

Twin Sons of Different Mothers: The Remarkable Theological Convergence of John W. Nevin and Thomas F. Torrance

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This article explores some remarkable yet overlooked theological similarities between nineteenth-century American Reformed theologian John Williamson Nevin and twentieth-century Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance. There are striking parallels between the two with respect to both theological method and theological content, to the point where one might reasonably suspect a direct genetic influence. There is little evidence beyond these parallels, however, that Torrance ever read a word of Nevin, which makes the question of convergence that much more interesting.¹ I will suggest that the common threads here are due to the fact that here are two remarkably capable theologians with similar backgrounds wrestling with persistent questions that emerge out of the Reformed and evangelical experience. As such, this exploratory exercise may well have implications for contemporary evangelical theology.

¹While my survey of Torrance's voluminous writings is not complete, I have thus far found no references to Nevin. Likewise, two extensive secondary treatments of Torrance's theology (McGrath and Colyer) do not mention any influence by Nevin upon Torrance.

I. Biographical Considerations

John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) was raised in the bosom of the older Presbyterian tradition, with its emphasis upon the ordinary means of grace, catechetical training, and the Westminster Standards. At Union College, however, Nevin encountered New England Evangelical Calvinism with its revivalism, moralism, and reformist impulse.² Nevin then enrolled at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was trained in the tradition of Reformed federal theology. After a brief stint of teaching at Princeton in which he filled in for Charles Hodge while the latter studied in Europe, Nevin was called to Western Theological Seminary near Pittsburgh where he taught Biblical literature. While at Western, Nevin began to explore German theological literature, and was particularly impressed with the work of the church historian J. A. G. Neander, whose organic and developmental approach captivated Nevin. Then in 1840 Nevin was called to teach at the German Reformed Seminary at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. There Nevin and Phillip Schaff spearheaded the "Mercersburg Theology," a mid-nineteenth century movement in the German Reformed Church that sought to provide a churchly alternative in the American context to the individualistic revivalism and moralism of the New England theology and to the federal theology of Old Princeton.³

Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007) was born to British missionary parents in China. His father was a Church of Scotland minister from the evangelical wing of the church, and his mother an evangelical Anglican. After studying classics, philosophy, and divinity at the University of Edinburgh, Torrance completed a doctorate at the University of Basel where he studied under Karl Barth. Following several years in the pastorate, Torrance was called to teach at Edinburgh, where he taught Church History and then Christian Dogmatics from 1952 until his retirement in 1979.⁴ In addition to his

²On Nevin, see John W. Nevin, *My Own Life: The Earlier Years* (Lancaster, PA: Historical Society of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1964); Theodore Appel, *The Life and Work of John Williamson Nevin* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication House, 1889); D. G. Hart, *John Williamson Nevin: High Church Calvinist* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005).

³On the Mercersburg Theology, see especially James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁴See Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999); Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F.*

own myriad of publications, Torrance is also known for his work as a translator and editor of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and in his own theology we frequently find Barthian themes filtered through the Scottish heritage of churchly Calvinism and Torrance's own engagement with the philosophy of science.

What are the common threads here? Both men were exposed, by family background and by educational training, to Reformed theology and to the emotional warmth of pietistic evangelicalism. Both head and heart were engaged, and both were to demonstrate a deep concern for the integration of the Christian's experience of grace. By virtue of their backgrounds, they were both also aware of certain difficulties in the received heritage. We will look at some examples of this, first in the area of theological method, and then in the area of theological content.

II. Theological Method

As we survey the work of both, we immediately notice a heavy historical component. Nevin read widely in the history of doctrine from the Apostolic Fathers until his own time. In debates Nevin showed himself to be a formidable historical apologist, as Charles Hodge and others discovered to their dismay.⁵ Torrance's Basel dissertation explored the eclipse of grace in the Apostolic Fathers,⁶ and his later writings have copious references to a wide range of figures – eastern and western patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern. Clearly, both men have taken the tradition with deadly seriousness – not in slavish dependence upon the letter of earlier formulations, but with profound respect for those who have gone before.

Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001).

⁵Nevin and Hodge had a well-known debate over the nature of the Reformed doctrine of the Lord's Supper. In the opinion of many, Nevin got the better of the argument. Nevin critiqued the prevailing Zwinglianism of his day in his *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott, 1846). Hodge responded with a scathing book review, "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 20 (1848): 227-278. Nevin's most complete response to Hodge is found in his "Doctrine of the Reformed Church on the Lord's Supper," *Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850): 421-548. For insightful accounts of this interchange, see Nichols, *Romanticism*, 84-106; Hart, *John Williamson Nevin*, 114-137.

⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959 [orig. ed. 1948]).

Second, both are philosophical realists who consistently oppose dualistic and disjunctive modes of thought. Nevin was powerfully influenced by the idealist currents coming out of Germany, and particularly by the organic idealism of Schelling.⁷ This is especially evident in Nevin's nearly constant polemic against what he terms the "outward" or "extrinsic," the "mechanical," and the "abstract," and his turn toward the "inward," the "organic," and the "concrete." We see in Nevin a vigorous impulse toward unity and integration rather than disjunction, toward the *a priori* and ideal over against the *a posteriori* and empirical, and toward the general over the particular. In the critical realism of Torrance as well we find a powerful drive for integration. Repeatedly we detect a philosophical stance in which there is a refusal to pit act and function against being and ontology (in contrast to much twentieth-century philosophy and theology). This realism is further evident in Torrance's polemic against "dualism." The causal and ontological categories inherited from Aristotelian and Newtonian science, Torrance argues, tend to separate God from the world and to cause one to see disjunction where essential unity and continuity exist. In place of "dualism," Torrance invokes the findings of contemporary theoretical physics, and he calls for an "onto-relational" mode of thought in which matter and energy, time and space are viewed in relational rather than absolute terms.⁸

Finally, both Nevin and Torrance emphasize Christology and the Incarnation as foundational for theology. Nevin regards the Incarnation as the central event of history and the theanthropic person of Christ as the essential content of the Christian faith. He writes in his 1849 article on the Apostles' Creed: "The Incarnation is the deepest and most comprehensive fact, in the economy of the world. Jesus Christ authenticates himself, and all truth and reality besides; or rather all

⁷The philosophical influences on Nevin are treated in Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale, 1985), 171-183; and William DiPuccio, "Nevin's Idealistic Philosophy," in *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Sam Hamstra, Jr. and Arie J. Griffioen (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1995), 43-67.

⁸See Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 186-188; *The Mediation of Christ* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1983), 58-62; *Theology in Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 8-14. The critical realism of Torrance is explored in McGrath, *T. F. Torrance*, 211-232; Colyer, *How to Read*, 322-355; and P. Mark Achtemeier, "The Truth of Tradition: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair Macintyre and T. F. Torrance," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994): 355-374.

truth and reality are such, only by the relation in which they stand to him, as their great centre and last ground.”⁹ The Incarnation is just as central for Torrance. A staunch defender of the Nicene *homoousion*, he regards the Incarnation as foundational to God’s revelation of himself, to the accomplishing of salvation by the God-Man, to the application of that redemption and reconciliation to human beings through participation in the Savior’s person, *and* to the human response to divine grace.¹⁰ As such, the Incarnation is determinative of the method as well as the content of theology. Torrance writes: “It is the incarnation of the Word which prescribes to dogmatic theology both its matter and its method, so that whether in its activity as a whole or in the formulation of a doctrine in any part, it is the Christological pattern that will be made to appear.”¹¹

III. Theological Content

We will examine convergence of theological content in two distinct but related areas – the incarnate humanity of Christ and the stress on solidarity/participation/union with Christ as the means of receiving salvation.

A. *The Incarnate Humanity of Christ*

Both Nevin and Torrance affirm the classic two natures doctrine of the Creeds. More interesting, however, is how they both treat the nature and significance of the humanity of Christ. Several points of crucial importance must be noted at the outset. Both theologians accord enormous soteriological significance to the incarnate humanity of Christ. Both affirm that the Logos assumed a “fallen humanity,” and that the humanity of Christ is in some sense general or universal in its significance.

⁹John W. Nevin, “The Apostles’ Creed,” *Mercersburg Review* I (1849): 315. The logic of this position implies, and Nevin at times suggests, that the Incarnation would have occurred even apart from sin. For example, Nevin suggests that “the Messianic idea” of the God-Man “has its necessity in the constitution of humanity.” William H. Erb, *Dr. Nevin’s Theology: Based on Manuscript Class-Room Lectures* (Reading, PA: I. M. Beaver, 1913), 236. For other discussions of this matter see Nevin, “Liebner’s Christology,” *Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 55-73; and “Cur Deus Homo,” *Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 220-238.

¹⁰See Torrance, *Mediation*, 83-108.

¹¹Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 128.

