Christ at the Center:
Interviews With Paul Molnar

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Introduction

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When people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In these 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.

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Our guest in the following interviews is Paul Molnar, professor of systematic theology at St. John's University in New York. He received his PhD from Fordham University in 1980. He is author of:

Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity
Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance, and Contemporary Theology
Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding
Karl Barth and the Theology of the Lord's Supper
Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity
Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity (contributor)

The interviews were conducted by J. Michael Feazell, D.Min., adjunct professor of theology at Grace Communion Seminary.

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Keeping Christ at the Center

J. Michael Feazell: Paul Molnar is a Catholic theologian and Professor of Systematic Theology at St. John's University in New York. He is author of

* *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity,*
* *Incarnation and Resurrection, and*
* *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialog with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology.*

Dr. Molnar is also editor of the Karl Barth Society of North America newsletter and [at the time of the interview] president of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship.

It's a pleasure to have you with us today.

Paul Molnar: My pleasure.

JMF: We wanted to begin by talking about your book, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*. Tell us how you came to know Thomas Torrance and how you came to write the book.

PM: It started in the early 1980s when I read his book *Reality and Evangelical Theology* — that was my first exposure to Torrance's writing, and I enjoyed it a lot. I was at a theological conference and someone asked who your favorite theologian was, and most people at the conference had Karl Rahner as their favorite theologian, so I said, "My favorite theologian is Thomas F. Torrance." I had read that book, and then I had read a couple others besides, when I got that question. The person looked at me like I had three heads, because he had never heard of Thomas F. Torrance.

Subsequently I read most of his writings, and I was quite impressed. For good reason, Torrance is thought of as the most important British theologian of the 20th century. He taught for many years at the University of Edinburgh. He didn't formally teach the doctrine of the Trinity for political reasons (because another professor was teaching that course), but he did work the doctrine into all of his lectures in Christology and so on. He didn't write his books on the Trinity until after he retired — his two major works on the Trinity.

What impressed me the most about Torrance was his vast knowledge of patristic theology and his ability to not only demonstrate a clear understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, but to show how the doctrine of the Trinity functions, enlightening us in our knowledge of Christ, the

Incarnation, atonement, redemption, ascension, resurrection, the church, and the sacraments.

The reason I came to write this book was to show that side of Torrance which I was most interested in — his dogmatic theology. Torrance is famous for doing work in theology and science, which is also very important and very good, but my special emphasis in this book was looking at his dogmatic theology, showing how Trinitarian thinking shaped all of his doctrines. That's where I went with this book.

JMF: And you've met him a couple of times.

PM: I invited him to St. John's University in 1997 with the help of his son, Iain, who introduced me to him and enabled me to bring him to St. John's. He came to St. John's to speak on Einstein and God. He gave that same lecture at Princeton and Yale in 1997, and while he was there I had lots of time to get to know him. We had dinner together, we had lunch together, we had quiet time together — driving in the car together, we talked theology. It was a great experience for me because by that point, I had been reading him for 15, 16 years, so I held him in awe, to be honest with you, just to be able to speak with him.

One morning when I went to pick him up at the hotel he said, "Call me Tom," so my tongue nearly froze in my mouth when he said that. I couldn't call him Tom — he's Professor Torrance, the great theologian. When I introduced him to the audience at St. John's — he had sent me a thick C.V., and he said just introduce me, I'm just a minister of the gospel. That wasn't going to fly for me. Having had a C.V. this thick, I was going to say something. So I went through a long explanation of how important he was and the work he had done and so on. I'm not sure how well that pleased him, but he was polite about the whole thing.

He was in his 80s, though at that time he was quite young and we had good exchanges during the lecture and the question and answer session, and we took him to dinner afterwards and he had good exchanges with members of the theology department and the philosophy department. But he did indicate that that would probably be his last trip to the United States and that if I wanted to see him again, I would have to see him in Scotland, which, as it happened, I got to do two years later.

When I was lecturing at St. Andrews and at Aberdeen, I visited him at his house on Braid Farm Road in Edinburgh, and in his study we sat and chatted for three or four hours. It was quite an experience. I learned a great deal from him. We had many exchanges of emails and letters, and he would send papers to me that he had written, and I would send papers to him and he

would write back to me with comments on them. So I got to know him quite well and I learned a great deal from him.

He's affected my thinking a great deal. One of the major premises of my book *Divine Freedom* was that to think accurately about God, we would have to think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves. I learned that from Tom Torrance. In my book on *Incarnation and Resurrection*, I learned the main thesis of the book from him, which is that you need to hold the incarnation and the resurrection together if you're going to have a clear understanding of the meaning of the resurrection. To him that meant: If you tried to think about Jesus' resurrection in abstraction from the incarnation, you would have what he called a docetic view of the resurrection.

A docetic view of the resurrection in his mind meant that you would undermine the fact that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. It would just be an ideal description of something that may simply describe the disciples' reactions to Jesus, or it may describe some person's idea of life after death, but it wouldn't be an idea dictated by the fact that the resurrection was really the completion of the incarnation, in that it was also the completion of our reconciliation with God, by the fact that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. So his thinking had affected my thinking a great deal.

JMF: Many people have a sense that the incarnation ended at the resurrection. In other words, Jesus does not continue to be fully human for us. Even at prayer they're thinking of Jesus as being fully God, but no longer thinking of him as being fully human for us.

PM: Yes. Torrance spends a great deal in his life's work undermining that idea. Why would it be important for Torrance to undermine that idea? It would be important because if Christ is not risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, and continually mediating between us and the Father in his full divinity and full humanity, in Torrance's mind, we would then have no human connection with God. That's one way of putting it. Another way of putting it that we're not really saved humanly.

For Torrance, Jesus' continuing high priestly mediation is of the utmost importance, because if he is not the continuing mediator between us and God, then something else or someone else would have to be inserted into his place and would become for us the supposed mediation between us and God. We would be cut off from God by even thinking of such another mediator, because there is no such thing — it would compromise God's oneness and God's three-ness.

God mediates *himself* to us, the Father through the Son in the Spirit, and to even suppose that there could be some intermediary other than Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate who continues to mediate humanly and divinely, would compromise both his divinity and his humanity and the meaning of our salvation. So there's a lot at stake.

JMF: What are examples of other mediators that anyone has proposed?

PM: Some theologians tend to emphasize what they call a theocentric theology, so that they could have the world religions agree about God. In their theocentrism, they would want to avoid the Christocentrism that would see Christ as the exclusive revealer and exclusive Savior of the world. Such theologians might argue that Christians could believe in Jesus as their Savior, but not as the Savior for everyone else, because that would be a kind of exclusivism that imposed Christianity on other religions and would undermine a proper pluralism, in their estimation.

But for Torrance, you can't be theocentric at all unless you're Christocentric, because Christ is the one mediator who not only mediates God to us, but us to God, so that by sharing in his human knowledge of God, we have true knowledge of God. For Torrance, that's not something you can have if you construct a theocentrism that bypasses Jesus Christ, because that's essentially unitarian theology.

JMF: That would be the idea that all roads lead to the same God, and that as long as you have a belief in God, then that's the main thing, as opposed to recognizing that Jesus is the revelation of the Father.

PM: Right. People who hold that sort of theocentrism as opposed to Christocentrism are basically thinking that Christocentrism is the product of the church's response to Jesus.

JMF: Christocentrism meaning Christ at the center?

PM: Putting Christ at the center, seeing Christ as the exclusive Savior, for example, or as the exclusive revealer. They argue against the notion of exclusivism because they want to sound more open in a pluralistic society to other religions. But in my mind, they've given up the truth of the Christian faith, because what makes Christ unique and exclusively the revealer and Savior of the world is his eternal being as the only begotten Son of the Father. It's not something that's grounded in the reaction of the community — not the Christian community, not any community.

