

Atonement for Everyone

Interviews With Daniel Thimell

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Introduction

This is a transcript of four interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 100 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

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.

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 Daniel Thimell, Associate Professor of Theological and Historical Studies at Oral Roberts University. Dr. Thimell earned his Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen in 1993. He has 30 years of pastoral experience and has taught at Trinity College in Bristol, England, and the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. In 1997, Dr. Thimell won first place in a nationwide preaching contest sponsored by *Pulpit Digest*, and he's a regular contributor to *Clergy Journal*. He and Trevor Hart co-edited the book *Christ in Our Place: Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance*, published by Pickwick in 1991 as part of the Princeton Theological Monograph Series. His book *God, Grace, and the Gospel* was released in 2013 by Aventine Press.

The interviewer was J. Michael Feazell, who was then vice president of Grace Communion International, and is now an instructor at Grace Communion Seminary.

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John McLeod Campbell and Grace

J. Michael Fezell: Welcome to *You're Included*, the unique interview series devoted to practical implications of Trinitarian theology. We're talking with Dr. Daniel Thimell, Associate Professor of Theological and Historical Studies at Oral Roberts University. Dr. Thimell earned his Ph.D. from the University of Aberdeen in 1993. He has 30 years of pastoral experience and has taught at Trinity College in Bristol, England, and the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. In 1997, Dr. Thimell won first place in a nationwide preaching contest sponsored by *Pulpit Digest*, and he's a regular contributor to *Clergy Journal*. He and Trevor Hart co-edited the book *Christ in Our Place: Essays Presented to Professor James Torrance*, published by Pickwick in 1991 as part of the Princeton Theological Monograph Series.

Dr. Thimell, thanks for being with us today.

Daniel Thimell: Delighted to be with you.

JMF: I wanted to begin by asking you to talk about your Christian journey and how you came to be a Trinitarian theologian.

DT: It was during my time at Westmont College, particularly under the tutelage of Ray Anderson, when I began to reflect more deeply on my understanding of Christ. I had come to know him as Savior years earlier, but it was during those wonderful classes that I took from Ray Anderson that I began to discover the theology of John McLeod Campbell, a Scottish pastor and theologian who, when he would make his pastoral rounds, discovered that his people didn't have any joy in believing.

JMF: What was his time frame?

DT: McLeod Campbell was a pastor in the early 1820s, in Scotland. He found that as he made his pastoral rounds, the people would dread his coming because they were afraid that he would inquire after their spiritual condition, and they felt so unworthy. He found that they had no grounds for rejoicing in God, and he thought this strange, that here we had this wonderful good news of what God had done in Christ, but the people were not finding any joy in it.

JMF: Sounds somewhat like today, doesn't it?

DT: It has amazing parallels to today. He found that the problem was that they were so wrapped up in themselves and in their adequacy to be "eligible" for grace. They understood that Christ had done something wonderful on the cross, but all their doubts were as to themselves:

Have I repented enough? Am I sincere enough? Have I believed enough? Am I worthy enough?

So he sought to direct their attention away from themselves, hunting in themselves for some kind of worthiness, and instead pointed them to Christ and to see how God felt toward them, and to see what God and Christ had already accomplished for them.

This really switched on some lights for me. It helped me see that in Christ, we have a full revelation of God; that God has come in our humanity to disclose his heart to us. In Christ we see a God who loves us unconditionally, who will go to any length to bring us back.

JMF: Why is that hard to get our minds around?

DT: Because it's counterintuitive. In our society and world today, everything is based on performance, whether it's the job we have, perhaps the relationships we have, we're always trying to *win* a relationship. We're trying to *earn* a job, earn a raise. So when we're told that God loves us unconditionally, that we're already loved and accepted by him, that's astonishing.

Grace is an alien word in our culture. We think that we must *do* certain things, perform certain things. We must bring a certain amount of merit so that God will accept us. So when McLeod Campbell began to proclaim the gospel that God and Christ had already done it all, his people were astonished, and some of them felt liberated for the first time in their lives, and others began to murmur and complain.

Eventually he was forced to leave the ministry of the Church of Scotland for daring to preach a universal pardon available through Christ. But he went on to become one of Scotland's finest theologians with his work *The Nature of the Atonement*.

JMF: So Ray Anderson brought this to your attention as part of the class?

