatalism' (Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 457).

20. Fergusson sees this as one of the weaknesses of Augustine's doctrine of predestination, that due to God's foreknowledge God passes over the reprobate and this is an explanation why some believe and some do not. Ibid., 457–459. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 16, 307.

21. It was not simply Calvinistic scholasticism that made this determinist move but also Lutheranism. See, for instance, Luther and Erasmus, *Free Will and Salvation* (London: Library of Christian Classics, 1969).

predestination" the tendency is to think of God as a "force majeure" bearing down upon particular individuals. That is to operate with a view of omnipotence that has little more significance than an empty mathematical symbol.²² Evident in this statement is Torrance's methodological commitment to work from an *a posteriori* basis rather than an *a priori* one, and so reject a natural theology.²³ Omnipotence, for instance, is what God *does*, not what God is thought to be able to do because of some hypothetical metaphysical *can*. What God does is seen in Christ. What then does the 'pre' stand for in 'predestination'? asks Torrance. Originally it made the point that the grace by which we are saved is grounded in the inner life of the Trinity.²⁴ 'That is to say, the *pre* in predestination emphasises the sheer objectivity of God's Grace.'²⁵ It was this view of the priority of divine grace which fell away in scholastic Calvinism so that predestination could be spoken of as 'preceding grace' and election came to be regarded as a causal antecedent to our salvation in time. The result of this shift was a strong determinist slant.²⁶

II. Christologically Conditioned Election

Utilizing the language of the Scottish divine John Craig, Torrance distinguishes between Christ's 'carnal union' with humanity from his 'spiritual union.' Our carnal union with Christ refers to the union between Christ and humanity through his incarnation.²⁷ He was made man for us that he might die for us, and so there is a carnal union established between Christ and all of humanity. Our spiritual union with Christ refers to the fact that the Holy Spirit unites the believer with Christ so that the benefits of Christ may be ours. It is important that the carnal union and the spiritual union are not separate but rather, spiritual union is a sharing in the one and only union between God and humanity wrought out in Jesus Christ.²⁸

22. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 114.

23. Torrance comments that 'there is no doctrine where natural theology causes more damage than in the doctrine of predestination' (Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 114).

24. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 134.

25. *Ibid.*

26. A weakness of Torrance's argument is his refusal to acknowledge this determinist element within Calvin's own theology and not simply that of his followers. It seems clear that Calvin presents a doctrine of double predestination, albeit not as strictly as many of his followers do. See Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.21–24 (especially 3.23.1), and John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: Clarke, 1961). An account of Calvin's doctrine of the double decree can be found in F. H. Klooster, *Calvin's Doctrine of Predestination*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 55–86. Someone who shares Torrance's basic convictions on election but does not share his views on Calvin is Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 460–462.

27. See W. D. Rankin, 'Carnal Union with Christ in the Theology of T. F. Torrance,' unpublished PhD Thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1997).

28. Torrance, 'Introduction,' cvi–cvii.

If the spiritual union were another union, then our salvation would depend upon something additional to the finished work of Christ. Torrance argues that one of the problems with Westminster theology is that it separates these two unions and in the process thrusts justification by (our) faith into supreme prominence rather than union with Christ by grace alone. 'If there has to be a priority in our understanding,' writes Torrance, 'then we must say with Calvin and Craig ... that it is through participating in Christ that we partake of His benefits.'²⁹ Accordingly, the forensic element in the atoning work of Christ rests upon the basis of Christ's incarnation, upon his person and life 'and therefore that the forensic element in justification reposes for its substance and meaning upon our union with Christ.'³⁰

Having established a definition of carnal union and its relation to spiritual union, Torrance then asks about the range of the carnal union: does it refer to all people or just the elect? The question behind this is whether or not Christ entered into a generic relation with humanity by becoming a particular man, or also entered into an ontological relation with all humanity in the assumption of our human flesh. The first position is rejected outright on two grounds: first, it would separate the carnal union from the spiritual union and as a result diminish the sufficiency of Christ's work, and second, the Church could then only be construed in terms of an extension of the Incarnation. In line with Torrance's commitment to a version of a universal atonement the carnal union establishes an ontological relation between Christ and all humanity. As a consequence Torrance asserts 'that human beings have no being apart from Christ.'³¹ Without the Incarnation the estrangement between God and humanity would have continued to grow to such an extent that the alienation caused by sin would be complete so that humanity would disappear (along with the rest of creation) into nothingness. The Incarnation means that God refused to hold back his love for humanity and entered our alienated human existence to lay hold of it, bind it in union with himself, and heal it for all humanity. As a direct consequence all humanity is laid hold of by God and kept in existence by God. Humans 'can no more escape from [God's] love and sink into non-being than they can constitute themselves [persons] for whom Christ has not died.'³² God has not given up on creation but has poured his love on all humanity and, in this expression of love, humanity exists because God has not given up on his creation. 'God does not say Yes, and No, for all that He has done is Yes and Amen in Christ. That applies to every man, whether he will or no [*sic*]. He owes his very being to Christ and belongs to Christ, and in that he belongs to

29. *Ibid.*, cx.

30. *Ibid.*, cx.

31. *Ibid.*, cxiii.

32. *Ibid.*, cxiv.