This is why Torrance rejected what he called Ebionite Christology and Docetic Christology. When he did his Christology, he stated that he didn't want to begin from below, as in Ebionite Christology, or from above, as in Docetic Christology, and then he defined the terms. For him,

Ebionite Christology would be any sort of Christology which saw Jesus as an ordinary human being who became the Son of God at some point in his life, or perhaps at the resurrection. Or it was a Christology that Jesus was an already existing human being into whom the Word descended.

For Torrance, the miracle of the virgin birth signifies that the eternally begotten Son mysteriously, miraculously became incarnate, took flesh from the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. It's a miracle. It can't be explained, it can only be acknowledged. Therefore, Torrance would say, as he does in his book on the incarnation, that we must begin thinking Christologically with the fact of Jesus Christ. For him, the fact of Jesus Christ cannot be established historically from below, because if you just start with history, all your results theologically or conceptually would be historical results.

We must start in faith, recognizing and acknowledging who Jesus actually is. Torrance opposed that sort of Ebionite Christology which suggested that it was the community's response to Jesus, and that people *thought* of him as a God; that made him unique, as an extraordinary human figure who people thought of as divine, but he wouldn't really be divine. In Torrance's mind, it's the deity of Christ that gives meaning to his human history because the hypostatic union, the second person or hypostasis of the Trinity becoming incarnate, is precisely the one who posits into existence his human history. There is no human history apart from his divine being. Docetic Christology is the idea that Jesus is just one particular historical embodiment of who God is, but not the *embodiment* of who God is. Torrance would reject both Christology from below and from above, arguing that we must begin by accepting history, humanity, and true divinity from the outset.

JMF: That raises a question… Jesus was perfect and obeyed his Father's commands and so on, and yet, as Torrance argues, he took our fallen nature on himself, that which is not assumed is not redeemed. How can both be true? How can he be perfect and yet take our fallen nature on himself?

PM: Let me give you what may at first sound like a perplexing answer to that question. Torrance would say we can't explain how that can be so, because if we could, we wouldn't need to acknowledge it and begin thinking about the reality in faith. But he would say it *can* be so, because in becoming human and assuming our fallen human nature into union with his divine being, God healed our self-will and therefore our sin, beginning with his becoming incarnate and

continuing throughout his whole life of obedience through to his death on the cross and completely in the resurrection and ascension.

He would say that God never surrendered his divinity in becoming incarnate (so he could forgive our sins, because he was God incarnate), but he could also, from the human side, live our reconciliation subjectively in his perfect life of obedience. Unless the Word actually assumed our fully human nature, he wouldn't have come all the way to us within our human history. Redemption takes place within the personal being of the mediator, both so that when Jesus suffers God-forsakenness in obeying the Father, he lives out a human life in the midst of sin and temptation, in the midst of stresses and strains that would want to divide the unity that took place in the hypostatic union, but, in the end, did not do so.

JMF: Hypostatic union being …

PM: The hypostatic union is the unique union of the divine Word and the human nature of Jesus. We participate in Jesus' humanity through faith in him. The hypostatic union is unique — there is no analogy for it in experience or in any form of knowing. Torrance would say that Jesus is an ultimate — no, Jesus is the ultimate. By *ultimate,* he means that in any science you have to work with certain ultimates, without which the science wouldn't make any sense. Those ultimates cannot be proven or justified on any grounds other than the fact that they are what they are.

He would say that Jesus is who he is — the word of God incarnate. The hypostatic union is that unique event signifying that Jesus the Word was born of the Virgin Mary and that he was therefore truly divine and truly human throughout his entire life. Because Jesus is the ultimate, there is no ground for verifying who Jesus is outside of Jesus himself. That's why it's important to recognize that in the resurrection and ascension, Jesus continues to live and interact with us even now.

For Torrance to speak of the Holy Spirit is really to speak of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ. If you spoke of the Spirit and weren't speaking of our union with Christ through that Spirit and therefore through faith, you weren't speaking in, and by, and through, and about the Holy Spirit at all. That's crucially important — the fact that Jesus is the ultimate.

What it means to Torrance is: the first [group of] theologians, who try to verify who Jesus is in his uniqueness by a study of history or try to verify who Jesus is by some sort of *a priori* Christology, or what Karl Rahner calls a searching Christology, one that suggests that we can

construct an understanding of what humanity is and what humanity is searching for, and in that search discover the true meaning of Jesus. Torrance would reject that sort of thinking because if that's the route we pursue, then it's our search that becomes determinative of who Jesus is — we no longer are absolutely in need of and rely on Jesus himself, who at present is disclosing to us who he is. That would be seriously problematic.

If I could give one example: I have it in my book on divine freedom, in chapter 6, where I contrast Torrance and Rahner on their interpretations of the resurrection. Rahner says that he's not going to begin with Jesus Christ, but with a transcendental experience. Rahner argues that wherever anyone hopes for some sort of life beyond death, that person already experiences the meaning of the resurrection, he says, perhaps anonymously, where Torrance would say you can't have an experience in the resurrection anonymously, because to have an experience of the resurrection is to know that Jesus Christ himself was raised from the dead and as such is the mediator who empowers us to know God conceptually.

He would say to Rahner, "You're holding what I would call a non-conceptual understanding of God." Rahner holds such an understanding when he argues that we have un-thematic, anonymous knowledge of God. Torrance would say there is no such thing as anonymous knowledge of God. Either you know God because your concepts are tied to the events depicted in the gospel story — his incarnation, resurrection, preaching, and ascension. Either you know God conceptually, or you don't know God at all — you're describing your own experience, symbolically interpreted. Torrance was dead set against that sort of thing.

JMF: What is the right explanation for the idea of a person who doesn't know Christ and yet experiences good things and lives out good things and so on? Since Christ is the only source of what is good, isn't there a sense in which there's a participation in that which one doesn't know what he's participating in yet?

PM: In one sense, everybody is in relation with Jesus Christ. But theologically, to understand what that means, one would first have to understand who Jesus Christ was and what he did. Otherwise, the danger in the statement that you made to me is that one could argue that, as long as one is a good person, one is already a Christian.

I don't think we would want to equate the idea of being good with being a Christian because in being good, we could then rely on our own goodness with the idea that by being good, God somehow owes us our righteousness. However, Torrance argues that when Christ died for the

sins of the world, he died not just for the bad part of us, but for the good part of us. He means that just by being good, we're not necessarily thereby Christians.

JMF: Yes. We're talking about two different things, in a sense. We're talking about what is the nature of the unbeliever, or the non-believer, or the not-yet-believer (or however we want to say it) in terms of their union with Christ by virtue of his incarnation on behalf of humanity, that on one side, and the nature of the relationship of the believer on the other. Not that the unbeliever is a Christian, but nevertheless, the non-believer is taken up into Christ in his incarnation.

PM: That's right. Objectively.

JMF: Right. And there is, to that degree, a participation in Christ whether he knows it or not.

PM: True.

JMF: But the believer enters into a relationship that is personal and is knowing and is a fellowship, friendship, walking with God, and worshipful personal relationship that transcends the other.

PM: Yeah. Let me clarify something that I said a few minutes ago when I was talking about Rahner's statement to the effect that those who have an experience of hope have an experience of the resurrection whether they know it or not. What that tends to mean in his thought is that we can rely on our experiences of hope in order to explain the meaning of Christ's resurrection. The problem that I was pointing out was that for Torrance, you can't explain the resurrection by exploring people's experiences of hope, because the resurrection is its own explanation. We need to rely on the risen Lord himself to make sense of it to us.

When Rahner argued that you could have an anonymous experience of the resurrection just by having hope for eternal life, Torrance would say that is a docetic explanation of the resurrection, because it's equating the meaning of the resurrection with our hope for something beyond death. That's the point I was trying to get at. Christ died for the sins of the world so that everyone somehow is already included in his resurrection. The difference between Christians and others is that Christians recognize the meaning of that statement.

