Art, God, and Salvation:
Interviews With Trevor Hart

Published by Grace Communion International

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Introduction

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In ordinary conversations, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in these interviews is Dr. Trevor Hart, Professor of Divinity at the University of St. Andrews in Edinburgh, Scotland. He received his PhD from the University of Aberdeen in 1989. Among his books are:

- *Art, Imagination and Christian Hope: Patterns of Promise* (with Gavin Hopps and Jeremy Begbie)
- *At the Cross* (with Richard Bauckham)
- *Between the Image and the Word: Theological Engagements With Imagination, Language, and Literature*
- *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World: Essays Presented to James B. Torrance* (edited with Daniel Thimell)
- *Dictionary of Historical Theology* (editor)
- *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*
- *Faithful Performances* (with Steven Guthrie and Ivan Khovacs)
- *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (with Richard Bauckham)
- *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of Peter Taylor Forsyth*
- *Making Good: Creation, Creativity, and Artistry*
- *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*
- *Theatrical Theology: Explorations in Performing the Faith* (co-authored with Wesley

Vander Lugt)

- *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature and Theology (with Ivan Khovacs)*
- *The Waiting Father: Thomas Erskine of Linlathen*

The interviews were conducted by Dr. J. Michael Feazell, then vice-president of Grace Communion International.

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Art and Imagination in the Church

Introduction: St. Andrews, Scotland, is known as the birthplace of golf some 600 years ago. Here also stand the 850-year-old ruins of the Cathedral of St. Andrew, three of whose 100-feet-high towers rise majestically over the east end of the city. Nearby, the esteemed University of St. Andrews, founded in 1413, is the home of St. Mary's College, the university's renowned divinity school, which still uses its 16th century buildings.

In College Hall, a room within one of those buildings, *You're Included* host J. Michael Feazell, Vice-President of Grace Communion International, interviews Dr. Trevor Hart. Dr. Hart is Professor of Divinity and Director of the Institute for Theology, Imagination, and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews. He is the author of *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology*, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology*, and *Hope Against Hope*, which he co-authored with Richard Bauckham.

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for joining us today. We'd like to ask about historical Christian art. How has it helped to shape how Christians view doctrine and practice?

Trevor Hart: Much more than many Christians often suppose and realize, art has had a central place in the church for many centuries. At the time of the Reformation, and for very good reasons, there were some questions asked about certain ways of using art in church. Those remain important. But art has always been a way in which Christians have interpreted and made sense of the gospel.

There are lots of ways in which as human beings we make sense of things. We tell stories… Art such as painting, music, drama, have all featured centrally in the ways in which Christians have made sense of, interpreted, and represented to themselves fundamental truths of the faith, fundamental stories from Scripture. Whether we're thinking about what goes on in church, or outside church, art has been a central vehicle for the communication of the gospel.

JMF: There are many different forms of art – often we think of painting when we think of art, but art goes everywhere, from illustrations of stories, ideas, human imagination in many ways. We're trying to talk about things unseen and things we don't have a clear picture of, and yet we're trying to bring them down to our level. Doesn't that leave room for misinterpretation?

TH: It does. But if we limit ourselves to words, we get misinterpretation as well. One of the advantages, whether we are thinking of painting or of music – or if we bring things up to date a

bit, film, and the more contemporary forms that now would be recognized as among the arts – one of the advantages is that art engages us at levels and in ways that words alone can't. I say "words alone" advisedly, because it's important to hold together the levels at which art operates visually or through sound or action, whatever it is, engaging our emotions as well as our intellect and imagination. It's important to hold that together with words, but words alone can only take us so far.

A lot of the more familiar ways in which we think of the Christian gospel, biblical stories being interpreted limited to words can end up being dry if we're not careful. Most people know that when listening to a sermon or reading a Christian book — it's when the writer or the speaker resorts to story, for example, which is an artistic form, things begin to take off and get more interesting.

There's a place for what we might call clear-cut reasoned thought, and there will never be a context in which we can let go of that or stop doing it. But that needs to be supplemented. It needs to be brought to life. The ideas are important and they need to be clothed in flesh, we might say, and made more accessible. But I don't want to suggest that art is simply a matter of illustration or making abstract ideas more palatable. It can do that, and we should be grateful for the fact that it can. But art can also open up depths of meaning that words alone can't reach. In tandem with words, taken together with words, art can be a powerful force to put us in touch with realities that often go beyond the level of our understanding.

JMF: What are some examples of the depth of, let's say, music? When you bring music to church, sometimes the music can affect us in a very negative way or a very positive way.

TH: It can. That's a complex subject, and there are people far more expert than I am who understand how it works, but sometimes the interplay of the words, and when we're talking about music, words set to music and the sound, whether we're listening to it or when we're participating in it, when we're singing, we're doing something, making sound in a certain way which can complement and amplify the meaning of the words when it's done well.

Equally, I think a bad setting of a set of words…whether it's church music (or any other sort, for that matter)… is one where the sound, the music, doesn't work with the words, the ideas, but in some way against them. That can be hard to pin down and explain, but I think we know when it happens. Somehow it doesn't work. There's no sync between the meaning that we're articulating through the words and the meaning that is articulated in sound.

JMF: In some of our Western churches today, there seems to be a carryover from rock concerts into the church service. The volume tends to come across that way, and in my experience, many elderly people have asked if the volume could be turned down, and yet they're willing to, if it helps the young people, to have that music. Is it a historical phenomenon for what is art in contemporary life (or secular life, let's say) to be brought across into the church, and is that usually productive, or should the church have its own art that does not reflect just what is around us?

TH: There are elements of truth in both sides of that. For many centuries, while the culture was shaped by the church, much music was written and performed as church music. The church was the key patron for the arts, at least music. Someone like Bach was writing to order for church patrons, Catholic and Protestant.

The division between secular music and sacred music only arises in the 17th century and beyond, when music, among other arts, was forced to find business, as it were, outside church because there were more opportunities for it there than within the church. Since then it's usually been the case that church music has, to some extent, been willing to draw on wider currents of musicality, though not in an injudicious way.

The point of your question is good — we can't borrow anything simply because it might attract young people. We need to be careful. Music can work at deep levels which we don't always understand, so judiciousness and discernment needs to be carefully done. But, done well, done carefully, all sorts of things can be baptized and brought into the sanctuary and made good use of. There's a long history of that. Many hymn tunes and carol tunes were borrowed from the wider culture of the day. And we forget…we just claim them for our own in the church. I don't think there's anything wrong in principle with doing it, but it needs to be done carefully.

Music written within the church, for the church or from a Christian standpoint — we think not so much of music for worship now, but music composed by Christian composers — I think can have a powerful impact on the wider culture, too.