According to Nevin, in the Incarnation humanity is united with the eternal Logos so as to introduce a new principle of existence into the world. Moreover, Nevin insists, the Logos has been united with a “fallen” human nature, has sanctified it, and thus has raised humanity to a new level of existence Nevin terms the “New Creation.” In speaking of Christ’s “fallen” human nature, Nevin did not deny the sinlessness of Christ. Rather, he emphasizes the solidarity of Christ with those he came to save.

In taking our nature upon him, he was made in all respects like as we are, only without sin. (Heb. iv. 15. v. 2, 7). He appeared “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. viii. 3); “made of a woman, made under the law” (Gal. iv. 4). The humanity which he assumed was fallen, subject to infirmity, and liable to death. . . . Under all this low estate however, the power of a divine life was always actively present, wrestling as it were with the law of death it was called to conquer, and sure of its proper victory at the last. This victory was displayed in the resurrection.¹²

And so, as the bearer of this new principle of existence, Christ is the “second Adam,” the root and source of a new humanity made up of those in mystical union with him.¹³

In explaining how this incarnate humanity of Christ can serve as the medium of the New Creation, Nevin introduces a crucial distinction between individual and generic humanity, between “the simple man and the universal man.”¹⁴ Both the first and second Adams serve as generic heads of their respective communities. The first Adam has to do with humanity as originally created, the second with humanity as recreated and elevated through union with the Logos.¹⁵ This distinction between individual and generic humanity, Nevin believes, enables one to affirm a real and meaningful union without effacing personal distinctions.¹⁶

¹²John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1846), 223.

¹³See Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 165-166.

¹⁴Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 173.

¹⁵See John W. Nevin, “Catholic Unity,” in James Hastings Nichols, ed., *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 40; *Mystical Presence*, 173.

¹⁶See Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 165, 173.

Torrance travels a similar path as he treats the significance of the Incarnation. His writings are replete with references to the “mediatorial humanity” and the “vicarious humanity” of Christ. This humanity of Christ has a corporate dimension: “His being was not only individual but also corporate, recapitulating in himself the chosen people and the messianic seed, and embodying in himself also the new humanity of the future.”¹⁷

Torrance also repeatedly insists (even more strongly than Nevin) that the humanity assumed by the Logos in the Incarnation was a fallen humanity. He writes: “[T]he Incarnation is to be understood as the coming of God to take upon himself our fallen human nature, our actual human existence laden with sin and guilt, our humanity diseased in mind and soul in its estrangement or alienation from the Creator.”¹⁸ In its assumption by the Logos, this fallen humanity was then sanctified, humanized, and brought into a proper relationship of responsiveness to God.¹⁹ This process of elevation reached its climax in the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Christ’s humanity has become “spiritual,” for “by the Spirit physical existence is redeemed from all that corrupts and undermines it, and from all or any privation of being.”²⁰

Two comments must be made at this juncture. First, the coherence of these notions of the corporate or generic significance of the humanity of Christ depends upon philosophical presuppositions that may be broadly designated as Platonic in tendency. For Nevin, this impulse was mediated by and filtered through the organic idealism of Schelling and German mediating theologians such as Neander and Ullmann. While the philosophical background of Torrance is certainly different, on this key point he too looks suspiciously Platonic. George Hunsinger insightfully remarks that for Torrance the sanctified humanity of Christ has “the status of a ‘concrete universal.’”²¹

Second, their view of the “fallen humanity” of Christ requires comment. Although Nevin asserts the notion in various contexts, he

¹⁷Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 200.

¹⁸Torrance, *Mediation*, 48-49; see also T. F. Torrance trans. and ed., *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (New York: Harper, 1959), lxxxv.

¹⁹See Torrance, *Mediation*, 81-82.

²⁰Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, 141. See also 139-142.

²¹George Hunsinger, “The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54/2 (2001): 162.

does not list his influences. Nevin was doubtless aware of the ideas of the deposed Scottish minister Edward Irving (1792-1834), but for obvious reasons does not cite him approvingly.²² Torrance is more concerned to establish a “meaningful past” for this position. He claims that this teaching was “found everywhere in the early church in the first five centuries,” and he appeals explicitly to the patristic dictum “that the unassumed is unhealed.”²³ This doctrine was, Torrance maintains, later suppressed in the Latin West in favor of the view that humanity in its pre-Fall condition was assumed by the Logos. This Torrance terms the “Latin heresy” and he views this as leading to an extrinsic conception of the relationship between Christ and the Christian, and to an undue preoccupation with the forensic at the expense of the realistic.²⁴ Then, according to Torrance, this earlier and more robust incarnational perspective re-emerges in the better Scottish theologians.²⁵