Christ he has his being only from Him and in relation to Him.³³ So far Torrance has asserted the fact that because of the Son's incarnation human persons are loved and kept in existence by this love.

The conclusion must not be drawn from this that because Torrance is committed to a view of universal atonement and an ontological communion created through our carnal union with Christ, that all humanity will be saved. Torrance is no universalist. While the spiritual union is not a separate union, it is distinct and it is not universal. While we shall have more to say on the possibility and state of the reprobate shortly we note Torrance's acknowledgement of an objective and subjective element in election. Objectively election is consummated in the 'wondrous conjunction between God and man in Christ' as revealed through the incarnation. Hypostatic union and atoning union are held together as the obverse of one another, thus the person and work of Christ are rigorously held together. Subjectively our election is consummated when this 'most holy fraternity' between God and humanity is restored to us, a unique work of the Holy Spirit.³⁴ The Holy Spirit thus plays a crucial role in the doctrine of election and enables Torrance to maintain a commitment to a universal atonement but not a universal salvation (universalism).

In light of Barth's famous doctrine of election in Jesus Christ as God's 'Yes' and 'No',³⁵ and Torrance's comment above that 'God does not say Yes and No,' are we right to assume that Torrance is at odds with Barth here? In a word, no.³⁶ According to Torrance's christologically conditioned doctrine of election Christ took on the entire human condition for the entire world and judged sin in his flesh and on the cross ('No'). On the basis of that finished work Christ has forgiven sinful humanity and offers salvation as a free gift of grace ('Yes'). As such, 'we are in fact all elected and damned in Him',³⁷ Torrance opines. Does this imply universalism? Once again, in a word, no.³⁸ In a discussion of free-will Torrance defends Luther's basic position that sinful humanity possesses *voluntas* (will) which

33. *Ibid.*, cxiv.

34. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 15.

35. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II / 2, 3–34; IV.1, 350, 591–592.

36. It is Torrance's conviction that one of Barth's primary contributions to Reformed theology is precisely in his doctrine of election, a doctrine Torrance considers himself to be advancing. See Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 5.

37. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 119.

38. Many argue that Barth did not espouse universalism either. For a defense of this position, see J. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House Books, 1989), 249–252, 264–274. Colwell argues that for the charge of universalism to hold true, one must posit it as a theological necessity. In his view, Barth does not make universalism a necessity but simply holds out the hope that God's salvation will be more extensive than we may currently imagine. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, 417–419; IV/3, 461–477; and Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Fontana, 1967), 59–60. Where Barth and Torrance diverge on this point is in Torrance's explicit and repeated affirmations of the reality and population of Hell, construed along traditional lines of theological thought.

is applied in respect of 'lower things.' However, sinful humanity does not possess an innate *arbitrium* (choice) which is neutral and so free to accept or reject divine grace. According to this reading, strictly speaking, only God has free-will, and therefore humans have no *arbitrium* at all.³⁹ The point Torrance wishes to make is that 'man has no *arbitrium* over his sin and salvation just because it is objective as well as subjective, positive as well as negative; just because it means something to God as well as man.'⁴⁰ What then happens in salvation? When confronted with God, humans for the first time become free to decide for God. 'The personal encounter of Christ with forgiveness on His lips, singles out a man ... and gives him freedom to say "yes" or "no" ... freedom is only possible face to face with Jesus Christ.'⁴¹ If there is a universal atonement, as we shall consider shortly, then surely it is a corollary that all who are confronted with God's forgiveness, and as a consequence are free, will repent, and receive salvation. Torrance disagrees. While freedom is possible face to face with Jesus Christ 'the mystery is—and this we shall never fathom—that such a man may commit the sin of Adam all over again.'⁴² This is the absurdity of sin which we shall examine below.

In order to further understand how Jesus can be both God's 'Yes' and 'No' Torrance turns to the cross where Christ died for us. In the cross Christ is the propitiation for the sins of all humanity where God has judged sin, and judged us all in Christ. The cross results in election and damnation, mercy and judgement. 'But the important thing to note here is that it is not election *or* damnation in the first place. In Christ we are all judged—and in so far as Christ died for all, then all are dead—but in Him we are all chosen by God's Grace.'⁴³ How does this work out in practice? Torrance replies:

When we are brought face to face with decision in this encounter, and answer No or disobey—and God does not allow us to be neutral—then we choose damnation in the second place, that is the Cross of Christ is our judgment only and not our salvation. When we answer Yes or obey, then we learn that Christ has already answered for us! We are chosen already in Christ—man cannot damn himself any more than he can elect himself. We must say that both election and damnation are in Christ.⁴⁴

Torrance provides one further insight into how he conceives the precise relation between the divine and human decision, or between the Subjective

39. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 120, 121.

40. *Ibid.*, 123.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 123.

43. *Ibid.*, 125.