JMF: Much of contemporary music today, or what's called (at least in the United States) contemporary Christian music (much of which was written 40 or 50 years ago in some cases) has catchy tunes, repetitive tunes, but much of the theology seems to be weak, and yet that seems to be most popular and most repeated in many evangelical churches.

TH: If I wanted to start a new theological movement or a new Christian church with

peculiar doctrines, the most efficient way by far of populating such a church would be to write songs, popular choruses, hymns, call them what you will, with appropriately theologically orientated words and get people to sing them, because when people sing things, they quickly begin to believe it. We're far too careless in the way we pick up and sing things in church. We aren't really thinking. I try to make it a habit of my own to always read through a hymn that I'm not familiar with and see whether I want to sing it. We don't all need to have theology degrees and be able to analyze church hymn lyrics in a precise way, but we should be cautious about what we sing.

The flip side of that is it's incumbent upon hymn writers, writers of songs, to do a good job and to be better informed theologically, so that what they write is carefully thought through and not simply driven by the beat or by whatever. The best church music is a happy synthesis in which good words and good music complement one another. It's easy, and I suspect it happens, for bad words to arise because the music seems to drive it, just as it's possible for good words to be spoiled by bad music. We need to be judicious about what we sing and not be driven too quickly by the currents of music or fashion or what passes as popular in theological terms.

JMF: Are there other forms of Christian art that could enhance a worship service?

TH: It's a shame that in the Protestant churches and in the evangelical tradition, commonly we're still nervous about the use of visual art in church. The Reformation was careful in the direction of its criticism about the use of visual art in church. The key Reformers differed markedly on their attitude toward it. Luther was far more forgiving about visual art in church, was happy to tolerate it. Calvin was much more nervous and careful about what he thought was permissible. The key concern was idolatry. Calvin's worry was that if you put things in churches, people would tend to treat them in a way which might end up in idolatry and therefore it was far better to have them removed from churches. He was happy with art of a certain sort outside the sanctuary, not so happy with art in the sanctuary.

Luther's attitude was that idolatry is a matter of the heart. If you take away paintings, they'll simply find something else to latch onto — deal with the idolatry and then the paintings won't be a problem. There are a range of issues about which we need to be careful, therefore, about using visual arts in church. But painting and other forms of visual art can be powerful communicators of the gospel. They can enhance our church buildings in a range of ways which enrich worship, and used carefully and judiciously, so that we don't fall foul of the things which the Reformers

were worried about, they could be a massive enhancement of our worship in a number of ways.

JMF: Art is a reflection of human imagination, and you've done a great deal of work on the imagination in a broader sense and how it is a reflection of faith and practice in our walk with Christ. Can you tell us about that?

TH: I got interested in this when I was asked to write an essay on imagination and the Christian hope, and I started to reflect on it, reading around, thinking hard about it. It's apparent, when one thinks about hope, that imagination is bound to be central. When you're hoping, you're picturing things that aren't yet the case and making them concrete, so hope is one example of a place in Christian faith and life where we are employing our imaginations. There are many others.

In down-to-earth terms, if you ask yourself, what are most Christians doing when they pray? Most of us, I suspect, have a picture in our minds. Perhaps to some it will be a picture of God as father or something. For others it will be Jesus. It's hard to pray to a person without picturing them in some way. So that's another context in which imagination is quite indispensable for the life of faith.

Then I got to thinking, how about Jesus himself? Weren't Jesus' teaching strategies highly imaginative? In breaking open complex and difficult ideas — the kingdom of God, whatever it might be — Jesus tends to bring things immediately into the sphere of the imaginative and say, it's a bit like this, and he would tell a story or compare something abstract to something concrete so people could get a handle on it. In all sorts of ways, in almost any area of Christian life and faith, the imagination crops up very soon and seems to have a central function to play.

One could describe Christian faith itself as a way of imagining the world. People will get nervous about that because "imagination" tends to be associated quickly with another word — imaginary. The automatic association between the two isn't helpful. There's nothing wrong with things that are imaginary, but not everything that we imagine is imaginary. Lots of things that we have to imagine, because we have no other way of picturing them, are real. When one comes to faith, a different way of seeing, feeling, and tasting the world, slides into view. That's a matter of the imaginative. It's a way of picturing reality, picturing the world, picturing our relation to God in a new way as if someone has changed the backdrop against which we're situated. So a fundamental way in which to be imaginative seems to be basic to what we are, and in the life of faith, that has a basic role to play.

JMF: Many Christians will shy away from the idea, and yet everybody does it — we can't be alive without having some goings on in our brain that put together ideas…and that is imagination. Can Christians go too far? Is there something they should be worried about or careful about?

TH: Sure. I like to think of the imagination as whatever's going on in the mind's eye, as we might call it. That can be good and healthy, and it can be bad and unhealthy. It's reasonable that Christians might be concerned about certain things the imagination is capable of.

One thing I'm slightly cautious about is that in the 19th century, there was a rediscovery of the imagination and a tendency to associate it too quickly, almost automatically, with things of God, with the divine spirit, and so on. So I point out to my students that the imagination can be enormously dangerous. I usually say to them that there's nothing more imaginative than a torture chamber. That's one example of how we can use our imaginations to devise things, which far from being good and healthy and the things of God, are actually manifestations of evil. That tends to be the thing which underlies a lot of Christian concern of imagination, is it can be the maker of all sorts of things which are dangerous and damaging.

But imagination also lies behind most of the things which are good and life-giving and healthy. For example, knowing how to deal with somebody who is in a difficult place — an act of love, we might say, or mercy, or charity, call it what you will, is a highly imaginative thing. Knowing how to relate to another person effectively and well in any context is an imaginative activity. The imaginative is a fundamental disposition of what we are as human beings, and like most of the other things that we are as human beings, it can be used for good or ill, can be in the hands of God's Spirit, or can be a device we use to withstand God's Spirit and struggle against it.

So I don't want to automatically baptize the imagination and say that everything that's born of the imagination is necessarily good and healthy, but I want to recapture it, to reclaim it, for the kingdom of God, and say, God made us imaginative beings. We can't remember, we can't think where we've come from, without exercising our imaginations, we can't anticipate or hope for what lies in the future without using our imaginations, we can have no sense of who we are, where we're going, where we've come from, or what we should do and who we should seek to be. The imagination is a place in our lives where if God's Spirit lays hold of it and renews and redeems it, can be a remarkable resource for good.

One way I sum that up is to say, as Christians we talk about God's Spirit being present in us

and transforming us from within. We're not good at identifying the places where that happens. I have a hunch that if we talk about the imagination in that broad-brush sense of our mind's eye, the way we envisage things, the way we see ourselves and the world, then the imagination could be one place, if not the main place, where God's Spirit, present and active, works in renewing us and conforming us to Christ.