What are we to make of this historical case? Torrance is perhaps on firmer ground when dealing with the Greek fathers – the patristic dictum “what is not assumed is not saved” would seem to support his thinking, although a careful reading of Athanasius (a church father often cited by Torrance), for example, suggests that the problem of “corruption” in view is a metaphysical tendency toward non-being rather than moral fallenness.²⁶ His assertions regarding the Reformation and post-Reformation period, however, are open to

²² Edward Irving’s views on this matter were published in his *The Orthodox and Catholic Doctrine of Our Lord’s Human Nature* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1830). On the influence of Irving, see F. F. Bruce, “The Humanity of Jesus Christ,” in *A Mind for What Matters: Collected Essays of F. F. Bruce* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 248-258.

²³Torrance, *Mediation*, 49.

²⁴See, e.g., Thomas F. Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39/4 (1986): 461-482. See also Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 86-89.

²⁵Torrance, *School of Faith*, lxxxiv-lxxxv; *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 56-57, 78, 208-211.

²⁶See, e.g., Athanasius, *On the Incarnation in Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 62-63. Also of interest is the early but sophisticated discussion of this issue in Tertullian, “On the Flesh of Christ,” 16 in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 reprint), III:535-536.

question.²⁷ But, of course, the coherence of the position does not stand or fall with the historical argument. It hinges not only on the exegesis on passages such as Romans 8:3 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, but also on the soteriological framework that is held, and it is to that soteriological framework that we now turn.

B. Salvation as Participation/Union with Christ

Christology generally stands in close relation to soteriology, and these theologians are no exception. Both stress the reception of salvation through the believer's union and solidarity with Christ. Both contend that it is through participation with the person of Christ that the Christian receives the benefits of Christ's work. But in order to understand the significance of this theme, some historical context is necessary.

We may distinguish two broad approaches to soteriology – the “appropriation” and “participation” models.²⁸ Much early and medieval soteriology was participationist. That is to say, the Christian is brought into union with Christ through sacramental incorporation into Christ himself and into his church as the body of Christ, and through this union with or participation in the person of Christ, the benefits of salvation are conveyed. Often the humanity of Christ is seen as the point of contact, mediating the power of the divine to the believer. As we move into the Reformation period, the initial impulse continues to be participationist. Here we recall, for example, of John Calvin's famous statement at the beginning of Book III of the *Institutes* that the benefits of salvation remain unavailable to us as long as “Christ remains outside of us.”²⁹ Also to be noted is Calvin's insistence that it

²⁷ See Bruce L. McCormack, “For Us and Our Salvation: Incarnation and Atonement in the Reformed Tradition,” *Studies in Reformed Theology and History* 1:2 (1993): 17-22. McCormack argues that the Reformed tradition generally has held that while the Logos assumed a humanity like ours in every respect, at the moment of conception the humanity derived from Mary was immediately sanctified by the power of the Holy Spirit (and not progressively through the hypostatic union). See also Donald Macleod, “Dr. T. F. Torrance and Scottish Theology: a Review Article,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 72:1 (2000):67-71.

²⁸I am indebted to Roger Newell for this terminology. See his “Participation and Atonement,” in *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, ed. Trevor A Hart and Daniel P. Thimell (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), 92-101.

²⁹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.1.1: “How do we

is through union and participation with the “substance” of Christ’s incarnate humanity that both the power of his deity and the forensic benefits of salvation (e.g., justification) are conveyed to the Christian.³⁰ But Calvin’s view of union with Christ and soteriology in general involved a matrix of realistic, personal, and forensic categories which is never fully developed and explained. Categories such as “substance” and “participation” are ontological, while “imputation” and synthetic justification are forensic, and the Reformer never fully explained how the forensic dimension is related to Christ’s person such that to receive the latter is to receive the former.

Some initial headway on this problem was made by some of Calvin’s successors, who began to explore the notion of Christ’s resurrection as a forensic act – a divine declaration of the righteousness of the God-Man, which applies first to Christ himself, and then to those united with him. But this potentially promising trajectory was soon overwhelmed by the rise of the Federal Theology with its notions of immediate imputation and federal or legal solidarity.³¹ The tendency in mature federal theology from the late seventeenth century onward is to speak of at least two forms of union with Christ – an extrinsic legal union whereby the Christian appropriates the forensic benefits of salvation by faith, and a vital or spiritual union whereby the Christian experiences the transforming power of God.³² The effect of this

receive those benefits which the Father bestowed on his only begotten Son—not for Christ’s own private use, but that he might enrich poor and needy men? First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us.”