DT: Exactly. He helped us see that Christ reveals the Father, and we began to appreciate the depth in God as being a Triune God, that within God there's this Father/Son relationship that's been existing from all eternity. God is a God of relationships. Ray also emphasized the fact that the Holy Spirit is another of the three persons in that communion.

JMF: So if there's relationship in God, then that translates over into how everything is made, including us, our relationships with God and with each other.

DT: That's a crucial point. Within God, God being from all eternity a triune communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, experience an abundance of love through all eternity. It was out of the overflow of that love that God through Christ brought the world into being. We were made in love, and for love.

After the fall, Christ the Creator becomes the Redeemer. God comes to reclaim that which he had made. He was not willing to live without us. In love, he went all the way to be incarnate in our humanity, in our skin and bones, to live life as we live it, with the same temptations we face, the same struggles. Yet through it all, Jesus was faithful to his Father. Then he died our death and rose in triumph in our humanity. Now he presents us in himself as those who are loved by the Father, who have been redeemed.

JMF: Didn't Campbell have a great influence on Thomas and James Torrance?

DT: He did. Campbell had been branded a heretic by the Church of Scotland in his day because at that time, the Church of Scotland was enamored by the high Calvinist idea that only some are predestined to salvation and that Christ only died for some. Calvin himself (but that's another story) taught that Christ died for the world. But McLeod Campbell, when he began to state that Christ's atonement was universal, that he died for everyone, raised the eyebrows of his peers and he was defrocked from the ministry.

But later, he was awarded a doctor of divinity by the University of Glasgow before he died. By the time he died, the majority of the Kirk, as we call the Church of Scotland, had come around to his point of view of a universal atonement.

Both Tom and James Torrance loved the writings of McLeod Campbell. They found particular help in his emphasis on the priesthood of Jesus, that Jesus not only did a priestly work by his death on the cross, but that he represented us in his humanity, that our humanity was assumed by Jesus so that as he lived his life, we were there in him, and when he died, we died, when he rose, we rose.

Paul writes to the Colossians, in chapter 3, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." This is a present reality, because Christ goes on bearing our humanity. We're included in the priesthood of Jesus. "When I go to pray," James Torrance was fond of saying, "I'm not left to struggle God-ward with my prayers hoping that I'm worthy enough or pious enough or good enough to get a hearing, but rather, Jesus Christ ever lives to make intercession for us, as Hebrews 7 puts it so memorably." This dimension of the priesthood of Jesus has been emphasized greatly by the Torrances. It helps us understand our ongoing relationship to God today.

JMF: Most people have the idea that Jesus was human while he was here on earth, but after he died and was raised, that he's no longer human; he's fully God but not fully human anymore,

but that works against the scriptural witness.

DT: It does. One of the most memorable passages is 1 Timothy 2, where Paul writes to this young pastor he is mentoring and reminds him that there is one God and one mediator between God and man, *the man* Christ Jesus. He puts it in the present tense. Jesus' mediation today with the Father is as a human. He goes on being human. This is important because the humanity of Jesus is our bridge to God. It's through his humanity that we're included in the life of God and the communion of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's through the humanity of Jesus that I can come right into the Father's arms even though I don't deserve so glad a welcome.

JMF: So getting back to your journey, these things were brought up, you were introduced to them through Ray Anderson, and then how did things go after that?

DT: After serving in the pastorate for a few years, it was my privilege to go to Scotland in 1985, where I studied under James Torrance. These were transformative years for me. James Torrance was a wonderful man of God, Christ-centered, a tremendous warmth about his pastoral way, but he brilliantly reflected on the nature of God as a triune God and as a communion of persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

He also made much of the fact that in our life in God, grace is the first and primary thing, that God's expectations of us are the second thing. The first thing is his grace. As J.B. (To his face, we called him Professor Torrance; to one another we affectionately called him J.B.) said, you could summarize a paradigm for the Christian life as being grace, law, consequences. God's grace comes first, and then he enables us to keep his expectations through his grace. Then as a consequence, we live our lives in Christ. It was a very freeing thing to see and experience this.

JMF: I love Paul's letter to Titus, where he says, "Grace teaches us to say no to ungodliness." Often what we hear is, "say no to ungodliness," but Paul's point is that it isn't *law* that teaches us to say no to ungodliness — it's grace, the fact that we're already accepted, forgiven, and clean in Christ, that is what teaches us, that's the springboard toward saying no to ungodliness.