JMF: Our imagination is all we have, isn't it, as far as any kind of planning, ideas, coming up with what to do next?

TH: Anytime we move in our mind's eye beyond where we are now, then we're being imaginative. Whether we're thinking about what happened yesterday or what we might have for dinner tonight, that's imaginative. If we're thinking or planning a service for the weekend, that's imaginative. If we're expecting something to happen in life, that's… Almost anything you can think of that gets us outside of the immediacy of the here and now, this moment, involves the imagination to some extent.

JMF: As Christians we're participating in the life of Christ. As we read Scripture, that is a part of that process as Scripture becomes the witness of who Christ is with us and for us… How does imagination play into that?

TH: If we look at what God has given us as a book through which he makes himself known to us — how much of it is imaginative, and the sort of the thing that any literary critic would say oh, that's an imaginative genre? Story, poetry, parable, and so on. History (I mean history which figures God in it) is a way of patterning things, creating a pattern through a series of events over centuries. That is imaginative in terms of the content of Old and New Testaments and the pattern in which we trace through them a story leading from creation to the last things.

But it's not just the content of Scripture that's highly imaginative. The ways in which as Christians we read the text, make sense of it for ourselves, find ourselves as well as God in its pages. Here, God's speaking to us through its pages. That demands huge acts of imagination. It's not a way in which people ordinarily would see or think of themselves, but we're called to do it. God gives us these texts, calls us to read them together, and to seek his voice. Seeking and finding are highly imaginative activities. Imagination is a living and vibrant thing through which we come to see ourselves differently, and therefore to live differently. It seems to be fundamental to the ways in which we engage with the text of Scripture as God's word.

JMF: Aren't there some principles or guidelines that Christians can bring to keeping their

imaginations within some sort of reasonable boundaries when they come to the Scriptures? Often, as we read the Scriptures and bring our experiences to them, we can begin to abuse other people, and as we interpret the Scripture, assume that our view is God's view. How can a person not let their imagination lead them astray as they're going through the Scriptures?

TH: You're right. We can do all sorts of things with the Bible if we wish to. We can misuse it as well as use it well. Putting that back in terms of the question — there can be good imagining and bad imagining in relation to Scripture. We have to be guided by what we find in the text. It's not a free-for-all. We can't just do what we like with the text. We have to be guided by the patterns that we find in the text and work with those.

Christians have never thought that being faithful to the text of Scripture was simply a matter of reiterating the text. The best practitioners of the Christian faith, and the best theologians, have been those who have identified patterns within the text and then extrapolated them in a way that's faithful to the text but applies it to new situations, answers questions which the text itself perhaps doesn't answer directly but to which it's relevant, almost in the way that a jazz pianist or saxophonist might improvise on a theme or themes that are within the piece, but now there's something new and imaginative to be done on the basis of it for a new context, a new situation.

Yes, it's possible to use the imagination badly in relation to Scripture, just as it's possible to use it badly in relation to almost anything else in life. We're fallen in our imaginations, just as we're fallen in our minds, in our wills, and in our bodies — that's all the more reason then to suppose that we're also redeemed in Christ in our imaginations as well as our minds and our wills and our bodies. The other thing to say when we're talking about Scripture is that we should do it prayerfully.

JMF: Is there something to be said for doing it in the context of the body of Christ as opposed to just on our own…

TH: Absolutely. This is to some extent something that Protestants and evangelicals need to rediscover — the importance of the church for the reading of Scripture and that it's not primarily an individual exercise — it is primarily an exercise within the Body in which we have to listen to others, learn from others, as well as offer our own voice, and expect to meet Christ as we meet others and engage with them and not in isolation.

That's not to say that God doesn't speak to people — that we can't meet Christ in the privacy of our own space — but I think the more normal expectation is that that will happen as

we engage with other Christians in faith, in the community of faith, and share our interpretations, voice the things that we think we discover in the text, and see whether those are resonated by what others find there and see whether they're confirmed or called into question by what others find.

JMF: I've seen a bumper sticker on cars that says something like, "God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." They're talking about specific social issues about which they have reached a conclusion in which they're condemning those who do it, and it's their way of using the Bible as a tool to get across their agenda.

TH: Yeah. We need to be cautious about that. It's always complex asking questions about issues to which the Bible itself sometimes appears to give no clear answer but which it would be easy, by using it in certain ways, to make it seem to speak. The secret is to approach the text prayerfully, to seek to be as aware as we can about our own failings, of our own tendencies to make it say what we want to find in it, but to situate our reading of it in the community — to air our readings, to hear the readings of others, and to seek truth together prayerfully, because what we're concerned with is not faithfulness to our own readings or even those of our tradition, but faithfulness to what we hear God speaking in the text as we read it together.

JMF: The fact that we have imagination and the fact that Christ is one of us and therefore shares imagination as well, but more than that, we're made in the image of God, then we have to think that God has imagination which transcends our imagination and is the source of our imagination. How would we think about God and imagination? Is that a fair question?

TH: That's a huge question. Some theologians have wanted to use the term *imagination* directly of God. Any term we use in speaking of God we're using very carefully, because as Christians have long recognized, God is not like us, as God says in Isaiah, "My ways are not as your ways," and that otherness is important. However, the Bible doesn't hesitate to use human terms of God — thinking, speaking, acting, and so on. It seems to me that imagining is a reasonable one to use. To think of God, in some sense, on the analogy of human imagination in his dealings with things, can help us get a grip, perhaps, on the ways in which God deals with things sometimes.

But we need to handle the terms carefully. We can't simply project all the features of human imagining onto the clouds and assume that they're true in some amplified sense of God — that would be a dangerous way to go. But I wouldn't resist the term *imagination* just because it's one

that we don't find on the pages of the Bible all over. The Bible does show God acting imaginatively, creatively, if you prefer the term, in response to all sorts of situations, so it seems to be reasonable to use it in that way.

JMF: The term *imagination* has to do with *image,* a created image of which we are.

TH: Yeah. Christians have sometimes wanted to use the image of the artist, coming back to artistic imagination, as a way of picturing God's creative relation to the world. We need to be careful about that, but as a picture it seems to work reasonably well in certain respects…and the idea of God taking care over something, pouring gratuitous amounts of effort into the making of it and then standing back and…

JMF: The Scripture uses the potter and the wheel as the image of God.

TH: Indeed. And I think that sense of aesthetic judgment that we get in Genesis 1, where God stands back and sees that it is good. All those things speak to the human experience of making something, doing it well, doing it as well as you can, and being pleased, satisfied, with the outcome. And, of course, caring for what you've made, putting great value on it.