Any attempt to neutralize that statement by equating an experience of a knowledge of the resurrection with our experiences of hope for life beyond death subverts the need to believe in Christ's bodily resurrection and understand that as the meaning of eternal life. It could undermine the reality of eternal life, at least conceptually, because you would be equating it with

something that's a universal experience instead of recognizing that it's something that can only be had and understood in faith by an actual union with the risen Lord — it loses specificity. Does that make better sense?

JMF: I think so. It would be the difference between recognizing that…to use an analogy, maybe not a very good one, but we all have a shadow if we're standing out in the sun. If you look at the shadow and then try to explain from the shadow what it means to be a human being, you wouldn't be able to get there from there. That doesn't mean that the shadow is not related in a very real and positive sense with a human being who is casting the shadow.

PM: In that sense, Christ's life to the resurrection casts a shadow over the entire human race, but only those who see the meaning of the events of his life understand the inner meaning.

JMF: It's an entry point for evangelism, it would seem, though, to be able to point out to someone that those things that are good in their nature, their love for their children, for example, doesn't come from nowhere — it's a reflection of who Christ is in them and with them as a human being. It isn't something that springs out of them, nor does it come from nowhere. It's that Christ is already at work in you. Christ already is in you. Why not come, why not acknowledge what the source of this love is, and know that you are loved and accepted, and turn to him? Does that make sense?

PM: Well, yes, but the danger in that is that the focus would then be on people's experiences of love and not on the one who empowers it.

JMF: What I mean is that to help a person who thinks, which many do, that I'm worthless, God doesn't love me, how could he? If you knew me like I do, then you wouldn't be telling me that God could actually love me, so I need to get good before we have this discussion. But instead, we're able to say to them, God already loves you and accepts you. Where do you think this came from, or that came from? God has already done everything necessary for you. Why not acknowledge that and turn to him?

PM: That makes sense. I'd agree with that.

JMF: That's at the heart of where many people have difficulty in trying to comprehend Trinitarian theology, because they assume "You're saying that if Christ's union with humanity through the incarnation has actually made a difference already and he had made himself one with humanity in such a way that he will not let it go, and will not be who he is without humanity, then you're saying that everybody, even unbelievers, are saved."

That isn't the point. The point is that everyone is in union [with Christ], but not that everyone is a believer and is participating in the relationship in the way that a believer would, in the transformational way. But as an entry point for evangelism, you are able to say not that you have to do something in order to get God to like you, but that he already does. He's already taken you up and done everything necessary for you.

PM: That's right.

JMF: But the difficulty people have, again, is that they think, "You're teaching universalism. You're saying everyone is saved no matter what they do, because they're in union with Christ." But there's a difference between "in union with Christ" as an unbeliever and being in communion with Christ in the way that believers are.

PM: Of course. Torrance says that universalism is a form of rationalism. He rejects both universalism and the idea of conditional salvation because he wants to say just what you said — that by uniting God and humanity in the history of Jesus Christ is, God has objectively unified us, overcome our self-will, our attempts to be independent of him, overcome our alienation, our suffering, and even death itself in the history of Jesus. That is taking place objectively, but also subjectively, in that Jesus was faithful to God in our place. That is the objective and subjective justification of the sinner, you might say.

As you said, we don't have to do anything in order for God to love us, and the very idea that we could, would miss the fact that he loves us while we're unlovable, because we're his enemies. But as you say, and Torrance says at one point… (well, you didn't quite say this, but it could be implied in what you say – help me if it's not the right thing! [laughing]) that none of us can say who is saved and who is not saved, because that's God's alone to do. It would be rationalism in the direction of universalism to make that statement. But on the other hand, to say that salvation is contingent on our response to the gospel, we throw salvation back on us and miss the point, the objective point that you were trying to make.

JMF: Exactly.

PM: He doesn't want to say either of those things, because he's leaving room for the grace of God, for God to act. God does will the salvation of all, and it is (in Torrance's mind) utterly inexplicable that people would reject the Savior, but it happened once on the cross, and even after his death and resurrection, it still can happen, because Christ does not force himself on people. Even though the goodness that people have comes from God through Christ, they may

never acknowledge that. It's a possibility. Even when they do acknowledge that, I think Torrance would also say, even that's not under their control. That's the work of the Holy Spirit empowering them to see and to live subjectively what is objectively already a reality in the life of Christ.

JMF: By grace from beginning to end.

PM: Right.

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God Chose to Enter Our Humanity

Sin and salvation

JMF: There are a lot of ideas about salvation. I don't know if everybody wants to be saved, maybe not everyone thinks about it or cares, but those who do care want to be saved. What is the Bible driving at when it speaks of "salvation" and "being saved"? Is it being saved from sin, is it being saved from death, and that's it? Or what is salvation all about?

PM: It is being saved from sin *and* from death, because the consequences of sin and death are being cut off from God. I love the way C.S. Lewis puts it in his book *Mere Christianity.* He says, "The human machine was designed to run on God and there is no other possibility." The problem of sin is that we try to run on our own steam.

JMF: We're putting diesel in the gasoline engine.

PM: Exactly. Or sugar in the gas tank. So the human machine simply conks, and there's no way to solve that situation on our own, because we've created the problem by relying on ourselves (being in-turned upon ourselves, you might say), by being self-reliant, self-willed. Lewis argues that salvation means that we have to learn to un-train ourselves in what we've trained ourselves into for thousands of years, self-will, because it's self-will that cuts us off from our only source of happiness — God. Salvation is the overcoming of sin and death, but I agree with Torrance and Barth, who both argued that we don't even know the true meaning of sin until we see God's grace, until we see what he looks like in light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Barth said that there is such a thing as an unprofitable focus on sin. It can lead you to be morose. But when you see that sin and death mean that we as individuals try to live independently of God, when God did design, as Lewis said, the human machine to run on himself…then it makes a whole lot of sense to realize that salvation is an act of God for us that we cannot accomplish ourselves, and therefore free grace. It's also an act that includes us humanly because Jesus was fully human, and that act of God healed us humanly because the sinful human nature that was assumed in the Incarnation is now healed. Christ lived the life that is sinless. None of us can do that.

JMF: What's the problem with sin? Why does sin…other than the fact that it's destructive and hurts and ruins relationships… (I guess I'm answering the question myself). Isn't ruined

relationships what makes sin, sin?

PM: Not necessarily, because you can speak about ruined relationships with psychologists…

JMF: But doesn't sin lie at the heart of that?

PM: No. Objectively, sin does lie at the heart of disrupted human relationships, but you can't simply equate the fact of disrupted human relationships with sin, because the real essence of sin is humans being self-willed, exercising their choices without trusting in God himself.

JMF: Isn't it being out of right relationship with God?

PM: Right.

JMF: And that results in bad human relationships.

PM: That's right. But you can't discover the meaning of sin by analyzing the human relationships, that's what I'm trying to say.

JMF: Right.

PM: Let me put it another way… Barth and Torrance say that we don't know the true meaning of sin except in and through Christ. The essence of sin was disclosed on the cross, in that even though we may claim that we want to live by grace, all of us are powerless to live by grace alone. Only God's grace, the love of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ, empowers our lives insofar as they are lived by God's gracious forgiveness of our sins in Christ. Therefore, seeing the true meaning of sin is not something that we can do for ourselves – it's something that comes to us as a disclosure from God when we see the events of the cross and the resurrection.

JMF: The separation or the alienation that we experience from God… sin lies at the heart of that.

PM: That's right.

JMF: You're saying God has acted from his side to forgive and…

PM: And also from the human side in Jesus Christ.

JMF: …to a better way.

PM: Right. So that's the possibility of our salvation and the reality of our salvation.

JMF: The result of salvation, though, the product of salvation…maybe we could even say what salvation *is,* is to be back into the right relationship with God…

PM: Yes.

JMF: Not that we've ever been in the right relationship with God, but it's to become

Christ's own relationship God.

PM: Through Christ…right. So in Christ, we are in right relationship.

JMF: So salvation is being drawn into his relationship with the Father.