44. *Ibid.*, 126.

and the Objective: 'it is the Holy Spirit in fact Who constitutes the relation between the Divine decision and the human decision.'⁴⁵ To further elaborate Torrance uses an analogy, the only one available to us, 'if Grace means the personal presence of God to men, then that means concretely, Jesus Christ. Therefore it is in the relation of the deity to the humanity in Jesus Christ that we are to look for our final answer to this question.'⁴⁶ Just as in the Incarnation Christ is *vere homo vere Deus* (very man, very God), so in the divine encounter we have a real human decision and a real divine decision. The human decision, like Christ's humanity, is *anhypostatic*, it has no independent existence apart from the divine, but it is concrete and personal, and so *enhypostatic*.⁴⁷ There can be no separation between the divine and human decisions but neither can there be any (con)fusion.⁴⁸ 'In the end therefore,' writes Torrance, 'these errors reduce themselves to two main types in which the extremes are a doctrine of irresistible grace and independent free-will.'⁴⁹ In place of either what actually happens is that a sort of hypostatic union between grace and faith, through the Holy Spirit occurs. In relation to the human decision to reject God's offer of salvation in Christ, Torrance can only say it is the mystery of evil which cannot be explained in rational categories.

III. The Forensic Captivity

This understanding of Christ and election affects the way a theory of the atonement is constructed. While Torrance does not reject a doctrine of penal substitution outright, he challenges the hegemony it has on Western theology. Without denying the juridical elements evident in Paul's atonement theology, these are not the central feature of the atonement. If juridical elements are allowed to occupy centre stage, as they have in Protestant scholasticism, then the atoning sacrifice of Christ is fulfilled only as a human, and it is this which draws Torrance's charge of Nestorianism against much of his own Reformed tradition.⁵⁰ Christ must be viewed as the one Mediator between God and humanity; who is himself God and human in one person. Under this reformulated construction Jesus Christ is not understood to placate God the Father but rather

45. *Ibid.*, 127.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Torrance develops the analogy of Christ's incarnation in *ibid.*, 128–129, although he does not use the terms *an/enhypostatic*. He also develops the analogy of Christ's virgin conception in *ibid.*, 130–131.

48. Behind both misconceptions Torrance sees the same dangers inherent in faulty christologies: 'Separation or fusion inevitably result in Pelagianism or determinism, which correspond respectively with a Docetic and an Ebionite Christology, on the one hand, or in a doctrine of mystic infused grace ... or a doctrine of synergism, which correspond respectively to a Eutychian and a Nestorian Christology, on the other hand' (*ibid.*, 129).

49. *Ibid.*, 129–130.

50. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 18–19.

atonement is a propitiatory sacrifice in which God *himself* through the death of his Son draws near to humanity and draws humanity near to himself. This is precisely why John affirms that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life' (John 3:16). If the Nestorian tendencies apparent within certain Reformed notions of atonement hold sway, then the inevitable result is an overly forensic understanding in which atonement is thought of as an external transaction to God, not as the ultimate expression of the love of God for all.

It is well known that the Torrance brothers, Thomas and James, are outspoken against Calvinism after Calvin,⁵¹ what Torrance variously describes as 'federal Calvinism,' 'hyper-Calvinism,' 'Bezan Calvinism,' 'scholastic Calvinism,' and 'Westminster Calvinism.' All such Calvinisms, as Torrance styles them, present a federal scheme of salvation, a moralizing of the Christian life, the intellectualizing of faith, a logicalizing of theology, and an overly forensic notion of election and justification in which faith and assurance tend to be torn apart from each other.⁵² Torrance considers his own position to be an 'evangelical Calvinism.'⁵³

Torrance attributes the ascendancy of penal substitution in Scottish Reformed theology to the acceptance of the Synod of Dort and the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The Synod of Dort promulgated the absolute decrees of predestination and reprobation, and advocated a strict form of limited atonement. 'With the scholastic brand of Calvinism that arose in this way the Anselmic concept of satisfaction of the infinite gravity of sin was allied to a doctrine of divine punishment conceived in terms of contractual and governmental law, and synodal authority was given to

51. See: James B. Torrance, 'The Concept of Federal Theology: Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?' in *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae professor*, edited by W.H. Neuser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 15–40; James B. Torrance, 'Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,' in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today: Papers Presented for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine*, ed. A.I. Heron (Edinburgh: St Andrew, 1982), 40–53; James B. Torrance, 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and Its Legacy,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981): 225–243; and James B. Torrance, 'Covenant or Contract: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51–76.

52. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 59, and in Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture*, 133–134. The root cause of Protestant scholasticism, according to Torrance, is the acceptance of a determinate yet dualist framework of the Augustinian–Aristotelian thought which developed soon after the Reformation and then of the Augustinian–Newtonian thought which succeeded it. According to another Scotsman, this form of Calvinism 'tends to subordinate grace to nature; it renders the justice of God essential but the love of God arbitrary; it yields a theory of limited atonement which is contrary to the plain sense of Scripture and which is divorced from the doctrine of the incarnation; and it fosters an introspective and legalist religion as the search for the signs of election is redirected away from Christ to the life of the individual believer' (Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 466).

53. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 59–60, 65, 224. Torrance sees himself in line with J. Calvin, J. Knox, and many of the early Scottish theologians, as opposed to Calvinists such as T. Beza, W. Perkins, J. Owen, and J. Edwards.

this concept of atonement in the strict terms of penal substitution.⁵⁴ It was this form of Calvinism which was accepted by the Kirk of Scotland under the influence of the Puritan Calvinism of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in 1647.⁵⁵ It is Torrance's contention that this brand of theology brought with it a more legalistic Calvinism to the more evangelical Calvinism of the older Scottish tradition deriving from the *Scots Confession*.⁵⁶ Torrance wishes to retrieve the positive insights of this evangelical Calvinism in his doctrine of election.