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God the Father,
Reflected in Jesus Christ

J. Michael Feazell: How did you become acquainted with Trinitarian theology?

Trevor Hart: I was an undergraduate student at the University of Durham in England. In about the second year of my three years of study, someone introduced me to Tom Torrance's work. They lent me a copy of *Space, Time, and Incarnation,* and I confess it took a little bit of reading. But I moved quickly on and picked up some of his other books, *Theology and Reconstruction, Theology and Reconciliation.*

In his writing, I realized that it was possible to do hard-nosed, thorough, rigorous, systematic theology in a way that touched base on almost every page with the things that mattered to the life of faith. Sometimes I wasn't finding that in the other people I was reading. That's not to say that the theologians I was reading weren't men and women of faith – it's that the theology seemed to be doing something other than a game in which self-conscious meshing of theology with Scripture, with tradition, and with the practical concerns of Christian life and living was apparent.

I found that very encouraging, slightly daunting, because he did it so well, but also refreshing. I moved on, because when reading Tom Torrance, you don't go very far without finding allusions to other figures. One of them was Karl Barth. So I started to read Karl Barth as well, and found the same sort of thing in Barth that I found in Torrance, and both of them were casting the whole of theology in this Trinitarian way of understanding things.

Reading Karl Barth

JMF: Karl Barth has such a huge body of work that it seems that people…there's so much, that they don't even undertake to read it. And there's been a lot of misunderstanding. Do you think that that is improving? Is Karl Barth being better understood?

TH: I suspect so. I hope so. Barth is a complex figure, as you say. His work is daunting; there's an awful lot of it. In a way that is analogous to Torrance, it's not easy to get into. Part of the reason is that he has his own way of saying things, putting things. There's a huge level of overall consistency between the different parts of his work, which means that you need to have read all the others before you start any one of them. So wherever you leap in, it's going to be

hard work at first. But if you stick with it, it becomes readable quickly, and you see the same themes occurring; you recognize where you are within the map, as it were, of his thought.

What struck me when I first started reading Barth, and still strikes me, is his clear dedication to the gospel, his concern that it be understood, and that its significance for life in the world be worked out and made manifest for as many people to see and to grasp as possible. He does that at huge length, with great care, but it's probably true that certain parts are less daunting than others in terms of their accessibility.

Usually I would encourage an undergraduate student wanting to start reading Barth to look at *The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [*Church Dogmatics* volume 4], where the themes are familiar: atonement, incarnation, and so on. He treats them in a way which is sometimes difficult, but sometimes just "home from home." What students get when they read that is the sense that even if they're not understanding everything on every page, nevertheless this is someone with whose thought they can feel at home.

Not that Barth won't stretch them, not that he won't make them re-think some things, maybe fairly fundamentally. Not that on occasion (and this remains true after 30 years of reading his thought) they may not end up disagreeing with him about one or two things, but they will have grappled at a deep level with some basic themes in the gospel, in their understanding of who God is, in their understanding of what God has done in Jesus Christ, and in the way that that plays out in the wider story of life in the world. For that, it's hard to better Barth, although if I wanted to cluster theologians who do it well, Barth and Torrance would be in the first league.

JMF: There are some interesting small books by Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam* and *The Humanity of God*, and many people have found those helpful. In *Christ and Adam* he goes through Romans 5. It's short and easy to read, but so meaningful as he takes you into the love of God that is in spite of who you are and what you've done. As a taste of what can come of reading Barth, it seems different from the way we typically go to church and hear a sermon about how you should be obeying and if you don't please God you're coming under the curse and you're going back like a dog to its vomit, and you come away discouraged. But when you read Barth, you come away encouraged about who you are, the commitment toward the same way.

TH: Yeah. Barth talks about the strange new world that we find in the Bible, and many readers have a similar experience when they first pick up Barth, that here too there is a strange new world, and you might not yet be able to identify all the landmarks or pick out the horizon.

But nevertheless, you know that you're in somewhere that's unfamiliar, in a sense.

I cited a couple of moments ago that Barth's theology in some ways has a familiar ring to it. But you also get the sense that even though these are familiar themes and landmarks, somehow the configuration of them is different. The difference is intriguing, and when most people read it the first time, it's attractive. Something about it has changed. The players are the same players and the storylines are the same storylines, but something has been done to them which gives it a completely different feel.

It is that sense of the God who is from first to last *for us,* and determined to be for us, no matter who we are and no matter what we've done and no matter what we amount to, who values us not for our achievements but for who he has called us to be and who he has made us to be in his Son. That is completely foundational to Barth's thought; it colors every chapter of the story he tells. I think people catch that.

Even if they don't understand it at first and they can't see how it all plays out in the larger structure of their understanding of the Christian faith, most people I've met who have engaged with Barth at any length find that attractive immediately. It's something they want to hear more of, and that's because it is the gospel. It is the story of the God who gives all for us and is determined to be for us. Barth's got his finger on that pulse from the very first, and it's shot through the whole of his theology. There's no part of his theology where that doesn't come up again and again and shape the whole substance of what he has to say, no matter what he's talking about.

The doctrine of election

JMF: When we think of Calvinists today, we aren't necessarily thinking of John Calvin, but we're thinking of a theology that excludes people… On one side there's a declaration of assurance of salvation, but on the other side, there's a "How do you know that you're among the elect?" Well, you know by the evidence of your works, and yet that proves nothing to you. Is there a difference between John Calvin's theology and what has become of it, and what influence has Karl Barth brought to that understanding?

TH: Barth is a Reformed theologian, self-consciously so, and therefore I think his appropriation of the Reformed tradition and his reinterpretation of it at certain key points, not least in his treatment of the doctrine of election, has forced people, not least some Calvinist

theologians (Reformed theologians) to go back and examine again and see whether the way in which Reformed theology has sometimes schematized that theme has been healthy, helpful, but more importantly, biblical.

What Barth saw and shows is that you can't formulate a doctrine of election, or any other doctrine, simply by lifting verses from Scripture and laying them out and putting them in a logical order. That's not how it works. It never has worked like that. You have to go further than that. You have to relate doctrines to one another. You have to ask questions about certain themes that perhaps have priority logically, theologically over others.

Barth's fundamental conviction is that while the theme of election, God's choosing, God's deciding, ultimately the sovereignty of God, is fundamental to the way Christians should conceive of God in biblical terms, that it's in the person of Christ that the theological center of gravity falls in Scripture and, therefore, in theology too, it should be.