PM: Correct. I also like the chapter in C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, "The Perfect Penitent," where he says that nothing in God's nature corresponds to submission, suffering, and death. Because out of free love for us, Jesus here is perfect God; he also becomes the perfect penitent. He doesn't need to repent to believe, because he's already perfect, but out of love for us, he can repent perfectly because he's God, and he does it for us humanly and therefore when we share in his perfect obedience, we live the life that is ours in him. We can only do it because he enables us to do it.

JMF: And he didn't have to be baptized either, but he does it…

PM:…vicariously for us. Right. When he was baptized, it's not because he sinned, but because he assumed our sin for humanity and so his baptism was the beginning of his living a human life of perfect obedience, which culminated on the cross where he said, "Not my will, but thine be done," and then experienced God-forsakenness.

That raises a number of issues among contemporary theologians — can God suffer and die? C.S. Lewis said that nothing in God's nature corresponds to suffering, submission, and death. We have to live our salvation by submitting to Christ. Christ living for us as the Savior submits to God. There's nothing in God's nature that's like that, but he says by becoming incarnate, God can suffer, surrender, submit, and die, and he can do it as God and man. Unlike some of the fathers in the early church who would say that God cannot suffer and die because God is perfect, C.S. Lewis says that God can suffer, surrender, and die both as God and as human in the incarnation.

Torrance is very good on this, too. He insists that God in Christ atones for our sins, bringing about repentance from within the person of the mediator. He would say that God both does suffer in our suffering, *and* he's not a God who moves from our suffering.

One of the great things that I like about Torrance is that he says that if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, then Christianity would be immoral. When I first read that, I said, "What is he talking about?" When I went further, I realized that he was making sense, because if Jesus was just a man dying on a cross, then salvation would be the equivalent of human sacrifice or some human attempt at self-justification by placating God, and that would be an immoral…

JMF: Isn't that how a lot of people look at it? That God was very angry at humanity and…

PM: Something had to be done…

JMF:…then Jesus comes along, and he's the one who loves humanity, so he says, if you're going to be that angry, then kill me and I'll take it on myself, that kind of thing, that he stands in the gap.

PM: Yes. I think that is common. To use a more popular image, C.S. Lewis's said, "I don't like thinking of atonement in the police court sense" because he thought that concept was immoral before he became a Christian. (He had been an atheist.) He said, "Because that would imply that Christ did something wrong and needed to be punished in our stead." He said, "I would rather think of the atonement as a kind friend helping us out of the hole that we've gotten ourselves into by doing something for us that we can't do for ourselves."

Torrance's view comes much closer to that second view. Torrance argues, if you put *God* on the cross, then not only is it *not* immoral, but now you see the depth of the love of God — that God was willing to sacrifice his own Son out of love for us while we were incapable of helping ourselves. God is not only not remote from us (as he could be if Jesus was just an innocent man trying to placate the deity), but he's actually the deity involved in the suffering of Jesus in an act that was geared to, and did in fact, overcome all suffering and death.

So you might ask, if he overcame all suffering and death, why is there still suffering and death? The answer is that our history is not *automatically* Christ's history, that Christ gives us the freedom to respond and to live within that history of faith. He gives us that interval between his first coming and his second coming as the time of freedom in which we have that freedom, and we're given that freedom to live that life by faith now.

JMF: There's probably a lot more that could be said…

PM: Pages have been written on that, that's for sure.

Immanent and immutable

JMF: Let's talk about your book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity.* What is the fundamental point you're getting across in this? (You alluded to this earlier.) You need to define "immanent Trinity" (it's not spelled imminent, like "just about to happen," but immanent, as "fully present"). [**PM:** Yes, with an A.] I want to read a comment on the back of the book that sets a tone. "Paul Molnar sets out a contemporary doctrine of the immanent Trinity and addresses the issue of how we can know God according to his true nature rather than create

him in our own image."

PM: That opens a door to a discussion that I use when I introduce the topic of the doctrine of the God in class at St. John's. It's a story told by Colin Gunton, who had just had a conversation with a professor about a book that that professor had read, entitled *The God I Want.* The professor said to Colin Gunton that "I can't imagine a sillier enterprise than writing a book entitled "*The God I Want*," because it's not the God I *want*, but 'the God you're damn well going to get!'" I think that covers the point. In other words, God has his own existence in himself, and that is the doctrine of the immanent Trinity.

It's a doctrine that recognizes that God is God for us, because we would have no knowledge of God's eternal life, his immanent existence, his existence within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if it were not for God creating the world first, then revealing himself in history, reconciling us, and redeeming us, which is commonly referred to as the economic trinity — God's actions outside of himself. The Greek word is *oeconomia*, which literally means household, but was used as a term in the early church to refer to God's plan of salvation, and then his executing that plan within history as creator, reconciler, and redeemer.

I say in this book, that Barth says (and also Torrance, but Barth in this particular instance), that God is who he is – eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that we know God through his revelation of himself in the economy, in history, but that we cannot reduce God to his revelation of himself in the economy. We have to make a clear distinction (but not separation, I argue in the book) between the immanent and the economic trinity. If we do not make that distinction, then we would end up in our thinking reducing God to what he does for us, so that then all we have is a God who is present in history, but no God existing in himself.

Unfortunately, a number of theologians have what is called the purely economic doctrine of the trinity, reducing God to what God does for us. Writing a book entitled *The God I Want* has done that to the nth degree, you might say, because such thinking supposes that we can invent images of God and really be talking about God. In this book I argue that God has his own life and retains his own life. Even though he is in close union with us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, he retains his own life. We can't confuse God's life with our life.

We don't want to say things like "God is not relational unless and until he relates with us." Some theologians hold that position. We don't want to say things that suggest that "God becomes the God he's going to be precisely by relating with us within history and working out

his being within history." This is common in process theology. I'm not a big fan of process theology, because it misses the point of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity, which is that God has his life in himself, but that God is not a prisoner of his freedom. As one who loves, he loves us, but he remains God even as he loves us, so when he works outside of himself as our reconciler and redeemer, he doesn't abandon his own eternal existence.

I will say things in the book, following Barth and the early church, that God is eternally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and would be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit even if he never decided to create, to reconcile, and redeem the world. Barth says something like that in Volume 1, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth never abandoned that thinking throughout the *Church Dogmatics,* not because he believed that God is locked up within himself and had no relations with us (otherwise he never would have written 1000 plus pages of the *Church Dogmatics* telling us about how God is involved with us in creation), but because unless God has his life in himself, it becomes superfluous for us to talk about his life with us, it becomes projection, it becomes us working up our own images of God, and that's the huge difficulty that I address in that book.

JMF: The word immutable is often used in describing God, and we think of that as being unchangeable, which relates back to what you were talking about before — how some think of God as not doing anything in himself until such time as he creates the world and involves himself in the world. We have a couple passages in Scripture, "I change not" in Malachi, and "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever," but particularly "I change not" in the Old Testament. What is meant by "immutable"? How is God unchangeable? In what way?

PM: The answer is that in all his changes, God remains the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's the importance of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. Let me explain. Torrance makes the statement that "God is always Father but not always creator. God was always Son but not always incarnate." So in those two statements…

JMF: We already see that *immutable* does not mean absolutely no change whatsoever in God.

PM: Right.

JMF: So it means something else.

PM: Because if God was the absolute instance of changelessness, he would be a prisoner of his inability to change. He'd be a prisoner of his freedom. That's not what Christians mean when they speak of divine freedom.

JMF: That's not what Christians *should* mean when they speak of… (laughing).

PM: Well, I stand corrected (laughing). Right. Here Torrance and Barth are similar, because they're both saying that God's freedom has to be understood positively as his freedom to love according to his own will. So, not being a prisoner of his own freedom, God can choose to love us as creator. God can choose to become incarnate. Torrance says when God does choose to create us and to love us by becoming incarnate, these are new actions, and he says they're new even for God. If you don't say that, then you've got to embrace some notion of Origen's idea (espoused very early in church history) that there's no distinction between God's internal relations and God's external relations. In other words, you're basically arguing that the world and God are co-eternal.