³⁰See, e.g., John Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, ed. and trans. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 308; *Commentary on John 6:51*; *Commentary on Ephesians 5:30*; *Institutes* III.11.9. See also R. S. Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Word and Sacrament* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1957), 146-149.

³¹ Regarding this notion of the resurrection justification of Christ, R. B. Gaffin, Jr. remarks, “Apparently, this point was better grasped by the earlier Reformed theologians than subsequently.” Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 123, n. 147.

³² It is worth noting that the Westminster Standards were written prior to the point when the language of an extrinsic “legal union” emerges in Reformed thought. Today, however, notions of covenantal/federal/legal solidarity and participation are often pitted against one another. See, e.g., Michael S. Horton, “Participation and Covenant,” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed*

bifurcation was to safeguard the forensic from works righteousness, but at the expense of making the forensic rather abstract. That is, the doctrine of justification was abstracted from the ongoing life of faith. Compounding the problem of abstraction, the unity of salvation (the link binding the forensic and the transformatory together) was no longer to be found in Christology (as in Calvin), but in the eternal decrees of God. And so, in this move to extrinsic categories we see a shift from a participationist soteriology to an appropriationist model in which salvation is no longer “in Christ” but on the basis of what Christ has done.³³ In addition, the humanity of Christ begins to be eclipsed as a theological factor – Christ’s incarnate humanity becomes little more than a prerequisite for the Atonement.

This extrinsic appropriationist trend accelerates in the New England Calvinist trajectory from the Edwardseans to Nathaniel William Taylor. Convinced that traditional federal theology did not comport with the emerging revivalism (because the notion of a definite substitutionary atonement seemed to undercut gospel proclamation) and that it was implicitly antinomian (because *ordo salutis* conceptions of a punctiliar, once-for-all forensic decree of justification upon the exercise of faith were thought to undercut the need for ongoing obedience and holiness of life), the New England Calvinists adopted the Grotian or Governmental view of the atonement, jettisoned all notions of imputation (in both hamartiology and soteriology), and spoke only of a “moral union” of shared sentiment between Christ and the believer.³⁴ One result of all this was that the theme of union with Christ largely dropped out of New England Calvinist discourse by the mid-nineteenth century, which prompted Charles Hodge to quip, “[T]he Christian feels disposed to say with Mary, They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him.”³⁵

Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation, ed. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthuis (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 107-132.

³³On these developments, see William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008), 43-83.

³⁴See Evans, “Imputation and Impartation,” 228-267. The continuity of the Edwardsean trajectory from Jonathan Edwards to N. W. Taylor is ably explored by Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁵Charles Hodge, “Beman on the Atonement,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 17 (1845):115.

John Nevin opposed both of these appropriationist options. Against the federal theology bifurcation of union, Nevin contended that both the legal and the spiritual unions are ultimately extrinsic and abstract.

The relation of believers to Christ, then, is more again than that of a simply *legal* union. His is indeed the representative of his people, and what he has done and suffered on their behalf is counted to their benefit, as though it had been done by themselves. They have an interest in his merits, a title to all the advantages secured by his life and death. But this external imputation rests at last on an inward, real unity of life, without which it could have no reason or force. . . . Of course, once more, the communion in question is not simply with Christ in his *divine nature* separately taken, or with the *Holy Ghost* as the representative of his presence in the world. It does not hold in the influences of the Spirit merely, enlightening the soul and moving it to holy affections and purposes.³⁶

He also insightfully suggests that this approach constitutes an unstable synthesis, tilting toward a theoretical antinomianism but with the potential to fall into a practical legalism at the same time.³⁷ An examination of the history of Reformed federal soteriology reveals a tendency to oscillate between the antinomian and the neonomian poles, and federal theology has been persistently accused of both problems.³⁸

³⁶Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 57.

³⁷John W. Nevin, "The Sect System," in *Catholic and Reformed: Selected Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978), 160-161, writes: "It is well to note how generally the sect system adheres to the article of *justification by faith*, and how prone it is to run this side of Christianity out to a false extreme, either in the way of dead antinomianism or wild fanaticism. . . . They . . . turn justification by faith into a complete abstraction, and so nullify the law in one form, only to come too generally under the yoke of it in another."