His thoroughgoing insistence on rethinking what it might mean to say that God chooses, concerning a person's eternal well-being, in the light of Jesus Christ and his refusal to acknowledge the meaningfulness of talking about any God who, as he puts it, is hidden *behind* Jesus Christ, forced him to a radical re-reading of the doctrine — to the fundamental conviction that it's not in the text of the Bible as some work of literature that God reveals himself, finally it's in a human life lived, a death died and raised to life again that God has made himself known fully and finally. All the rest needs to be worked out in the light of what that means and the significance of that fact.

As Barth sees it, the significance of that fact is that this is who God wills to be, and what he has done for each of us. Whatever we say about election or any other theme theologically has to reckon with that fact. That can't be something we come to after we've worked out the other things. That has to be where we start – that God's purpose eternally was to be the man Jesus Christ and to do what he does in Christ for us. That forces us to rethink some themes. So Barth has caused some rethinking of that doctrine, but for some people that's problematic, and some people find him difficult to cope with theologically because they're convinced that the traditional version of that doctrine is non-negotiable.

Jesus as God

JMF: Why is it significant when Jesus said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the

Father"? What is important about that?

TH: One way of answering that is pastorally rather than theologically, differentiating between those two for the moment. (I wouldn't want to drive a wedge between them, incidentally, but let's look at it pastorally.) Most people, if they think of God at all, have a question mark about what sort of God it is they're dealing with. Luther had the question, "How can I get a gracious God?" Christians sometimes live with this lurking suspicion that God may turn out to be rather unpleasant, or to have a grudge against them or a good case against them.

What Barth says so clearly is that Christian life ought to be based solidly on the God we see, and the face of God that we see in Jesus, that we can be sure that God turns out, finally, to be like Jesus, like his Son. That provides a huge ground for assurance, because what do we see in Jesus? We see God forgiving sins, we see God loving the sinner, rehabilitating the sinner. Once we realize the Father is no different in that from the Son he sends into the world to do it, then it banishes any specters we might have of a God who, even though Jesus is like that, may turn out to be rather different.

On a pastoral level, in terms of the God we pray to day and night, or the God we hope to meet at the end of our lives beyond life, if we live with a question mark, it seems to me we're going to live finally with fear and guilt and a suspicion, and possibly be driven to some form of seeking to secure ourselves by earning salvation through good works or some form of that. It's hard to shake that off completely when you don't think you know the answer to the question "What is God like?"

Once you've come to the realization that God is no different to Jesus, on this level at least, he's like Jesus. God's character, the Father's character, is fully reflected in the face of his Son. That sets you free from all those fears and guilts and suspicions and enables you to live in a liberated way, in a way that is born out of gratitude and joy rather than fear and guilt. So, on a pastoral level, quite apart from the theological niceties of it all, it seems to be fundamental that we can say, when it comes down to it, there isn't anyone (when we come to talk about God), there's no one there who isn't fully reflected in the face of Jesus and Jesus' dealings with us.

Jesus as a human

JMF: The theological term "vicarious humanity of Christ" – what are we talking about?

TH: It's something which most Christians, most evangelical Christians anyway, will be

familiar with as a category in one respect – most evangelical Christians would be happy to think that Jesus did something in their stead. Most of them will think that that thing he did for them in their place, in their stead, is die on the cross. That's absolutely right.

The phrase "vicarious humanity" captures the realization that it doesn't stop there. In Jesus, God stands in for us at almost *every* point of our relationship with him, because we fail him at almost every point in our lives. No matter how hard we struggle and strive (and most of us are good at struggling and striving, even though we know we shouldn't), we fail. To use a biblical category, we're not very good covenant partners for God most of the time. "Vicarious humanity" picks up on the idea that in Jesus, God stands in for us in all aspects of life. It's not simply in his death that he takes our place and does what we can't do – it's in his faith, too, in his obedience, in his responses to the Father. At each point God, as it were, looks at us through him and in him and together with him, and not standing isolated on our own.

I suppose this is a Pauline image, but I like to think of it as God being like a parent who puts his kids on their way to school in a set of clothes… (We have school uniforms in the U.K. – I don't know whether you have those… [**JMF:** Some schools do.]) Often a parent will buy a uniform several sizes too big because that way it lasts longer. You don't fit the clothes – they're way too big for you – but eventually you grow into them, or begin to. As an image, that works nicely. We're clothed with Christ. Every aspect of us is covered with him. When the Father looks, he sees Christ, Christ's response, Christ's obedience, Christ's prayer, Christ's faith.

The biblical term isn't "vicarious humanity." That's a technical term. The biblical category is *priesthood.* Jesus is the great high priest who mediates our human responses to God through himself to the Father. Jesus stands in our place and does for us what we can't do properly for ourselves.

But the flip-side of that, and it's a vital flip-side, is that that sets us free *to do it for ourselves.* It sets us free to do it because we're not afraid of falling. We're not afraid of any wrong. Why? Because our eternity doesn't hang on whether we get it wrong or not. Our eternity rests on his response made for us. So we can get on and do it, and if we fall he'll pick us up.

In the meanwhile, we grow into the uniform. We never quite fill it out, but nevertheless we begin to grow more like him, so that our faith becomes more adequate, our prayer becomes more appropriate, our obedience becomes more identifiable as the Spirit gradually makes us more like Jesus. But our relationship with God doesn't rest on any of that. Our relationship with God rests

on what he has done once for all, not just on the cross, but at every point from his birth through to his death and resurrection.

What are people afraid of?

JMF: That's so radical in terms of the way most people think. Why is something that good difficult to accept? Why are we afraid of it? It's as though we think, "If I believe that and I accept it, then it's like saying that I don't have to do anything, Christ has done it all, so if I accept that, God won't like me because I'm assuming on his kindness or something." Some preachers even get angry about it and say, "Don't listen to that kind of nonsense because God calls you to obedience."

TH: One reason why someone might be uncomfortable with it might be that it could be seen to encourage an approach that says: "If Jesus has done it all for me, then I don't have to do it for myself, do I?"

JMF: "I can go out and live any way I want."

TH: Exactly. In theological terms we call that antinomianism, or something like it. That's a worry. We can do almost anything with grace, can't we? We can reject it, we can turn it to what we think is our advantage. But that's not proper to the reality itself. That's why I said that Jesus does it for us precisely so that we can do it for ourselves, and the work of the Spirit draws us into the Son's work and brings it to fulfillment in individual lives. That's one reason why I can imagine a preacher being nervous, because "maybe my people won't try so hard anymore." Well, maybe they're trying too hard in the first place. Maybe *trying* is not what it's about.

JMF: Isn't it an irrational fear? Those who believe don't really do that.

TH: That's right – it probably is an irrational fear. I wonder how much it isn't a bit of resurgence of sinful pride in us, whether as preachers or as individual Christian men and women. Grace has a massive advantage which is also a bit galling – it says, "God isn't taking your responses as the most important responses." It devalues the things we like to think we can take to God to deal with him. You know, I bring my little bit of righteousness to God and say, "God, I have something for you."