This was rejected in the early church, and Torrance is explicitly rejecting it. He says, and this is the import of the doctrine of the Trinity together with doctrines of Christology, that the Father-Son relation has priority over the creator-creature relationship. If we don't see that, then we will end up collapsing the immanent into the economic Trinity, and one of the ways that that could show is with this rigid notion of unchangeability, because we'll be projecting our ideas of immobility, of God as the unmoved mover, into God, but if God is unmoved and in that way he moves creation, then God doesn't have any active, dynamic, relational freedom in himself. He's, in a sense, a prisoner of being unmoved. That would prohibit God from coming into space and time and enabling him to relate with us from within space and time. So there's a lot at stake in that question.

JMF: The passage in Malachi speaks to what it's talking about, because it says, "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore you sons of Jacob are not destroyed." His unchangeableness is specifically in reference to his covenant faithfulness to love them in spite of their rebellion.

PM: Exactly.

JMF: That's where we can have total confidence. I've heard people say, "If you're saying that God can change (after you explain how he became creator, that's a change, he became incarnate, that's a change), then how can I be sure that he will not change his mind about loving me and saving me?" That's exactly where there is no changeableness in God, in that covenant faithfulness, his steadfast love.

PM: That's because God is eternally the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God who loves in freedom. He's both loving and free, not one or the other — one *and* the other. That's

crucial.

If God were not free in his loving… I think it was in volume 2:1 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth attacked this person named Angelus Silesius who said, in explaining the doctrine of creation, "I know that without me God cannot for an instant be." Barth was really upset at that statement because it suggests just what we were talking about before — that God needs us in order to exist. Barth makes a few little remarks on the side saying, "When God creates us, it's not as though he needed a playmate, it's not as though he needed to satisfy some need of his. He creates us out of the free love that he is, but nothing compels him to do it. It's his free will to do it."

It's a crucially important insight. We have theologians today (I mention them in the book) who argue that because in human love *we* need others to love, therefore it's better to say that God needs us, because otherwise there wouldn't be true love, if he didn't need us. They missed the whole point of the Christian doctrine of God. God loves us with a divine love that's sovereign and free, that overflows to us without any need, and therefore can effectively overcome our self-love in a way that nothing else would.

JMF: It makes sense to me. And we're out of time. So if we need to expound on that, we'll have to do it next time we get together.

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God's Will and Our Decisions

JMF: Many people have the idea that God is unchangeable, because he's perfect. If God were to do something different, or if he were to change his mind or answer a prayer from somebody, then that would mean that the way he was before the change wasn't perfect, and he had to become perfect, or he was perfect and if he changed he wasn't perfect before, so therefore, using that kind of logic, God never changes, and he therefore had to decide everything that would ever happen ahead of time, and everything plays itself out that way. If that were true, then how can we expect him to answer prayers and interact with us in a real and present way?

PM: We wouldn't.

JMF: So what's a better way of looking at that?

PM: A better way of looking at that is to say that God is free and knows events that will happen precisely as genuinely contingent historical events as he wills them to exist non-deterministically. Torrance is good on this, pointing out that in Greek thinking, the notion of logical necessity and determinism seems to be endemic to the way they think about creation, about reality. That leads to the ideas of fate and so on. Torrance would say, I think rightly, that Christianity Christianized Hellenism rather than the idea that Christianity was Hellenized.

JMF: Hellenism is Greek thought.

PM: Exactly. The epitome of Greek thought, projecting sensual images into the deity, was erroneous.

JMF: In other words, thinking of God as having the same kinds of passions and so on that human beings have…

PM: Correct. Thinking of God deterministically would be sort of an extension of that sort of fatalistic, necessitarian, logical thinking. Since the Christian God is a living God and is free and loving, when he acts toward creation, it's from the overflowing abundance of who he is. It's not out of need, it's not because of imperfection, it's not because he needs to fill something up in himself. When he creates the world he creates the world out of love according to his own wisdom for his own purpose. Sometimes that purpose may seem unclear to us, but he has a purpose, and it's not arbitrary, and it's not a deterministic sort of purpose that suggests that he's encumbered by his relation with us. The existence of the world as a distinct entity is not a threat

to God's being.

JMF: Or to his sovereignty. So that would mean that there are any number of choices a person can make and any number of paths a person's life can take, without God determining that way ahead of time or before all time, and yet that is still under God's control, and it's still part of what he is working out for his redemptive purposes.

PM: Yes, with one proviso. I would like to remove the word *determined* from that, and say that God knows those events as free events that we will do, but he knows them precisely because he's not encumbered by the past or by the future. He's always the one he is, transcending time and within time, so that he's not losing part of his being when the past goes away and the present goes into the future….and he's not yet because there's a future. He's present to all times because he's God and eternal.

Torrance gets into some of this stuff and so does Barth… God has his own time, a unique time, in which he doesn't pass away, as we do. Our time is marked by its limitations and by the fall, so we don't really have time. We have no control over time. Created time must find its meaning always in God's eternal time. God's eternal time, however, is unique to him.

Both Barth and Torrance say that God has time, because he has time for us in Jesus Christ. That time is the healing of our time, so that we share in Christ's eternal humanity, because Christ, although he hasn't eternally existed (otherwise he wouldn't be truly human), now exists eternally as the risen and ascended Lord. When we share in that, we have eternal life — life without end. Since God is not encumbered by the limitations of past, present, and future as we are, he can know things that are future for us, precisely as events that are freely determined, contingently determined, and not necessarily determined, in a deterministic sense.

JMF: "Contingently determined" means what?

PM: It means that they're totally dependent on God's purpose and will to be what they are. It means that they might not even *be* at all, or they might be differently, depending upon God's will for them.

JMF: Sometimes a Christian will get the idea that in a given situation there's only one right decision they could make, and that they must seek out what God's will would be for them in this situation. They assume that there is only one possibility of what God's will might be for them, and that if they make the wrong choice, that would be a disaster. They want to make sure their decision is God's will, so they enter into whatever regimen that they think might help, whether it

be prayer and fasting or seeking counsel or whatever. Often they end up, regardless of the counsel they seek, doing what they want anyway.

Is there only one right decision, and is God's will always a specific thing that we must do, and a specific decision, that there's only one will of God and then everything else would be wrong? How does God work with us, in other words? How does he interact with us on a day-to-day basis?

PM: It's not an easy question. I'm thinking back to Barth's ethics that he develops in Volume 2, Part 2 of the *Church Dogmatics* and then in 3 and 4 where he talks about the divine command. It's been a long time since I've read that material, but if I remember, he argues that God's command infallibly reaches each person in their particular circumstances and makes itself known to them as his will because it is a permission, it's a freedom to serve him, which enables that person to be what God wants them to be.

One of the marks of coming up against the legitimate divine command is the fact that it's a freedom, not an enslavement. It never says to the person, "If you do this, this, and this, then you will get that, that, and that." It's always a freedom to obey God himself. So there is only one possibility – but not in a legalistic sense that you have four possibilities there and you choose one, and if you get the right one, then things go well for you and if you choose one of the other three, then you're in trouble. That would be the wrong way to think about this sort of interaction.

We really do interact with God, but we're not set in a position…(Barth would often say, and I think Torrance would follow him in this)…like Hercules at the crossroads, we choose between two possibilities, and if we choose the right one, then everything's good, and if we choose the wrong one, everything's not good – partly because our wills are enslaved to sin and are freed by God in Christ for service of God.

Love of God and love of neighbor in Barth's thinking means that the divine command reaches each individual in different circumstances and at different times in each person's life…that's why prayer is necessary, to discern precisely what that is, and then to obey. It's not, as it were, a test, where if you get this point right then you're okay, and if you don't… It's really a freedom, a freeing of a person from the illusion that they could determine God's will by their choices, because they can't, they can only obey. Let's say you were called to do a Christian act at a given moment – you either do it or you don't do it. You either obey or you don't. It's not a question of trying to figure out which is the right way to go.