³⁸During the 18th and 19th centuries, the accusation of antinomianism predominated (especially among the New England successors of Jonathan Edwards); during the twentieth century charges of legalism were more prominent (here we think especially of the Torrance brothers and their students, as well as historians such as Perry Miller). Most recently concerns about antinomianism have surfaced once again among Reformed advocates of the New Perspective on Paul and the so-called Federal Vision movement.

Likewise, Nevin also opposed the New England Calvinist notion of a moral union as extrinsic, as issuing in a flat moralism, and as ultimately sub-Christian.

In this view, the relation is more again than a simply *moral* union. Such a union we have, where two or more persons are bound together by inward agreement, sympathy, and correspondence. Every common friendship is of this sort. It is the relation of the disciple to the master, whom he loves and reveres. It is the relation of the devout Jew to Moses, his venerated lawgiver and prophet. It holds also undoubtedly between the believer and Christ. . . . But Christianity includes more than such a moral union, separately considered. This union itself is only the result here of a relation more inward and deep.³⁹

Against these “appropriationist” options, Nevin insists that salvation is to be found in Christ, not simply on the basis of what Christ has done. As Nevin himself puts it, “It is a new creation *in Jesus Christ*, not by him in the way of mere outward power.”⁴⁰ Yet how is this new creation, this new life in Christ carried over from the person of Christ to the church and to the individual Christian? A variety of metaphors and expressions are used, including infusion and participation.⁴¹ Nevin also contends with Calvin that this union or solidarity or participation takes place by faith and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Crucial here is the close relationship between the Holy Spirit and the incarnate humanity of Christ – the Spirit is not a proxy for an absent Christ; rather, the Spirit mediates the presence of Christ to the believer in that the Spirit is the sphere of the mystical union, the

Such instability is especially evident in the contemporary context, as the advocates of traditional federal theology have difficulty explaining how the ongoing life of faith is relevant to one’s eternal destiny if one is declared righteous once and for all upon the exercise of faith (sanctification/obedience are often seen as but a *conditio sine qua non* of salvation). Others have responded to this problem by expanding the category of faith to include obedience or by placing great emphasis upon the conditionality of the covenant of grace.

³⁹Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 55-56, writes: See also Nevin, “The New Creation in Christ,” *Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850): 1-11.

⁴⁰Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 228.

⁴¹See, e.g., Nevin, “New Creation,” 2-5; *Mystical Presence*, 55, 176.

mode of Christ's presence with the Christian.⁴² For Nevin, the fallen (albeit sinless) humanity of Christ has been elevated by virtue of its union with the Logos into the realm of Spirit, and thus it is accessible to the believer.⁴³

Given that the Christian receives the benefits of salvation through participation in the person of Christ, how does Nevin understand these benefits? Sanctification is rooted in union with Christ and is viewed as a lifelong process that is furthered by the means of grace (especially the sacraments) as the very life of Christ is infused into the Christian.⁴⁴ Nevin's view of justification requires more comment. To some extent, Nevin echoes traditional Reformed themes – justification is an objective work of God which takes place as the believer is united with Christ by faith. It involves not merely the forgiveness of sins but also the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. But Nevin diverges markedly from previous Reformed thought in his view of imputation and the atonement. Rejecting the federal notion of “immediate imputation” as an abstract fiction, Nevin instead argues for a form of mediate forensic imputation in which the sin of Adam and the righteousness of Christ are both imputed on the basis of participation in their moral character.

The moral relations of Adam, and his moral character too, are made over to us at the same time. Our participation in the actual unrighteousness of his life, forms the ground of our participation in his guilt and liability to punishment. And in no other way, we affirm, can the idea of imputation be satisfactorily sustained in the case of the second Adam. The scriptures make the two cases, in this respect, fully parallel.⁴⁵

⁴²See Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 229.

⁴³Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 176: “His whole humanity has been taken up into the sphere of the Spirit, and appears transfigured into the same life. And why then should it not extend itself, in the way of strict organic continuity, as a *whole* humanity also, by the active presence of Christ's Spirit, over into the persons of his people?”

⁴⁴Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 168: “The new life lodges itself, as an efflux from Christ, in the inmost core of our personality. Here it becomes the principle or seed of our sanctification; which is simply the gradual transfusion of the same exalted spiritual quality or potence through our whole persons. The process terminates with the resurrection.”

⁴⁵Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 190-191.

In the same context, Nevin suggests that justification may be ascribed proleptically to the believer because the life of Christ communicated in mystical union includes potentially all that belongs to Christ. The justification of the Christian is not the synthetic justification of the ungodly, but rather the analytic justification of the at least partly (and potentially fully) righteous.