Federal theology, in Torrance's estimation, works on the premise of a contract or bargain made between the Father and the Son in eternity past, and interpreted in necessary, causal, and forensic terms, rather than grounding election in the incarnate person of Christ, as it was with Calvin and Knox. Torrance rejects a strictly causative relation between God's eternal decrees and their end because they eclipse any real meaning to such passages as John 3:16 on the one hand, and as a result, on the other hand, they tended to restrict the proclamation of the Gospel to the 'heathen' due to a 'forensically predetermined covenant-structure'.⁵⁷

IV. Universal Atonement

Because Jesus is the God-man, his Mediatorial work represents all humanity, not simply some smaller category of the elect. If Christ died only for some then he would not be the Saviour of the world but rather an instrument in the hands of the Father for the salvation of a chosen few. 'In other words, a notion of limited atonement implies a Nestorian heresy in which Jesus Christ is not really God and man united in one Person.'⁵⁸ Torrance, in line with many Scottish divines,⁵⁹ holds to a position of universal atonement, which, however, is not to imply a notion of universal redemption.⁶⁰ Christ gave himself freely in atoning sacrifice or 'ransom for all' (1 Tim 2.6). In his articulation of universal atonement Torrance, along with Calvin, rejects the notion, often stated, that Christ died *sufficiently* for all but *efficiently* for the elect.⁶¹ What Torrance does assert is that Christ did die, as Hebrews 2:2 clearly states, for all people—he tasted death for all. The fact

54. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 96.

55. Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 457–478.

56. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 127. Torrance does concede that the Confession is an outstanding work of great theological substance and power, but it lacks a spiritual freshness and freedom about it.

57. *Ibid.*, 107.

58. *Ibid.*, 19.

59. Notably Robert Boyd (1578–1627) and John McLeod Campbell (1800–1872). See *ibid.*, 70.

60. Torrance makes this clear in distancing his own point of view from that of Thomas Erskine (see *ibid.*, 275).

61. *Ibid.*, 196. See Calvin's rejection of this in John Calvin, *On Eternal Predestination*, IX, 5, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: James Clarke & Company, 1954), 148 (and cited by Torrance, *ibid.*).

that Christ died, even for reprobates, means that the minister of the Gospel is free to offer salvation to all. In the event of their rejection of Christ, his death constitutes the ground of their judgment. Hence universal atonement does not imply universal salvation. 'The doctrine of unconditional grace and universal pardon cannot be twisted into universal salvation without evacuating the Cross of its profound nature and ultimate meaning, and distorting the self-revelation of God as Holy Love,'⁶² Torrance writes in a recent work.

This is a deliberate rejection of the scholastic way of thinking of atonement in terms of logico-causal relations, by which if Christ dies for all, then all must be saved. As Torrance understands it, Christ assumes a real humanity, assuming a fallen human nature, and joins humanity to God by means of the hypostatic union. Through his sinless life and his sacrificial death he makes atonement for all people without reserve. Anything short of universal atonement, according to Torrance, is an assertion of God's limited love for humanity as it would imply a circumscribed incarnation. The reprobate do not simply reject God's judgement, they reject God's pardon, his loving provision of salvation. Sin is so irrational, such an 'accident,' that it is a rejection of God's love revealed in universal pardon. It is this theology which Torrance sees working in John McLeod Campbell and Edward Irving, no less than in Barth.⁶³

What this conception of election also does is repudiate any theology of double predestination whereby the elect are predestined and reprobates are damned *simpliciter* (without qualification).⁶⁴ So what is Torrance rejecting and what is he accepting when he makes these comments? Torrance is rejecting on the one hand the idea common in much Reformed thinking that there is an election to life and an election to death and this is worked out in a causal and deterministic sense. On the other hand he is rejecting the Arminian position that humans are in a neutral position and respond to the Gospel from free-will and so accept and are saved (elect), or reject the gospel, also by free-will, and are damned (reprobate). What is the alternative? Torrance contends the word 'predestination' emphasizes the sovereign freedom of grace 'and so the "pre" in predestination refers neither to a temporal nor to a logical *prius*, but simply to God Himself, the Eternal.'⁶⁵ To fully comprehend this statement involves an understanding

62. *Ibid.*, 277.

63. Other Scottish theologians who basically follow a Barthian doctrine of election include J. K. S. Reid, 'The Office of Christ in Predestination,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 1 (1948): 5–18, 166–183 and J.K.S. Reid, 'Introduction,' to J. Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (London: James Clarke & Company, 1961), 9–44; G. Hendry, *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (London: SCM, 1960), 49–58; and Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 457–478, to which I am indebted for these references. Fergusson also includes T.F. Torrance in his list.

64. Torrance calls this the 'Jones-Smith theory of predestination, in which one is damned and the other elected simpliciter' (Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 115). Cf. *ibid.*, 124, fn., 32.

65. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 116.

of Torrance's thinking about time, something we do not wish to elaborate on in any detail here. What may be noted is that Torrance sees time not merely as a series of sequential events but as relative to the subject and object of time. So for God, election was not an event of the past as much as it is an action *a se*. Because Christ is the ground of election, and Christ came in space-time, election took on a temporal component. The 'pre' in predestination thus refers to the will of God to save humanity *in Christ*.⁶⁶

Election is another word for God's freedom of choice or his decision. God does not act arbitrarily nor by necessity but by personal decision. Election is God's personal decision. A doctrine of election that involves necessity at the human end cannot escape the element of necessity at the divine end. If election were determinism, 'God would not be God but blind fate, sheer necessity.'⁶⁷ God is love and election is a concrete expression of that love. Torrance expresses the relation between God's love and election as follows: 'Election means God has chosen us because He loves us, and that He loves us because He loves us. The reason why God loves us is love.'⁶⁸ Any other reason for election such as some divine *prius* that precedes grace would deny love. Because election is God's personal decision acted from within his freedom by love, humans can only acknowledge it in obedience or deny it in disobedience. 'No matter what he does or thinks, man cannot constitute himself a being under grace, he cannot constitute himself a man loved by God, he is that already. It is without the scope of human *arbitrium* altogether. [sic] and to bring in the concept of free-will is simply beside the mark.'⁶⁹ In what Torrance intends to be a self-evident statement, he concludes that, 'It might be said that when everything is boiled down the doctrine of predestination or election comes to this: I am saved by God, by the eternal God. But if I am saved by Eternity, I am saved from all eternity unto all eternity.'⁷⁰

Colwell raises several critical questions in his examination and critique of Barth's doctrine of election which can be equally applied to Torrance. According to Colwell a central objection to Barth's doctrine of election is the assumption that because humanity is now defined ontologically in Jesus Christ, then all people must be ontologically related to Christ and thus saved, that is, universalism.⁷¹ However, in defence of Barth, Colwell

66. Barth also made the concept of time ('eternity') essential to his doctrine of election, and it is from his foundation that Torrance constructs his own views. For more on Barth's doctrine of eternity, see the discussion in John Colwell, 'The Contemporaneity of the Divine Decision: Reflections on Barth's Denial of "Universalism,"' in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell: Papers Presented at the Fourth Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics*, ed. N. M. de S. Cameron (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 139–160, especially 150–153; Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality*.

67. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ,' 117.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 117–118.

70. Ibid., 118.

71. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality*, 273–274.

argues that he 'clearly prohibits too simplistic a relationship between the ontological definition of man as elect in Jesus Christ and the actual election of individual men.'⁷² Ontological definition is apparently different from ontic participation and noetic affirmation. Colwell continues: 'the ontic inclusion of any man in the election of Jesus Christ cannot be considered as an *a priori* necessary consequence of the actuality of the ontological definition of man as elect in Jesus Christ ...'⁷³ According to Barth, God is dynamic and so his eternity includes the past, the present, and the future in all his being and acts. The ontological definition of humans in Jesus Christ includes the actual participation of 'humanity' in that election. 'The participation of man in the election of Jesus Christ is an event of God's Trinity: it occurs in the primal decision of the Father, it occurs in the actualization of that decision in the Son, and it occurs in the realization of that decision in the Holy Spirit.'⁷⁴ Pneumatology thus comes to the fore and is the foundation from which to apprehend the way in which Jesus Christ establishes an ontological bond with all humanity; and yet two individual persons may or may not be actually saved or participate personally in a saving way with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Colwell concludes:

Only when the doctrine of election is understood in dynamic and not static terms, only when the primal decision of God is understood as an event of His eternity which includes human history and not as a timeless abstraction, only when election is understood as a trinitarian event and not as a unitarian or binitarian event that excludes its subjective realization in the Holy Spirit and thereby invalidates the authentic futurity of God's eternity, only then can universalism be avoided without logical contradiction.⁷⁵

While key differences emerge between Barth and Torrance, their respective constructions of election have often been 'lumped' together and critiqued along a 'guilt-by-association' tactic. Be that as it may, Torrance's doctrine of election is not only sophisticated, but ultimately logical and consistent, not to mention compelling. However, if the role of the Holy Spirit is misplaced or worse still, overlooked, then his doctrine of election, like Barth's, can only be seen as contradictory in that it affirms an ontological absoluteness regarding the humanity of Jesus Christ and yet continues to assert the reality of ultimate judgement and hell. Both the reprobate and the elect are ontologically related to Jesus Christ because of his incarnation. The

72. *Ibid.*, 274.

73. *Ibid.*, 274–275.

74. *Ibid.*, 282.

75. *Ibid.*, 283 (slightly adapted). Colwell proceeds to unravel Barth's doctrine of the application of salvation by the Holy Spirit and provide insights into the nature of time and eternity in his theology.

difference between the two is that reprobates do not know of this ontological relation nor do they participate in the Son by the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ The elect, by contrast, are not only objectively related to Christ ontologically but also subjectively participate in the triune communion through the Son by the Spirit. While it is correct to say a believer has faith while a reprobate does not, it must be maintained that faith itself is a gift of the sovereign Spirit and so free-will is never the ultimate cause of salvation.