Don't get me wrong – I think God delights when we bring righteousness to him. What he doesn't like is when we try to make it the basis of a trade, as if we have something to give to him, and now he can give something back to us. The message of grace, the gospel of grace

understood in this way, in terms of this category of "vicarious humanity," robs us of that, because it gives us nothing. There's nothing left that we can give to God and say, "God, you need this, and I'm giving it to you, so now you give me something that I need."

That's wrong. Everything has to be predicated on the idea that God gives everything freely. I'm sorry, that devalues the currency that you're working with. In our heart of hearts we, even those of us who believe this gospel, still, on occasion, find ourselves, I suspect, thinking, "I'd rather like it if I had something to give back to God." Well, you can give it, but now you have to give it freely and joyfully, not as the basis of some sort of trade.

JMF: That reminds me of how you have to give your five-year-old some money so they can get you a gift.

TH: Absolutely. And when they get to 15, it becomes more expensive (laughing).

JMF: It all comes from God in the first place, and so anything we offer back isn't ours to begin with.

TH: But it doesn't kill the dynamic of giving. The unfounded fear is that somehow the idea that God gives everything and we're only here to receive is going to deny the capacity, or simply not provide a context in which we can offer back to God. On the contrary: I think the complement of "vicarious humanity" is a life lived from first to last in (if I can use the term) a Eucharistic manner, and that's to say, thanksgiving.

Everything, because it's freely given to us, we can now freely offer back to God without fear that our offering won't be adequate and therefore will come back to haunt us because we did it badly. It sets you free to give and to offer back rather than killing it. But there's always that little bit of sin which wants something of its own to give to God.

Why confess our sins?

JMF: Some people ask, "Since we're already forgiven and we stand in the forgiveness of God, why are we asked to confess our sins?" How does that work together?

TH: I've moved a long way on this one. When I first came to faith and was part of an evangelical congregation, I confessed my sins every day with the sense that my eternal well-being depended on doing it well. There's a benefit to that, because everything was intense, and I knew that this matters.

I was liberated from that by discovering the gospel of grace and God's grace in the life of

Jesus lived in my place, so if I didn't confess all my sins, I wasn't on an immediate slippery slope that evening. There is a slight risk that the immediacy and urgency of confessing sins gets lost. It does have an important place – this constant recognition that we are sinners. It's just as well that our salvation doesn't rest on our shoulders, because we continue to get it wrong.

With that mechanism, with gratitude, with thanksgiving, goes also a sense of penitence, that God has given so much to us and continues to do so and yet we fall so far short. No matter what we seek to do in and of ourselves, we continue to betray him, to hurt him, to act in ways that deny who he would have us be. It's vital for the health and well-being of our lives as Christians that we keep that firmly in our sights precisely so that we also keep firmly in our sights the importance of turning to Christ and having him stand in our place.

It's like two blades of a pair of scissors. If we lose either of them, it becomes useless. If there's going to be a means of achieving something, then what God has done for us in Christ needs to be constantly being applied by the Spirit in our Christian day-to-day living.

JMF: That was my experience when I was a legalist. In confession, I couldn't be quite sure that I had done it well enough to feel like I'd been forgiven, so I had to do it over. Then I had to do it with more intensity…

TH: That's a small-style version of what Tom Torrance talks about, and his brother James (who is a great hero of mine and a colleague of mine at one point) used to talk about. I've seen it in my own experience as a preacher in small churches, often evangelical congregations, where, at the end of the Sunday evening service there will be an altar call of some form, and often the same people, not necessarily every week, but on a regular pattern will get up and go forward. If someone were to ask them why, they would say, "Because I'm not really sure I had a real experience of repentance last time." That seems to have got things wrong because it puts the focus on you and your faith, on the quality of your response.

I'd want to go at them and say, you don't have to repent harder. If you've repented at all, if you've opened yourself and turned to Christ and seek to lay hold of him, then *his* repentance is the one that counts. You can be thankful for that. That doesn't meant that repentance and penitence doesn't continue to be important, but your eternal destiny doesn't rest on your response, which is just as well, otherwise we'd all be up there every Sunday, week in and week out.

JMF: It brings such comfort and relief. It's like a participation in the assurance of the

forgiveness that's already ours.

TH: Yeah. In my own tradition (Episcopalian), for good or ill we have a weekly celebration of the supper, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. That is a tangible way of reminding one's self and constantly putting one's self in the way of the priesthood of Christ and saying, I eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in taking the bread and wine, and I'm symbolically identifying myself with Christ's response to the Father for me and realizing that that's what matters. It's not my response. It's only as I eat and drink of him that I'm drawn into the presence of God. That shifts the gaze away from the individual's own spiritual response to the Father. There shouldn't be such a thing. We don't have an isolated spiritual response to the Father. We have an indirect one that goes through the Son.

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Zooming in on Salvation

J. Michael Feazell: Let's talk about salvation. Christ has saved us, we want salvation, salvation is good. What is it we're being saved from? Are we being saved from something, for something, what is salvation all about?

Trevor Hart: That's a huge question. Scripture and Christian theology use lots of different *pictures,* we can call them, in order to answer that question. Some of them have more prominence in the Bible than others, some of them are more prominent in certain strands of Christian tradition than others, but there are a number of them. For example, we're being saved from something which is like being (in terms of the court of law) guilty. We're being delivered from the dangers hanging over us of guilt. When you think in those terms, then you use the language of the law court to explain what it is that God has done to deliver us from that…so the language is of judgment, of the execution of justice and so on.

But there are other ways of describing it, too, so the Bible will talk equally of us being in bondage to some sort of slavery, whether it's personified in terms of Satan and evil spirits or whether it's left more abstract than that. In some sense we're struggling with something that we can't break out of ourselves. The language of salvation is cast in terms of deliverance, of being set free, redemption, the liberation of the slave in the marketplace, being bought with a price, all that sort of imagery comes into play. There are others — disease and healing is another. Victory over forces that we're struggling with. Someone is victorious over them for us, because we can't defeat them ourselves, and so on.

That leads us to realize that salvation is multi-faceted. Whatever it is, it involves something way beyond our understanding. It's complex.

Correspondingly, the human situation — that which we're being rescued from — also needs all these different pictures and probably plenty of others to help us articulate it. One that I haven't alluded to yet and probably should, given its contemporary relevance, is debt. We have this huge debt that we can't possibly pay. So what are we going to do? We're crushed by it, we have no resources to pay it. The corresponding picture of salvation is, someone steps in and pays the price for us. All these pictures help us to get some partial understanding on the mystery which is salvation, and therefore helps us see the scale of the problem that confronts us.