The judgment of God must ever be according to truth. He cannot reckon to anyone an attribute or quality, which does not belong to him in fact. He cannot declare him to be in a relation or state, which is not actually his own, but the position merely of another. . . . The law in this view would be itself a fiction only, and not the expression of a fact. But no such fiction, whether under the name of law or without it, can lie at the ground of a judgment entertained or pronounced by God.⁴⁶

Here we see that the forensic is consistently subordinated to the realistic, to the point that an important Reformation insight (the synthetic justification of the ungodly) is rejected.⁴⁷

Once again, Torrance moves in similar channels. He insists that it “is through partaking of Christ Himself that we partake of His benefits and blessings.”⁴⁸ While there is an incarnational union of Christ with all humanity, this union also must be “subjectively actualized in us

⁴⁶Nevin, *Mystical Presence*, 189.

⁴⁷The distinction between “analytic” and “synthetic” justification, a commonplace of Ritschlian neo-Kantianism, harks back to Kant’s distinction between analytic (the negations of which are self-contradictory) and synthetic (the negations of which are not self-contradictory) judgments. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s, 1965), 48-51; Stephen Körner, *Kant* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955), 18-19. On the distinction between analytic and synthetic justification, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, trans. Lewis B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 15-16.

⁴⁸Torrance, *School of Faith*, cx. Torrance’s emphasis upon union with Christ is identified by McGrath as one of a number of key points where he diverges from his teacher Barth. McGrath goes on to cite the powerful influence of Torrance’s Edinburgh dogmatics professor H. R. Mackintosh and his views on union with Christ. See McGrath, *T. F. Torrance*, 140, 197. On Mackintosh, see Robert R. Redman, Jr., “*Participatio Christi*: H. R. Mackintosh’s Theology of the Unio Mystica,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 201-222.

through his indwelling Spirit.”⁴⁹ As in Nevin, the sacraments are viewed as an important means whereby this appropriation of Christ takes place. Like Nevin, Torrance inveighs against views of the relationship between Christ and the Christian as external and here he takes both federal Calvinism and moralistic Protestant liberalism to task.⁵⁰ The term *participation* is frequently used to describe the relationship between the Christian and the incarnate Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁵¹

Turning to the benefits of salvation, we immediately notice that the forensic aspect is eclipsed. The category of imputation is largely absent,⁵² and there is a persistent tendency to conflate what have been traditionally called “justification” and “sanctification.”⁵³ For example, he maintains that “Justification is not only a declaratory act, but an actualization of what is declared.”⁵⁴ Both are appropriated through union with Christ as the believer participates in Christ’s own justification and sanctification. Thus Torrance declares that “justification is a continuing act in Christ, in whom we are

⁴⁹Torrance, *Mediation of Christ*, 77.

⁵⁰See Torrance, *School of Faith*, cvi-cxxvi; *Mediation of Christ*, 72.

⁵¹Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 243-244: “in the Spirit we are made to participate in saving acts that are abruptly and absolutely divine, election, adoption, regeneration or sanctification and we participate in them by grace alone. . . . through the coming of the Spirit the Church in its earthly and historical pilgrimage is made to participate in a perfected reality so that it lives out of a fulness above and beyond itself.”

⁵²When Torrance speaks of “imputation” it is the objective side of the subjective reception by participation and union with Christ. Thus he can speak of both justification and sanctification as imputed. See *Theology in Reconstruction*, 160. Behind this is his conception of the “vicarious humanity” of Christ whereby Christ mediates not only God’s grace to us but also our human response of faith and obedience to that grace.

⁵³Torrance distinguishes “objective justification” (the objective act of God in Christ which includes the active and passive obedience of Christ as well as the assumption of fallen humanity and which culminates in the resurrection of Christ as the decisive declaration that Christ is indeed the righteous one) and “subjective justification” (which includes Christ’s own sanctification of estranged human existence). See *Theology in Reconstruction*, 153-156; *Space, Time & Resurrection*, 61-66. And so, Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 157, maintains, “Justification as objective act of the redeeming God and justification as subjective actualization of it in our estranged humanity have once and for all taken place—in Jesus.”