V. The Great Accident: Reprobation

Torrance parts company with Knox when he takes up Calvin's explicit teaching that people's rejection of God's grace and their reprobation by God can be understood only as something rationally inexplicable: 'Reprobation is to be regarded, then, as happening *per accidens* (an accident), or *accidentaliter* (accidental), as Calvin said.'⁷⁷ Torrance often appeals to the category of irrationality in relation to the reprobate—it is simply something inexplicable to reason. Of the possibility of refusing God's love and grace Torrance can only say 'that is a bottomless mystery of evil before which we can only stand aghast, the surd which we cannot rationalise, the enigma of Judas. But it happens.'⁷⁸

Behind this inexplicability lies the assertion on Torrance's part that there is only one will of God not two, and yet his will is secret and hidden from us, reserved in his eternal wisdom, to be revealed at his glorious return.⁷⁹ When applied to election this means that strictly syllogistic logical equations are not appropriate, as for instance, in an argument which would have 'horrified Calvin,' that 'if Christ died for all, so that they may perchance suffer for their sins in hell, God shall be unjust in punishing Christ for their sins and in punishing those same sinners in hell.'⁸⁰ Torrance also sees that such a view of

76. Barth has been consistently criticized for presenting salvation in 'purely noetic' terms, as for instance by P. J. Rosato, *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 161. Colwell refutes this position vigorously in Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality*, 295–301. Despite his best attempt Barth's theology does tend to give the impression that epistemology is of supreme importance and in fact may even define what it means to be saved. Torrance's theology suffers from a similar, though not as comprehensive, tendency. For Torrance, 'knowing' is a participatory knowledge in which one indwells the subject, hence for Torrance 'knowing' moves well beyond the merely noetic, something Barth moved towards but never fully developed. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV / 3, 510; IV / 1, 538.

77. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 16, 109, 277. See Torrance, 'Introduction,' lxxviii; and Thomas F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1956), 106–107.

78. Torrance, 'Introduction,' cxiv–cxv.

79. Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 4.

80. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 109. Torrance is citing an argument from Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661). Rutherford was one of the Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly and one of its most ardent supporters in Scotland, committed to supralapsarianism, absolute divine decrees, and double predestination. See M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1986), 70–91.

double election results in a position in which infants who die outside of baptism are thought to be damned. According to Torrance, 'we cannot, therefore, think of election and reprobation in any kind of equilibrium.' He explains, 'in election we lay all the weight upon "the hidden cause", the grace of God, and not upon "the manifest cause", the faith of man; but in reprobation we lay all the weight upon "the manifest cause", man's rebellion or unbelief, and not upon "the hidden cause", the action of God.'⁸¹ It is this lack of equilibrium which requires Torrance to repeatedly assert that we must not think out the doctrine of election and reprobation in terms of logical propositions for, in his opinion, that cannot be done without falsification.⁸²

There is only one true Gospel and that is that Christ has died for all. When the Gospel is preached, some believe and some reject it but it is the same Gospel which is being proclaimed (2 Cor 2:14–15). 'In that light it may be said that while the preaching of the Gospel of Christ crucified for all mankind is meant for their salvation, it can also have the unintended effect of blinding and damning people—it becomes a "savour of death unto death."⁸³ Thus the Gospel has what Calvin called a 'two-fold efficacy' in which it acts one way on the elect and another on the reprobate.⁸⁴ Accordingly, while Christ dies for all, his death affects those who believe and those who do not believe in different ways.⁸⁵ With John Cameron (1579–1625), Torrance can say that Christ died absolutely for the elect, and conditionally for all.⁸⁶ How different this position is from the earlier one he rejected, that Christ died *efficiently* for all but *sufficiently* for some, is debateable. According to Torrance's evangelical Calvinism, the reprobate are actually rejecting God's offer of salvation, his love and grace

81. Torrance, 'Introduction,' lxxviii. In a later work, Torrance undermines his earlier position to a degree when he writes: 'If predestination is to be traced back not just to faith as its "manifest cause" but to the yes of God's grace as its "hidden cause", so reprobation is to be traced back not just to unbelief as its "manifest cause" but to the yes of God's grace as its "hidden cause" as well' (Torrance, 'The Distinctive Character of the Reformed Tradition,' 4). The reason this is not an actual contradiction is found in the continuation of the quotation, 'and not to some alleged "no" of God. There are not two wills in God, but only the one eternal will of his electing love. It is by the constancy of that love that all who reject God are judged' (ibid.). While stress should be put on the 'manifest cause' in reprobation, even when it is pressed further into the 'hidden cause,' what one finds is still the constant love of God, not an eternal decree of damnation deterministically worked out in time-space.

82. See Torrance, 'Introduction,' lxxix. In a similar way Barth contends that the 'Yes' and 'No' of God in election are not to be thought of symmetrically. The 'Yes' and the 'No' of God are not equal and opposing forces. Rather, the 'Yes' of God overwhelms the 'No,' in Christ Jesus. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II / 2, 13; IV / 1, 591–592. Because Barth also contends that in God there is one will, not two, God determines to save all people, rejection of this salvation is only made possible by God's 'non-willing,' see Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II / 2, 458.

83. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 200.