DT: Right. Grace is the basis for our life in God, not our works. Paul says to the Galatians that he's astonished that they're deserting the gospel, that having begun in the Spirit they wanted to continue in the flesh, that having received the free grace of God, now they thought they were on probation or that they were on performance, that they had to somehow or another be obedient enough or keep enough rules in order to be in good with God. Paul wants to draw them back to

the gospel of grace in Christ.

JMF: The place where the rubber meets the road with that, we might say, is when a person has sinned.

DT: Yes.

JMF: Maybe they've sinned again. Maybe they've done the same thing they've been struggling with for decades or whatever. There's a sense at that moment of, "I am never going to overcome," and there's a sense of, "God has left me. I am forsaken," but that's where the real gospel can meet us with hope and joy in the face of our sin.

DT: That's important. One of the greatest enemies of the Christian life is our preoccupation with ourselves, our unworthiness and our failings. Luther said that the condition of the sinner is that he is *incurvatus in se ipsum*, he's curved inward on himself. That's the bondage we face sometimes because of our brokenness. We don't look up to God and his grace—we look inside ourselves and we see our hurts, we see our failings, we see wrongs we've committed, and we feel despair.

But the gospel invites us to look away from ourselves to what God in Christ has done. It was while we were yet sinners that Christ died for us, when we were powerless that Christ died for us. Our life in Christ continues after conversion, where we're continually upheld by the faithfulness of Christ, continually upheld by the grace of Christ.

That's why Paul writes to the church at Corinth. He says in 1 Corinthians 1:30, "Christ is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification." He is all of those things. If we try to find it in ourselves, we'll only be discouraged. Sometimes this is an ongoing thing. We don't get a magical mastery over all our sins when we suddenly get the right insight or when we hear the gospel of grace. We're broken people, and that brokenness will not be completely healed until the next life.

JMF: Doesn't that mean that there's a significant difference between our faith and Christ's faith? In other words, what we tend to do is say, "My faith is weak. I want to believe what you just described, and yet I find a hard time believing it, because you don't know how bad of a sinner I am," but we're dealing with, not the quality of our faith, but Christ's own faithfulness. Our trust is in him, not in our faith.

DT: That's a vital point that isn't emphasized enough today. This was one of the great teachings of Tom Torrance. Early in his career, in 1957, he wrote an important article called

“One Biblical Aspect of the Concept of Faith.” He pointed out that in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms, there’s this continuing contrast between God who is faithful, true, stable, and unchangeable, and man, who is frail and changeable as a flower that is vital and full of life one minute and withering and blowing away the next.

The Bible encourages us to take refuge from our own frailty and instability in God, who is faithful. Tom Torrance points out that this is continued in the New Testament with the emphasis on the faithfulness of Jesus. That’s why Paul says, “When we are faithless, he is faithful. When we are vacant of faith, he is full of faith. He is faithful.”

Paul says in Galatians 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. And the life I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul was not impressed with his own faith, but he was very impressed with the faith of Jesus. Paul didn’t have the feeling that it was the vitality of his spirituality, or his faith, or his sincerity that guaranteed him a place in God, but he was very impressed with the faithfulness of Jesus. That’s what kept him going.

JMF: That’s freeing and comforting to know, that it’s entirely the love of God and his faithfulness toward us, Christ’s atoning work for us, that we depend on and rest in. We don’t have to (as Tom Torrance puts it) look over our shoulder all the time wondering if we’re doing good enough, believing well enough...

DT: That’s right. A centurion went to Jesus, his daughter is desperately ill, but he says to Jesus, “I believe, help my unbelief.” Jesus didn’t say, “Go away until you get more faith.”

JMF: Yeah. The church does sometimes...

DT: Right. But he could come to Jesus in his brokenness and his half-belief and say, “Lord, I don’t even know if I believe. My faith is so fragile that I’m just desperate.” Jesus met him right there and wonderfully healed his daughter.

JMF: You wrote an article that was published in *Princeton Theological Review* called “Torrance’s Theology of Faith.” In that, you use an illustration, along the lines of what you just said, about a drowning man.

DT: This is a vivid way of putting it. Calvin describes faith as an empty outstretched hand, and the place of a sinner before God is like that of a drowning person. That person is going down. They’re losing their life, and there’s nothing they can do to save themselves. The lifeguard can come and save that person, but the person needs to stop struggling. Instead of taking

swimming lessons at the time, he needs to relax in the arms of another who will carry him to safety.