If there is an overarching answer to "What is the problem?", it has to be answered at a high

level, and say, “It’s the consequence of being in a broken relationship with our Maker. It’s the consequence of being out of kilter in terms of our relationship with God, for fellowship with whom we were created.” That’s the fundamental premise, that we were created, we were made to be in fellowship with God as Father.

Once we get that out of alignment, once we become alienated from God as our Father, then things go wrong in all sorts of departments of life, and we need all these different ways of thinking and speaking to make some sense of what’s going on, because frankly, we don’t know what’s going on anymore — we’ve lost the plot. We’re in a mess and we need someone to get us out of it. That’s the other *leitmotif* [or theme] that moves along with the story of salvation: we can’t fix it. We may have got ourselves into the mess, but we certainly can’t fix it, so salvation is God doing what needs to be done for our sakes to get us out of the mess and to put us where we were always meant to be — back in fellowship with himself.

JMF: There’s a sense in which we’re already saved, and yet in another sense we’re saved in the future. The one blossoms into the other…

TH: If we’re going to take the whole of what the Bible has to tell us seriously, then we have to reckon with some things that seem to run into conflict, but actually need to be held in tension. There’s a sense in which the most important thing has already happened, and the Bible leads us to say that God came in his Son Jesus and did what needs to be done. C. S. Lewis uses a military metaphor — the decisive battle has been won, but there are lots of skirmishes still to be carried out before the war is over.

What happened for you and me has happened. Nothing can undo it. But we still live in an age where that remains to be worked out through whatever is left of human history. That is the Spirit’s work applying what God has done for us in Jesus Christ — living his life, being crucified, then risen in our individual lives. Paul used the imagery of crucifixion and resurrection for what goes on daily in a Christian’s walk with God.

It’s important to see it not just as, “God’s done the most important thing, and now there’s this inconvenient time where we’re not one thing or the other and we just have to hang on and eventually it will all come right and God will bring it all to a close.” God doesn’t do things without reason, and I suspect there’s something important… what he has done for us needs yet to be worked out in us — it’s important that this happens to you and me through the threescore years and ten or whatever it proves to be of our lives — that application and working out, in and

through the particular circumstances of your life and mine, matters for who we shall be when finally, we're raised anew and brought into God's presence in the kingdom.

What about other people?

JMF: Yet, some people come to faith and then die very soon afterwards. How do we equate the two?

TH: That's a huge question — difficult to answer with any clarity. It suggests that we don't all need to have a certain amount of time in order for things to be worked out in this life for salvation to occur. Salvation, in some sense, as we've already said, has been done. It's a done deal, once and for all, in Christ. And God deals with individuals individually.

It matters that you or I continue in faith for several decades or whatever it is. Perhaps in God's purposes it doesn't matter that someone else doesn't. We have to trust that their salvation will be worked out in full (as it were) in some other way, so that they are who they are called to be in the kingdom. I don't think the process of working it out in life is, in that sense, *necessary* to our salvation, but it seems to be important nonetheless when it occurs.

JMF: In the *Narnia Chronicles*, sometimes one of the kids asks Aslan about somebody, "Why is this happening to him and not to me (or vice versa)?" Aslan always says, "That's his story. I'm talking to you about your story."

TH: Exactly. God calls us to be who we are. Karl Barth says in his discussion of this that God grants each of us our time. We don't know how long our time will be, but that's the time God calls us to be faithful in. Our salvation, in a sense, doesn't depend on it. Our salvation depends wholly on Christ and what he has done. But for now, this is who God calls us to be, and our task is not to ask about others and the brevity of their appearance on the stage. It's to get on and live faithfully the part he's called us to play so that when the judgment comes we can say, "I tried to be faithful to what you called me to be." That's what will matter. Salvation won't rest on it, but it matters that we do it, that we're faithful and not unfaithful.

JMF: Which raises the question, what about people we care about and love who didn't hear the gospel? Is there anything wrong with thinking that the heart of God toward such people is more full of love than we can have for them?

TH: I think we have to believe that. It's such a powerful question and a painful question. It ought to be painful for any Christian because Christian faith is driven, or should be, by the

realization that that is precisely who God is — that God is a Father whose heart beats with love for all those he's made — that he created them to call them into fellowship with himself, that's the reason for their being, that's the calling to which they're called, and his greatest desire is that they should fulfill that calling. That has to be the context in which we ask questions.

It also has to be the theological context in which we interpret passages of Scripture that seem to point to the possibility of that not happening. We can't treat those passages lightly. We can't ignore their teaching, but we have to interpret them in the light of that fundamental conviction. That makes it more difficult, and far more uncomfortable than Christians have sometimes been, to consign people to some wherever other than in an eternity in communion with the Father.

Any consideration of that question has to be with fear and trembling. It has to be undergirded by that fundamental conviction that who God is, is who we see him to be in the face of his Son for everyone — not simply for us. We can do no more than commit people to the God who we know in that way, rather than speculate about their eternal destiny. We should be concerned about it, we should pray for them, we should do everything we can to bring them to know the Father if they don't already know the Father. But finally, it's in his hands and not ours. As you said a moment ago, God calls each of us to be concerned with our story, not theirs, at a certain point.

JMF: In the Inquisition the idea was supposedly (apart from the political considerations and so on) that in doing everything we can, we have to get somebody to come to a confession of faith, because torturing them is worth preserving them from the alternative and so on. What is wrong with that thinking?

TH: It raises the question about what the confession of faith is, doesn't it? If we're agreed that faith is about gratitude — it's not simply about discovering who God is, discovering him to be our Father, but discovering that and receiving it joyfully, and with gratitude – then extracting intellectual assent or apparent intellectual assent from somebody under the pain of torture or worse seems to me to be an absolute nonsense in terms of bringing someone to faith — it simply has nothing to do with it.

Thomas Erskine, the Scots theologian from the 19th century, says somewhere that you can't frighten people into love. Even if we're not forcing them to confess with the use of pain, another version of that has been to extract confession from people by frightening them. Again, that seems

to have little to do with the true nature of faith and response to the gospel. The thing that's the most wrong with it, is that it misunderstands completely the nature of faith as a response to the good news.

The other thing to say is that the good news for Christians is not simply good news for Christians – it's good news for all. That's the message, that this is who God *is.* It's not simply who God is for some, it's not simply who God chooses to be on certain days of the week, it's who God is. That has to set the boundaries and the context in which we reflect on what it means to bring others into a saving knowledge of this God. Until they discover that that's who God is, they can't respond in an appropriate way. Getting them to tick boxes or make verbal confessions has got nothing to do with it. It's a fundamental shift of disposition, to discovering that this is who God is, that the universe is God's creation, and this is who I am as God's creature, and I'm responding joyfully to that. That's in God's hands, not ours.