84. See ibid., 201.

85. Torrance cites Scripture (Luke 2:34; 2 Cor 2:16; 1 Pet 2:8; John 10:39) and Calvin in support. See ibid., 283–284.

86. Ibid., 65.

and mercy, not simply some hollow shell or fictitious offer. In this Torrance is echoing the thought of Barth when he writes:

A 'rejected' man is one who isolates himself from God by resisting his election as it has taken place in Jesus Christ. God is for him; but he is against God. God is gracious to him; but he is ungrateful to God. God receives him; but he withdraws himself from God. God forgives him his sins; but he repeats them as though they were not forgiven. God releases him from guilt and punishment of his defection; but he goes on living as Satan's prisoner. God determines him for blessedness, and His service; but he chooses the joylessness of an existence that accords with his own pride and aims at his own honour.⁸⁷

In speaking of the reprobate, Torrance concedes that it is an 'abysmal irrationality of evil, which cannot be resolved away by rational means—that would mean that God need not have taken the way of the Cross in order to save us.'⁸⁸ Amidst discussing John Howe's theology, Torrance reveals his own position that 'while there is no divine decree of reprobation, God allows his will for the salvation of all for whom Christ died, to be frustrated, so that in view of the tears of the Redeemer for the lost, it may be said that God wills the salvation of those that perish.'⁸⁹ This does not mean, however, that the reprobate will one day cease to exist or be annihilated. According to Torrance this is an ontological impossibility for the incarnation and death of Christ cannot be undone. Because of the carnal union the sinner cannot undo the fact that Christ has gathered him into a relation of being that exists for eternity. 'His 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 and therefore of the negative decision of God's love to oppose his refusal of God's love just by being Love. This negative decision of God's love is the wrath of the Lamb.'⁹⁰ Torrance envisions Hell as the place in which the sinner is 'for ever imprisoned in his own refusal of being loved and indeed that is the hell of it.'⁹¹

VI. By Grace Alone

Torrance is critical of Roman Catholics, certain evangelicals, and liberals alike, who, in direct antitheses to a Reformed doctrine of election,⁹² rest

87. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II / 2, 449–450.

88. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 277.

89. *Ibid.*, 283.

90. Torrance, 'Introduction,' cxv.

91. *Ibid.*, cxvi.

92. By a 'Reformed doctrine of election' Torrance has in mind simply the stress on the priority of God's action in salvation over and against that of human free will. He is not, at least in this context, endorsing Barth's doctrine of election over that of earlier Reformed positions such as John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, or even John Calvin. See *ibid.*, lxxviii–lxxix.

salvation upon our own personal or existential decision.⁹³ The Arminian error is not in subscribing to universal atonement but in subscribing to universal redemption based upon an erroneous reading of 2 Cor 2:15.⁹⁴ Free-will is nothing other than self-will and it is the self which is enslaved to sin, therefore no human truly has free-will; therefore, salvation must be by grace alone. A vivid picture of this is provided when Torrance turns to the story of Zacchaeus found in Luke 19: 1–10. Interested in Christ but wanting to retain his freedom to stay aloof from him, Zacchaeus, short in stature, hides in a tree to observe Jesus from a safe distance. But Jesus invades his space and announces his decision to lodge in Zacchaeus's house and tells him to make haste and come down. 'Then the astonishing thing happened,' Torrance notes, 'this man who did not have it in him to change his heart, who was not free to rid himself of his own selfish will, found himself free to make a decision for Christ, because Christ has already made a decision on his behalf.'⁹⁵ This is what Torrance sees as the heart of the Gospel—that the Son of God has come into the far country to men and women enchained in their self-will and crushed by sin, in order to take that burden wholly upon himself and to give an account of it to God.

This view is contrasted to that of the Arminian who, in Torrance's opinion, throws people back upon themselves for their ultimate salvation, something he considers 'unevangelical.' The Gospel is preached in this unevangelical way when it is announced that Christ died and rose again for sinners *if* they would accept this for themselves. Torrance considers this a repetition of the subtle legalist twist to the Gospel which worried St Paul so much in the Epistle to the Galatians. 'To preach the Gospel in that conditional or legalist way has the effect of telling poor sinners that in the last resort the responsibility for their salvation is taken off the shoulders of the Lamb of God and placed upon them—but in that case they feel they will never be saved.'⁹⁶ In contrast Torrance proposes the following as an example of how the Gospel is preached in an evangelical way:

God loves you so utterly and completely that he has given himself for you in Jesus Christ his beloved Son, and has thereby pledged his very being as God for your salvation. In Jesus Christ God has actualised his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself. Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly

93. Thomas F. Torrance, 'Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,' in Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 162.

94. Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 200.

95. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, 130.

96. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 93.

unworthy of him, and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. He has bound you to himself by his love in a way that he will never let you go, for even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease. Therefore, repent and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour.⁹⁷

Torrance's presentation of the Gospel in such a way is instructive. The love of God is not in question, not even for the reprobate. All are elect in Christ as Christ died for all, thus universal pardon is announced in the free and gracious offer of salvation. And yet, two other things are equally clear; first, not all are saved. The sinner has the right and the ability to refuse the love of God and to damn themselves, no matter how impossible this may seem. While this will forever remain a mystery, it is nonetheless a reality. Second, the sinner does have to do something, namely, repent and believe. While faith is a gift, it must be responsive. This is why Torrance asserts one of his oft repeated phrases, 'all of grace does not mean nothing of man, but the reverse.'⁹⁸

One final issue deserves mention and that is the issue of synergism or the cooperation of the believer with the grace of God. In his soteriology, Torrance, standing squarely in the Reformed tradition, allows no place for synergism conceived in either an Eastern Orthodox or an Arminian way, if the use of synergism is meant to imply that human freedom co-operates with divine grace in effecting salvation.⁹⁹ A rejection of synergism, thus defined, does not rule out a conception of human co-operation with grace in a non-meritorious sense, hence a non-synergistic co-operation is entirely possible and is indeed something Torrance, and the Reformed tradition generally, affirm.¹⁰⁰ The elect co-operate with grace and in that co-operation make salvation a reality in the present tense. This co-operation, however, is the response of the believer to the grace of God; it is not a meritorious or efficacious act. According to Torrance's logic, and here he is thoroughly Reformed, in salvation the believer is united with the whole Christ so that all his saving benefits become theirs. This is salvation in the perfect tense. However, this perfect salvation must be realized in the

97. *Ibid.*, 94.