The analogy that Tom Torrance used, which I find to be a vivid one, he employs in his *Mediation of Christ*. He said when his daughter was very young, he would sometimes walk her some place, and she would put her tiny weak hand in his and she was secure in the strong hand of her daddy. He says, “That’s the picture of faith.” It wasn’t the strength of my daughter that kept her secure, that guided her to the right places, it was simply my strong hand around her weak hand. He says, “In Christ’s faithfulness, we’re being undergirded by the faithfulness of Jesus every day of our lives.”

JMF: So getting back to...you had gone to Aberdeen, you had studied under James Torrance, and how did things go from there?

DT: It was during that time that I began to study in depth not only McLeod Campbell, but also Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. I was seeking to understand how one’s understanding of God affects one’s understanding of salvation and of the Christian life.

Aquinas has many wonderful things to say. He was one of the great theologians of the church. But when it came to his understanding of the gospel, he began to insert conditions. He said that God will meet you if you meet him halfway: “If you do what’s in you, if you try your best, if you’re sincere enough, if you confess enough, if you comply with the conditions the priest sets forth, then you can receive grace.”

Aquinas was convinced that Christ had done a great work on the cross, but he argued that God meets us halfway, and the classical definition of that position is semi-Pelagianism. Pelagius taught that we’re saved by works, but Thomas Aquinas said that’s not quite right. We’re not saved by works, we’re saved by works-plus-grace, and that’s known as semi-Pelagianism.

I wondered how he would have such an understanding that our works contribute to salvation. I wondered what in his doctrine of God led him to that position. I discovered that he was heavily influenced by Aristotle, and his understanding of God was one of absolute will, and God who decreed the way he’s going to work with the world. God can do whatever he wants, and he decided to set up a situation in which those who perform sufficiently along with his grace would receive salvation. To my mind, that didn’t square with the gospel, didn’t square with the God revealed in Christ.

Then I moved on to look at John Calvin. John Calvin has a much more Christ-centered

theology. He understood grace as being totally unconditional. He points out that when John the Baptist said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” that John was saying that because the kingdom of God has come with all of the grace that Jesus is bringing, you are enabled to live a new life in Christ. Repentance wasn’t a condition of salvation—it was a way of living out the new life in Christ.

Calvin was much more helpful because he had a Christ-centered understanding of God the Father. His doctrine of God led to a much better understanding of salvation and the gospel. The problem for Calvin, in my view, is that he had an understanding of God’s grace being limited from all eternity to certain elect ones, and those were the ones who received salvation. In that respect, he departed from his Christ-centered point of view, because you don’t find a God who only loves certain ones in Christ. You find Christ opening his arms and saying, “Come to me, *all* you that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” And, “God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son.”

Last, I looked at McLeod Campbell, and I saw that McLeod Campbell was an advance over both Aquinas and Calvin because he was thoroughly Christ-centered in his understanding of Scripture and of God.

JMF: When James Torrance retired, you ended up teaching in that position for a semester.

DT: I’m still amazed to think of that. It feels pretentious to even admit it. But after I had completed my study under Professor Torrance and I had gone back to the States, he retired and he telephoned me and invited me to come and teach his classes. I was astounded and overwhelmed, but it was a wonderful experience to come back and stand in the classroom where he had stood. Not imagining that I was in any sense his equal or a worthy replacement, but joyfully proclaiming the same gospel and the same theology and quoting him without apology, frequently.

JMF: But you only stayed one semester.

DT: Right. I could have stayed longer. They were still in the process of finding a professor, but I had the longing to get back to the States and back into the pastorate again.

JMF: You were on a leave of absence from the church.

DT: Yes. There was a church that I was serving in North Dakota at the time which graciously allowed me to have that time, and I felt I couldn’t keep them waiting, so I returned back to the States.

JMF: We're out of time, but it's been enjoyable. Thanks for being with us.

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Christ Atoned for Everyone

J. Michael Fezell: You're particularly interested in the theology of John Calvin as well as the theology of Karl Barth. Could you, in a nutshell (even though that's quite a tall order), give us a little comparison between the two?

DT: Barth, when he saw the bankruptcy of liberal theology, realized that it had nothing to give to the people. When he saw Kaiser Wilhelm's aggressive war policies in World War I, he returned to "the strange new world of the Bible," and he began to discover a transcendent God, not a domesticated little house pet that liberal theology had made him to be. He began to rediscover in the writings of Calvin and those in the Reformed tradition a tremendous emphasis on grace and a much higher view of Scripture.