The fear of hell

JMF: Much of evangelism is still done with the idea of fear, of avoiding hell. It seems that knowing God as the God who is for us, for humanity, changes the face of evangelism – the approach – turning it around.

TH: Yes. I don't think it means that we lose sight of the language of hell, or the sense of urgency about accepting the gospel. But it's a different sort of urgency. Who, knowing if this were true, would not want to respond to it quickly? You're missing out on something good. It completely recasts it, because it's now a message of genuine good news, unalloyed good news, not a threat with a salvage hatch provided. It's news which changes everything, changes the way I see the whole of life, my own purpose and existence, and to which there can only be a response of gratitude.

When that's not forthcoming, that is, as Barth somewhere else says, the ultimate mystery: why would someone hear the good news, understand it as good news, and then say no to it? He characterizes that as the most mysterious of all things. He leaves it open as a possibility, but he sees it as a denial of all that we are as human beings. That means that if we are going to talk about danger of loss of salvation or hell, then it has to be cast in terms of the shadow cast by the light.

The fundamental thing about the gospel is that it's light, it's good. That is who God is. God

is not someone who is out there to get us, or waiting for an excuse to get us — some Dirty Harry character that's waiting for us to make his day, just itching for an excuse to judge us. God, on the contrary, desires nothing more than our salvation and goes to whatever lengths necessary to secure it. But there remains that colorfully illustrated inference that if people, notwithstanding all that, and for whatever reason finally identify themselves so thoroughly with that which is incompatible with God and his purposes for us, that then they will finally isolate themselves from that.

That's hard to reckon with theologically. It's a very odd circumstance. If God is this good and all-powerful and loving Father who seeks our salvation, it makes that problematic. But I think Scripture compels us at least to reckon with the possibility that if someone so identifies themselves with evil, and the things of evil, to cease even to want anymore to respond to that goodness, then that's where the language and the imagery of hell starts to come back into play. I don't think we can ignore it. We have to take it very seriously. I'd rather people found that problematic, and got a grasp of the good news as good news.

JMF: It was strange, in terms of the gospel, after the terrorist attacks in 2001. We had the images and descriptions of firemen who saw the building was in distress, but went back in to try to pull out as many as they could, and were killed. Then on the following Sunday, many preachers, rather than calling them heroes as everyone else had, consigned some of them to hell because they had not become Christians before the building fell on them.

It was a message of "something like that could happen to you at any moment, and if you don't want to be like them, then you need to accept the gospel while you're still alive." It presented God and the gospel as kind of inept, in one sense, because he doesn't care about the selflessness of the people who went in to save others — that amounted to nothing and was no reflection of him and he really didn't care, or, conversely, maybe he was wringing his hands and saying, "I wish somebody had gotten to them with the gospel before that." It doesn't make sense, that sort of preaching. At least it doesn't seem to square with the…

TH: It's very problematic. The temptation is for us to slip into thinking, "Of course they'll be saved because they did what they did." I don't think that's relevant. It's hugely to their credit that they did what they did, but that's not really where the stakes are in terms of salvation or loss of salvation. They proved themselves to be brave and worthy human beings, and that's what needs to be said, and they gave up their lives for others. Whether they are saved will not rest on

that.

Does God rely on the ability or inability or the timing of human beings, does he get caught out by something like 9/11? That brings in a whole raft of problems that we could go around in circles on for a while. What we *do* know is that God loved each of those people in the towers, each of those people who went into the towers to get people out and themselves gave up their lives — he made them to exist eternally in fellowship with himself, he sent his Son to die for their sins, and he desires nothing more than their salvation. When we've said that, we've said the most important things.

At some stage we have to hand it over to God and say, "God, in your mercy, you deal with these people, because you know whether any of them had made in their heart of hearts some sort of a decision in life which distanced them so much from God as to exclude themselves from that." It is up to him to know, not for us to know.

Dealing with that extreme instance seems to be unhelpful because it puts the issues in the wrong place and suggests that it's in those extreme circumstances rather than in the everyday life, where these life and death, in a sense, decisions confront us day in and day out. That's where what matters really occurs in life. The thing that matters is what God has done for us, not the decisions we make day in and day out. Although they may seem to be vital decisions, they're overshadowed by that one big decision.

Eternal life

JMF: Let's talk about eternal life for a moment. The Bible says that we've already entered eternal life. The Bible has us already seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father. How should we understand eternal life in that context as something that's already taken place, and yet we want to think of it as something that takes place after the return of Christ?

TH: It is, in a sense, a matter of things which we believe will be the case after the return of Christ already breaking in and shaping, reshaping, the quality of life in here and now. Maybe the word *eternal* is a bit misleading, because we tend to think of it in terms of temporality, that something eternal goes on and on, like a dreary lecture or sermon, whereas the temporal aspect of it is difficult to picture, and we don't know what temporality or non-temporality will be like after the return of Christ.

It's more important to picture it as a *quality* of existence — it is life with a capital L, as John

talks about — "and this life is in his Son." If we think about it like that, then perhaps we can see how, in a sense, we both look forward to having that quality of life in the hereafter — when history has reached its close, when God has judged the world and wrapped everything up and handed it over to his Son — and that already breaks in *now*.

The way it breaks in now is that we already have communion with the Father. When people say, "I can't picture what the quality of eternal life is going to be like," I want to say, "No, in a sense you can't picture what it's like, but you're not left wholly without some indication." Probably the most obvious indication is those moments of intimate communion with God that we have in prayer and in worship and so on, because that is relationship with the Father though the Son in the power of the Spirit. That is going to characterize the whole of our experience in eternity.

That qualitative aspect is helpful in making sense of the idea of eternal life, because we do have that now. We only have it partially, we only have it on an occasional basis. We're probably not conscious of it, most of us, for much of the time. But we get glimpses of it, we can anticipate it, and we can enjoy it in part already. So rather than thinking about it in terms of a temporal model of eternity, what we might be doing for all that time, we think about it in those qualitative terms, of enjoying God's fellowship, and that's probably a more helpful way.

JMF: In the time we have left, if there's one thing you would like for people to know about God, what would it be?

TH: If I haven't already got it, I think it is that God made them to enjoy being in his presence — that was in his mind's eye from the very first. It shapes everything he does and who he is, and he has done all that is necessary for them to enjoy that. That's who he's calling them to be. He has not waited for them to decide that it's a good idea, he's already decided it's a good idea, and now he offers it freely for them to lay hold of and make their own, and enjoy in this life and then in the life to come, too. God isn't a problem – God calls us to enjoy being his children in the Spirit.

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