98. *Ibid.*, 95. The virgin birth of Jesus is used as a model to illustrate this.

99. For a brief history of synergism, see L. D. Peterson, 'Synergistic Controversy,' in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 4 vols, ed. H. J. Hillerbrand (New York: Oxford University, 1996), 4.133–135. For a definition see M. J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002), 194.

100. See, for instance, Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV / 2, 557. This is one of the areas Fergusson calls for more rigorous thinking in Reformed theology when he concludes: 'If predestination is to remain a credible theological notion in Scotland outside the shrinking citadels of Federal Calvinism, it will need to affirm with greater vigour that human freedom and love are made universally possible by God's grace' (Fergusson, 'Predestination: A Scottish Perspective,' 478). See also *ibid.*, 475–478.

present and so salvation does not take place completely without the response or co-operation of the believer at some point in space-time. Clearly such a conception of co-operation is not Pelagian or semi-Pelagian for this human response does not effect salvation: forgiveness and eternal life come by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fidei*) (Eph 2:8).

While highly sophisticated, Torrance's doctrine of election is not unique. It is compatible with a particular strand of Scottish Calvinism and with Barth's theology. David Fergusson outlines a similar view when he argues that 'the triumph of divine love when considered eschatologically can be cast in three possible ways, and that, because the first two are unacceptable, some version of the third requires development.'¹⁰¹ The first view is a limiting of the scope of God's love and an Augustinian disjunction of divine love and justice, as seen in much of Reformed theology. The second view is a universalizing of divine love along the lines of Barth's doctrine of universal predestination in Christ. Fergusson considers both to be unacceptable and moves to present a third view, one in which 'the freedom finally to rebel against God can avoid the determinism of either double predestination or universalism.'¹⁰² Fergusson believes that for true freedom to exist, the creature must really have a freedom to believe or to reject Christ. However, what separates his view from that of synergistic semi-Pelagianism, or Arminianism, is his employment of something Torrance also utilizes, the recognition that 'there is no symmetry between acceptance and rejection, and no sense in which the trust we show is of equal weight to God's mercy.'¹⁰³ This leads Fergusson to admit that 'this libertarian notion of freedom must find a place in one's theological system, but perhaps only as an addendum to explain the possibility of one's rejecting God.'¹⁰⁴ Like Torrance, Fergusson believes human freedom is not to be invoked as an explanation for our redemption, 'the love of God in Christ and the influence of the Holy Spirit are all-sufficient.'¹⁰⁵ But human freedom, made possible by the love of God in universal atonement, is what finally allows for the incredibly absurd possibility of rejecting God. 'Without some such appeal to deliberate human rejection of God, we can explain the possibility of unbelief only in terms of ignorance or a divine decree. Neither alternative can be consistent with the love of God declared in Scripture,'¹⁰⁶ Fergusson determines.

101. D. Fergusson, 'Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?' in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, edited by K. J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 188.

102. *Ibid.*, 196. According to Fergusson, universalism is just as deterministic as double predestination as it does not allow any human being the freedom to finally say 'No.' See also *ibid.*, 199.

103. *Ibid.*, 200.

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Ibid.*, 200–201.

106. *Ibid.*, 201.

VII. Conclusion

Colwell concludes his study asking what a theology 'after' Barth should look like. He sketches an answer as follows:

Theology 'after' Barth must continue to speak unequivocally of God as the electing God, taking its rationality from the actuality of the event of His Word. In particular theology 'after' Barth must speak of election as the dynamic event of God's eternity; before all time but in all time, not 'left behind' by time; actualized in Jesus Christ but also noetically realized, and therefore authentically ontically realized, in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this latter respect theology 'after' Barth must attempt to speak with even greater clarity than Barth himself, without ambiguity or reticence but with humble confidence in its method and Triune structure.¹⁰⁷

How may we assess Torrance's attempt to do theology 'after' Barth? Certainly Torrance has sought to come to terms with God's time and eternity, overcoming the supposed excesses of Westminster Calvinism by situating election in Jesus Christ in an absolute sense. But has Torrance fulfilled the criterion mentioned above—has he spoken 'with even greater clarity than Barth himself, without ambiguity or reticence but with humble confidence in its method and Triune structure'? Of course this is a judgement ultimately left up to each reader to make. While Torrance is clear on the centrality of Christ, the trinitarian nature of theology and election in particular, and the condition of those who refuse God's love and grace, questions still remain over how he considers the work of the Holy Spirit to take place in effecting salvation subjectively in the believer. It is here that one realizes that theology 'after' Barth will not be complete with any one thinker or position. Rather, theology 'after' Barth will continue, no doubt, until the *Parousia*.

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107. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality*, 316.