JMF: Some people struggle over whether they should buy this car or that car. They want to get the whole church to pray for them to make the right decision. It's as though they think there's only one right choice they can make. Sometimes the pastors of certain churches will enter into that and presume to speak for God and tell them, you should get the white car because that's… We can bring some almost-superstition to every decision, assuming that we have to be careful that we stay within the will of God, but pretending that we know or struggling over the fact that we don't know.

PM: That doesn't sound very freeing, does it?

JMF: No, it sounds so…

PM: It's kind of unnerving, you might say. In such circumstances we can entrust our decisions to the care of God and to God's forgiving grace, so if we made what turns out to be a bad decision, a year from now sell the car, get another one, don't worry about it. I think we can trust in God's loving care and in the fact that he will bring good even out of bad decisions.

JMF: More of a lifestyle of trusting God to help us through the decisions we make.

PM: Correct. And trust in his forgiving grace when things don't go exactly the way they should.

JMF: There are certain principles anybody can use in trying to make a wise decision. You want to weigh the pros and cons. You want to get wise counsel, and you want to listen to good judgment about it and so on. But at some point you have to make a decision.

PM: An informed decision. Especially with regard to cars. If I'm going to buy a new car, I want to know every detail about that car.

JMF: There are many things we could obsess over. But when it boils down to it, we want to bring our Christian life, our walk with Christ, into whatever circumstance or decision we might make. Sometimes we make poor decisions and we still bring with that our faith that God will help us through. Sometimes we make a good decision, and we still bring with that our faith that God will bless us, help us to use it rightly, not foolishly.

PM: One of the good things in that is that we don't have to worry about whether our decisions in the last analysis were right or wrong, because Christ promises to make good for us. He's responsible for us. We are responsible to him and to God, but because he has made himself responsible for us, we don't have to make a final judgment about what we're doing. We leave that to him, to his care.

JMF: But at the same time we realize that decisions have consequences. If we do a foolish thing, then it's going to have consequences.

PM: Which we do at least once a day, maybe twice a day.

JMF: Perhaps most of the time. Yeah. That raises opportunities to trust God to have mercy on us.

PM: That's the whole point of prayer. Some of the botched decisions that we make point us once again to our utter need to rely on God's forgiving grace. That's not something we can control by plotting and planning every little detail of our lives and getting the whole church to pray for it, you know, that it's not raining on Thursday morning.

JMF: When I leave for our vacation.

PM: That sort of thing.

JMF: These are the kinds of requests that sometimes come in.

PM: People might conclude from that, that since it is raining, therefore God doesn't love me. So that concept of God is all too human a concept.

JMF: To what degree does God interact with us on a personal level with our daily life? Is it a matter of how much we bring him in, or is it that he's always present but he lets us make our own decisions and make mistakes and live with the consequences, or is it hands-off, he's out there watching us, for whatever reason? How does that work?

PM: The God that we know in Jesus Christ is not a hands-off deity, because he has loved us while we were still sinners and powerless to love him. He continues to love us in exactly the same way in Jesus Christ. There's no limit to his approach to us. We can only love because God empowers us to love at any given moment. God is deeply involved in each moment of our lives, but sometimes we're so busy that we don't see that and we don't pay attention to that, or we look right past it toward our own agenda, which, when put into effect, will enable us to sort of redefine who God is and what revelation is and what salvation should mean, to make ourselves feel comfortable.

God is not a distant deistic deity — that's the dualism that Torrance always refers to as problematic — because the God who meets us in Jesus Christ meets us in a myriad of different forms experiences. He is never far off but is sometimes hidden to us in our own experience because we're not paying attention or not really trusting God. We're sort of reinventing the God we want instead of trusting in God as he is.

JMF: Isn't another form of reinventing the God we want, to take the approach of… you hear in some conversations, the Lord told me to take this job or the Lord told me that we should move to Kenya and be a missionary. Sometimes the whole church knows it's a foolish decision, and yet the person is convinced that the Lord told them that, and in their own mind, they bring God into every decision they make, as though this is what the will of God is for me. It's as though I don't have to take responsibility for my own decisions because God told me to do this. So for you to tell me that this was foolish…

PM: That could just as easily be a manipulation of God's will. That's a problem. For example, God told me this morning I should be a chemical engineer. I don't know a thing about chemical engineering, but God told me to do it, so I'm going to go and do that. If you get such a revelation supposedly, you should have to then look at the abilities that you have, the talents, where your life has been to this point, and ask yourself seriously whether that is something that God is asking you to do. I don't think God is actually telling you to do that at all.

JMF: God is telling me that you're supposed to do that.

PM: I should be a chemical engineer because I utterly failed at the arts, so I might as well be a chemical engineer. Barth once said, I think to someone who was asking about whether they should be a theologian, you have to look at whether you have the temperament, the qualities that would lead to someone being a good theologian. You might have none of those things. If that's true, then that's a sign of God's interacting with you. You have to use common sense.

JMF: I think this happens too often with people who take up a missionary plan. They come to the conclusion that God is calling them to some sort of missionary service, and they will pluck their family up without regard to the effect on the children of moving to a new country, a new culture and so on, without really understanding what they're getting into, when they have heard a presentation or they have heard of a need and they feel some twinge of conscience or something, and so they assume that God is moving them to make this huge life-changing decision. Sometimes it becomes a major mistake for the family, but they're convinced that this is what God wants them to do. I don't know that there's any solution to that, because we all stand prey to that in one way or another.

PM: It's true. That's an extremely difficult decision, but the point that you made about that person needing to look at the overall effect on the entire family should weigh heavily in such a decision.

JMF: Getting good counsel from not just the person and people who want them to go, but from people who have been there, done that, and from their pastors, from other counselors, and are listening to the suggestions and ideas from more than one point of view on the topic.

PM: No question. I'm thinking of Tom Torrance's own life when he was asked by Barth to follow him in [the University of] Basel, and he stated that was one of the hardest decisions of his life. He decided not to go because he didn't want to uproot his children from school and bring them into a setting where they would have to speak and learn in German and so on. He was never sorry that he made that decision, but it was difficult. He had to weigh all of his family issues and so on, and in retrospect I think it was a good decision.

JMF: Just because a thing might seem spiritual or holy doesn't mean that you can't continue to serve God effectively in any other way.

PM: Absolutely.

JMF: But we sometimes substitute going out and doing some kind of a seemingly spiritual thing, trying to make up for all the other problems in our life, to feel better about our walk with God.

PM: Very true. We have an amazing ability to deceive ourselves.

JMF: Isn't that part of what we learn from Trinitarian theology, in the fact that Christ is already everything for us, and our trust is in him to be everything we need to be?

PM: That's why when Barth talked about Christian vocation, he said the Christian preacher and teacher should point vigorously toward Christ as the one who calls us toward his purposes, and not point toward Christian experience as the way forward in these matters. I think he was right.

JMF: It's often hard to face the fact that maybe the best place for us is right where we are, being who we should be in Christ, as opposed to finding a new and exciting place somewhere else that promises…

PM: But may not deliver. I couldn't agree more.

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The Giver and the Gift

JMF: You've written about grace being identical with its giver. What is the significance of that?

PM: It's extremely significant. Jesus Christ *is* God's grace, present among us. That means that in Jesus Christ, God actively loves us, binds us to himself, reveals himself to us, and that means therefore that you cannot detach that act of God (because God's being and God's act are one) from what God is doing in that particular history.

If you did that, you might then think of God's grace as a detachable quality that adheres in human nature, and you might come up with such ideas as creative grace and different types of grace. Your focus then would be off the reality of grace, which is identical with Christ himself and, more importantly, your focus would be on the gifts of the Christian life and living the Christian life in abstraction from the one who empowers you to live it.