⁵⁴Torrance, *Space, Time & Resurrection*, 62.

continuously being cleansed, forgiven, sanctified, renewed, and made righteous.”⁵⁵

Several comments must be made regarding this notion of salvation by participation. First, this participationist trajectory has had some difficulty maintaining the robustly Reformational emphasis on the forensic justification of the ungodly. If both justification and sanctification are received in the same way – through union and participation in Christ – then the danger of conflation exists. This participationist trajectory is strong on the unity of justification and sanctification in Christ, but it risks confusion of the forensic and the transformatory. This should not surprise, since the notion of participation originally functioned in Platonism to describe the relationship between the ideal forms and particular existents (i.e., it describes an ontological relationship). When it is used to describe the appropriation of salvation comprehensively, it seems at best awkward in dealing with the forensic dimension.

Second, the notion of soteriological participation suffers from problems of definition. The concept is used quite broadly – for participation in the person of Christ (in whom the benefits of salvation reside), for involvement in events and acts (crucifixion and resurrection with Christ), for participation in moral character, and for the reception of forensic benefits (justification). Some rigorous effort at clarification is clearly needed.⁵⁶

Third, there is the problem of philosophical dependence. The coherence of Nevin’s formulations depends, at least in part, on philosophical presuppositions imported from German idealism. Torrance’s “onto-relational” thinking arises out of his own exploration of the relationship between theology and science. Does a participationist soteriology stand or fall with a particular philosophy, or at least with a broadly Platonizing philosophical tendency? Clearly those who would press a participationist soteriology have more work to do here.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Torrance, *Space, Time & Resurrection*, 64.

⁵⁶For a helpful exploration of the range of diversity present in participatory soteriologies in the Patristic and Eastern Church contexts, see Donald Fairbairn, “Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50:2 (June 2007): 289-310. The picture becomes more complex still when Calvin and early Reformed theology are brought into the discussion.

⁵⁷In Torrance, for example, “onto-relational” thinking does not explain the realism in question, for when all is said and done Torrance must still appeal to

IV. Implications for Contemporary Evangelical Thought

Other examples of this remarkable convergence can be cited (e.g., similar ecclesiologies, their defense of the *filioque*, their views on the Atonement, their rejection of predestinarian Calvinism, and so forth), but we have seen enough to sense that we are indeed dealing with twin sons of different mothers. And so we return to the question that was posed at the outset – what *aporias* in Reformed and evangelical theology are exposed here, and what lessons may be gleaned?

There is, first of all, the problem of forgetfulness. Has there not been a forgetfulness of portions of the Scriptural witness in evangelical circles? There is much in Scripture that historically has been plausibly interpreted as pointing in a participationist direction – Jesus’ teaching regarding the vine and the branches in John 15:1-8, the Pauline “union with Christ” language that pervades his epistles. The theme of union with Christ itself largely disappeared from evangelical theology for many generations, a fact which prompted A. H. Strong to complain around the turn of the last century that “it receives little of formal recognition, either in dogmatic treatises or in common religious experience.”⁵⁸ Those who pride themselves on their Biblicism should seek to do justice to grand and pervasive biblical themes.

There is also a forgetfulness of the Incarnation. Evangelical theology tends to be Atonement-centered, finding more theological significance in Good Friday than in Easter Sunday, and spending more time on the work of Christ than the person. Particularly evident is the eclipse of the humanity of Christ as a theological factor. But surely the humanity of Christ is more than just a precondition of the Atonement.

the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, and he also recognizes an eschatological dimension. While believers still live in the context of the “old structures” of the present age, they nevertheless “participate in the time of the new creation through the Spirit of the risen Christ.” *Space, Time & Resurrection*, 103.

This writer has contended that the answer “may lie not so much in ‘philosophy’ as in the language and imagery of the New Testament, which calls our attention to the identity and work of Christ as the second Adam and root of the new humanity (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:45, 49; Col. 1:18) . . . and to the believer’s participation in the new creation through union with Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). . . . In the resurrection, one encounters the nexus of the old and new creations, and it is precisely here that all ‘philosophy’ fails.” Evans, *Imputation and Impartation*, 263.

⁵⁸Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), 795.

Nevin and Torrance remind us that there is a richness of theological content to be explored.

Finally, there is the problem of disjunction. Methodologically, evangelical textbook theology is still firmly wedded to the *locus* method. Materially, evangelical theology often has difficulty integrating the experience of salvation and discerning its unity in Christ Jesus. Evangelicals in the Reformed tradition have had persistent difficulty relating the forensic and the transformatory without lapsing into antinomianism or neo-nomianism. Even if we may disagree (as this writer certainly does) with the details of how they integrate soteriology, Nevin and Torrance remind us that such integration is needed if a satisfying account of the Christian life is to be given.

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