It's enormously important not to separate the gifts that we receive in Christ, living as part of the new creation — faith, love of God, love of neighbor. It's enormously important that we do not detach those from the giver, because if we do, then we no longer *need* Christ, and to the extent that we don't need Christ, we become self-reliant once again. We can become self-reliant under the guise of speaking about grace.

Torrance is great in pointing out the subtle dangers of Pelagianism in the human heart – our constant attempt to turn back on ourselves, even using Christian concepts in order to validate such a turn. He is dead against that, rightly so. It's a disaster to separate the gift from the giver. If you separate the gift of atonement from the giver, then the atonement becomes something we do.

Some theologians today (you may be aware of some of them) argue that if we reconceived salvation today as us trying to create a better world, then we have to realize that we need more than one savior of the world — we need many hearts, hands, and feet to make the world a better place.

Yes, we need many people working for a better world, that's true. But you can't equate salvation with people working for a better world. That's what happens, though, if you detach grace, the gift, from the giver. Where there is grace, where there is the freedom of love, to love God and to love neighbor by working for a better world, there we are bound to Christ and totally

dependent on Christ and not on us trying to make a better world and therefore reconstructing a notion of salvation by saying we need more saviors. That sort of thinking is the ultimate proof that we're attempting to save ourselves, then we've missed grace, we've bypassed it.

God's actions and being

JMF: It seems to tie in with the concept of separating God's being from his acts. What does that mean, and how does that relate?

PM: Torrance and Barth were big on stressing that God's being and acts are one. When dealing with the Trinity, Barth used to say that God is one being in three modes of existence — he preferred "modes of existence" to "person" — it did not make him a modalist, as some have suggested.

JMF: He's using "mode" in a different way.

PM: Right. He's allowing God — the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit — to dictate his meaning of "mode," so he's not trying to conform the Trinity to a prior idea of "mode." He would say that God is eternally one being in his act as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. When God decides to and then acts as creator — the Father through his word and in the Spirit, and then again as reconciler and redeemer — we need God in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's act, but you can't separate that act from the being of God, so that as God's act in Jesus Christ, we're actually meeting Jesus Christ.

Barth would then argue that if in your thinking you ignore Jesus Christ or don't begin thinking about God with Jesus Christ, then, in effect, you bypass the one possibility for a knowledge of God that comes to us from God. We can't bypass God and then attempt to know God, because that's a recipe for idolatry. Torrance makes statements such as, "We must think from the center in God and not from a center in ourselves, because God's being and act are one."

The act of God in Jesus Christ in the incarnation is God coming to us, approaching us, empowering us to know him. You could never say, as some have, that "Jesus is our historical choice, is our foundational figure for our Christian religion," because who he is is utterly dependent upon God's act and thus upon God, because you can't separate God's act from his being.

Both Barth and Torrance would say that God's act is the Holy Spirit empowering us to believe in Jesus Christ. They both cite 1 Corinthians 12:3, which says, "No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit." They take that seriously. Barth will make statements such as

this, “Knowledge of God is an event enclosed in the mystery of the divine Trinity.” He means that God himself in the Holy Spirit, uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father, begins, upholds, and completes our knowledge of God.

Such knowledge can never be traced back to anything in our thinking or anything within our experience. Our thinking and experience would be real enough, and they would be real knowledge of God and they would really describe God, because they would be faithful descriptions of God’s act and being, but none of that is under our control, and all that is a miracle, because it goes against the grain of our natural attempts to create God in our own image.

Both theologians take the problem of sin, the problem of our human limitations seriously. Barth was speaking about God’s hiddenness, even in revelation. That is, that nothing in history in and of itself can disclose God to us. We need God to act, and God does act in his Holy Spirit and in his word. When we hear his word by the power of the Holy Spirit through God’s acting, we’re already united to God’s being, because you can’t separate being and act. The fact that God’s being and act are one is crucial. For Barth, they annihilated the whole need for natural theology.

JMF: What is natural theology?

PM: It’s the attempt to know God by relying on nature, reason, conscience, or history. It’s the attempt to reason to God’s existence without relying on God’s revelation as attested in Scripture. It’s the attempt to know God without biblical faith. What one of us doesn’t have some knowledge of God or some natural goodness in us? The presumption is that we have *some* knowledge of God, but when we know God in Jesus Christ, we can’t rely on *any* of that — to know God with certainty. All of that is called into question and comes under judgment. We must give up any attempt to rely on our natural goodness or our natural knowledge, and take up our cross and follow him, Torrance would argue (and I think he’s right). We don’t want to take that away from people, because that’s the last hope of the person who refuses to hear the word of God in Jesus Christ — that’s all they have to cling to, is their attempts to build a knowledge of God on themselves.

Barth has a long section in *Dogmatics* volume 2.1 where he talks about natural theology. He doesn’t want to disprove it or argue, because in the act of disproving it, he would be engaging in natural theology. He simply wants to say that because of the Fall and because God has approached us in Jesus Christ and made himself known as the reconciler and redeemer, if we bypass those particular activities of God, then we will be constructing an image of God that’s in

variance with who God actually is. That's the problem of sin and the problem of natural theology. When we really know God, it's by the miracle of grace and not by anything we did. Even when we know God, it's not by means of any twist or turn in our usage of concepts. It's only when our concepts are commandeered, so to speak, by God, that we actually know him.

In both Barth and Torrance, following Hilary of Poitiers (Barth put it more forcefully than Torrance, although Torrance could be pretty forceful), Barth said that "words are subject to realities, not realities to words." He said, "Anybody who does not accept that axiom as their working axiom as a theologian is no theologian and never will be." Torrance adopted that axiom himself and used it as part of his repertoire.

So, natural theology is an attempt to make the reality of God acting in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit subject to our words, our ideas of God, rather than allowing God to define who God is to us. In the one instance, it's understanding seeking faith, which can't lead anywhere, theologically speaking. In the other instance, it's faith in the word of God being led by the Holy Spirit seeking understanding. But again, faith itself comes from the Holy Spirit; it's not something that we invented. It's grounded in God.

Law, sin, and repentance

JMF: What is the relationship between a believer and what the Bible calls the law of God? How does the believer relate to the law of God in the sense of both the Old Testament and New Testament?

PM: Torrance says something to the effect that our entire lives have to be recreated ethically, morally, and legally speaking, because people can use morality and the law to hide behind them, in the sense that they wall themselves up by trying to obey the law and thus not having to obey God — legalism and moralism, you might say. When we hear the word of God in Jesus Christ, all of that changes. When we really hear the word of God, God frees us to live in harmony with his will for us. We will then be living according to his law, because the point of the law is to direct us to our total reliance on God — God's love and God's grace.

Nobody ever quite lives that or has lived that, except Christ himself. That's why we were saved outside of and apart from the law. Christ didn't come to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them. He gave them their true meaning, put them on a true footing, so to speak. In Christ we see that the law is not an end in itself, and neither is morality an end in itself, because we can use both to try to justify ourselves and save ourselves, and we can use both to hide behind

them, making it seem as though we're really good and law-abiding when all the while we're not honestly relying on God. So there's sort of a suspension Torrance talks about.

Barth talks about the fact that when we really know God through revelation, the law won't make any difference, it won't matter, because we will simply be trusting in God and doing God's will. We will be obeying the law, but not because we are trying to obey the law, but simply because it's not even a question for us. Trusting in God, we'll really be loving God and loving our neighbor and doing those things that would signify that.

JMF: It's like Paul said in Romans 13: "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Jump from verse 8 to verse 10: "Love does no harm to its neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." The law gets taken care of when you're walking in the gospel.

PM: Right. That's what Barth meant when he said that you won't be worrying about the law and its fulfillment when you love God, because you've been loved by God first and empowered to love God. You will spontaneously love your neighbor …fulfill the law, in effect.

JMF: I've known people who were so focused on the law that they are the opposite. If you think of loving your neighbor, you wouldn't think of them, because they're so austere and they're so judgmental, both against themselves and everybody else, because of their focus on the law (as an end in itself, practically) — they think it's the stepping stone to God, as opposed to a focus on the grace of God in Christ.

PM: Dealing with those sorts of people is difficult.

JMF: It is. God pity the poor group, nation, church, or whoever might be under the authority of such a person.

PM: I agree. I think of C.S. Lewis saying you can tell the people who are behaving in such ways by the haunted look of those whom they are trying to love. Trying to fulfill that law of love can become a legalistic activity.

JMF: You talk about the love of God being "unconditional." What does that mean?

PM: Barth quotes from John, where it says that "God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son that those who should believe in him would have eternal life." The love of God is identical with the sending of Jesus Christ to love us while we were enemies of God. The gist of that statement is captured in Barth's response. It's a crucial statement.

JMF: As Paul says in Romans, "Christ died for us while we were yet sinners and he

demonstrates his love for us in that."

PM: I think that's crucial. It demonstrates to us that any attempt to love God, without recognizing God's love of us first, is a replication of the predicament of self-will and sin, isolating ourselves more and more from God. That isolation can take place even under the guise of Christian categories, which makes the situation more difficult. That's an important point.

JMF: It comes home for people, if they could embrace it, the most when they find themselves — I'm talking about believers or Christians who find themselves embroiled in sin. They've failed in some habitual sin or they have done something that is outrageous, and their first response is typically, "How can God still love me after this?" There's a depression that sets in and a sense of being cut off from God. It's renewing and helpful (and it's not easy to do, because it seems so unreal at the time) to remember that Christ died for you while you're still a sinner, while you were still enemies. He doesn't feel any differently about you today than he did yesterday, before you did that, or than he will tomorrow, after you have gotten through your emotional grieving and repentance process.

PM: That's a great point.

JMF: But we have to remember always that this love of God is not something that's going to go away, and it's not something that's going to change, and it's not something we can move beyond its limits.

PM: We shouldn't really want to.

JMF: Not that we want to, but we can't. Whatever state we find ourselves in, we can go back to the arms of the prodigal father.

PM: I was also thinking of the parable of the prodigal son. It's without conditions. If somebody took the inheritance and I was the father, would I really welcome that person back without conditions or would I say, "You can come back, but I'm controlling all the money from here on out"?

JMF: I would have all sorts of conditions.

PM: I would have all sorts of conditions, but God has none. The fact that he loves us in Christ gives a permission, a freedom, for us to live that new life, so we can trust in God's forgiving grace. Torrance (and Barth, too) was vociferous in speaking against any idea of conditional salvation. The notion of conditional salvation destroys the unconditionally of God's love, because if salvation is conditional on anything we do, then we're thrown back upon

ourselves to try to make good something that we can't make good. We can't possibly make good, because God loved us while we were still sinners. It turns into a vicious circle at that point.

JMF: I can hardly think of the parable of the prodigal son without thinking of Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, where he takes Rembrandt's painting and analyzes each part of it in connection with the story of the parable. It's such a moving and reassuring rehearsal of the unconditional love that God has for us.

PM: I was thinking a moment ago of C.S. Lewis, where he says, "Repentance is not something that God demands of you before he takes you back – it's simply a description of what going back to God is like." We can't go back to God without it, but it's not a condition of God's loving us, it's rather the thing you do when you recognize what God has done on the cross and in the resurrection (and recognizing that is not under our control either). But if you say that you're going to turn back to God and you're not submitting to God and therefore repenting, you haven't returned to God; you've just returned to an idea of God and you're once more trying to save yourself conditionally, you might say.

JMF: Don't we sometimes turn repentance into some kind of a work or some kind of a chore or duty? Instead of freely trusting that we can simply return to God who loves us, we project ourselves onto God as being somebody who is going to require a certain amount of penance or a certain number of deeds (or whatever we have in our head) before he's going to accept us back. We think that repentance needs to be tooth-grinding and fist-clenching and begging and sackcloth and ashes.

PM: And hair shirts, and so on. I think that's disastrous. That would not be living by grace. Living by grace means that we can trust in Christ and turn to him, as you said.

JMF: In the prodigal son, this son's repentance was not a great repentance at all, because he really was…

PM: He realized that he was feeding pigs.

JMF: …and he just wanted a decent meal among the servants who he knew were living better than he was. He didn't expect the kind of reception that he got.

PM: That's right.

JMF: All he knew was, that's where I need to go to stay alive. And so he went back.

PM: There's a moral in that, right? Those who are searching for the perfect form of repentance before they repent are going to have a problem, because even our repentance is the

repentance of unprofitable servants, you might say. Even in our repentance, we're dependent on the heavenly Father taking us back.

JMF: In one sense we could forget about our repentance and simply trust God to love us and go back to him trusting that he will accept us, love us, help us.

PM: That is the nature of God's unconditional love.

JMF: Thought of that way, repentance and trust or faith are the same thing.

PM: I think so.

JMF: What's your next book?

PM: I'm working on a sequel to my book *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity,* and it's going to come out with InterVarsity Press. I'm working with Gary Deddo on that. I'm going to put some real time into that this summer. I haven't put as much time into it as I should have.

JMF: Is there a potential title or a working title?

PM: The title is *Faith, Freedom, and the Spirit*. In the first book I focused on the need to acknowledge God's freedom in himself so as to recognize the way God was acting within history — it was really God and not just our using theological language to describe ourselves in place of God. So in this book I focus on Barth and Torrance again, but I'm going to look at the way the Holy Spirit works in connection with reconciliation and redemption, and then talk about how God works in the economy empowering us and enabling us to know him and participate in life, without blurring the distinction between creator and creature, but actually affirming the two and therefore engendering human freedom. I'm going to focus on the work of the Holy Spirit and knowing God through the Holy Spirit and reconciliation and the work of the Holy Spirit in redemption.

JMF: There hasn't been a lot of work specifically on the Holy Spirit in regard to Trinitarian theology…

PM: No, there hasn't. So that's the direction I would like to move. For all who might have thought that I was maintaining the divine freedom in terms of the doctrine of the immanent Trinity… (Some people have interpreted my book to mean that I was separating God from his actions, but I wasn't, because I wouldn't have written the book if God was separate from us. The only reason I wrote the book was to say that God who is active in history is free and acts free in love within history.)

So I would like to clear up some of those misunderstandings by focusing on the Holy Spirit and showing how, when the Spirit unites us to Christ, there are genuine human actions of those who are reconciled, but you can't read off reconciliation from those who are acting, any more than you can read off what it means to be a Christian by looking at what a Christian does, because sometimes there are Christians who behave well and sometimes there Christians who behave badly.

JMF: The same Christian.

PM: That's right. I would argue against those who say that you can judge the truth of Christology by the ethical fruits of those who live the Christian life. You can't. The truth of Christology is judged by who Jesus is as God's action among us, actively reconciling us to himself even now. And the only way to know that is through the Holy Spirit.

So that's where I'm hoping to proceed with my next work. It's been a while since I've looked at the chapters as I've fleshed them out, and I might have to make revisions as I go and as I learn different things. But I think it's going to be about nine chapters. Hopefully it will be interesting. I'll deal with questions that are raised about my first book, and then I'll focus on God's acting within history, all the while making sure that I'm speaking about God acting within history and then human beings being freed by God to know and love him.

JMF: Is there a tentative publication date yet?

PM: [The book was published in 2015.] I teach full time at the moment, and I don't have any research leaves coming up, so I am mainly working during the summers and during the year as well. Next year I'm going to be preparing some lectures to give as well, so hopefully those lectures will work out as chapters within that new book.

JMF: We'll look forward to seeing it.

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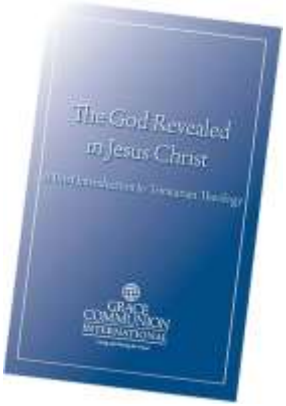

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