Calvin has a great deal to offer the Christian church because of his strong emphasis on grace. He has a wonderful discussion in chapter 3 of *The Institutes* when he talks about the difference between legal and evangelical repentance. Legal repentance says that if you turn from your sins and if you're sorry enough, if you turn over a new leaf, then God will reward you with salvation. This is the kind of teaching that was being presented in the church before the Reformation. It's our performance, our obedience, our self-reformation that merits us or makes us eligible for God's grace.

Calvin said no, that's legal repentance, that's a denial of grace, that's a denial of what God has done in Christ. He said that a proper answer is "evangelical repentance," or gospel-based repentance: a lifelong turning from sin and growing in Christ through grace. Repentance is a gift of God. It's not something that we bring in order to earn or win God's favor. This is a wonderful emphasis on grace.

Calvin, through much of his theology, is Christ-centered. He says the only way of restoring pure doctrine is to hold up Christ and all that he is. However, when Calvin comes to the question of why all don't respond favorably to the gospel, why when the gospel is preached some say yes and others say no, and having already emphasized that it's all about grace, he said "the answer must be that some were never intended to receive grace."

Although I take issue with him there, in Calvin's defense, it was the way he was reading Scripture. He thought that Romans 9 to 11, where God says, "Shall the potter say to the clay, why hast thou made me thus... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," he thought that it

was scriptural, that God for some mysterious reason decided from all eternity that he would save A and B and C, but he would not save X, Y, and Z. This was not based on anything that God would see in their life, any goodness or performance or anything. It was his mere will.

When Barth read this part of Calvin, he said, “He has departed from Christ here! He’s not reading the gospel through the lens of Christ anymore. He’s departed from his professed Christ-centered aim.” Barth said a proper doctrine of God’s call and God’s predestination is given us in Ephesians, where Ephesians says we’re predestined *in Christ*.

If we have a Christ-centered doctrine of predestination, we don’t have a God of a double decree, a God who arbitrarily decides to save some and damn others for all eternity, but a God who loves everyone and sends Christ to die for everyone, and who underwrites everyone’s responsibilities in the life and cross of his Son. Barth represents a significant Christological correction, if you will, of John Calvin. There’s much to appreciate about Calvin; I have to disagree with his understanding of election.

Calvin did teach that Christ died for the world. If you read his commentary on John 3:16, he says world means world, the world of all lost sinners. Christ died for all sinners. He taught two incompatible doctrines: 1) That Christ died for the world and 2) that God never planned to save the non-elect, that he only planned to save a few certain ones by name.

Later, the high-Calvinists (as they are sometimes called) tried to resolve that conflict in Calvin’s teaching by making him consistent. They revised his theology to say that God only planned to save certain ones and they’re the ones Jesus died for and none other. They were the least happy with Barth, with his Christological correction of Calvin. They wanted to retain the God of *will*, the God who was pure *will* and who can do whatever he wants, and if he only wants to save some, they should consider themselves lucky and the rest of them can go to hell because they deserve it anyway.

JMF: That doesn’t reflect the will of God as he’s presented in Christ. Christ presents a completely different picture of who the Father is and what the Father’s will is.

DT: Yes. He says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father” [John 14:9]. There isn’t any other god lurking behind the back of Jesus. The Bible says in Hebrews, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our ancestors by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son whom he appointed heir of all things.” [Hebrews 1:1-2]

Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh. He is the full revelation of God. We don’t need

to fear that there's some bad news somewhere else. Jesus Christ and his unconditional love for the woman caught in adultery, his forgiveness of her in telling her to sin no more, and acceptance of a greedy tax collector, showed that God is a God of unconditional love and mercy who welcomes every sinner into his embrace to receive his salvation already won for them. Barth represents a significant advance on the thinking of Calvin (even though there's much in Calvin that is rich, and I still appreciate and learn from).

JMF: Barth is sometimes called a universalist. Where does that come from, and what is it based on?

DT: A person could go on the internet or could read some theological dictionaries and learn there that Barth is a universalist. I can say to you with full confidence that that is simply not the case.

When I was a student at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, I was privileged to take a Barth seminar taught by Geoffrey Bromiley, the co-editor of the *Church Dogmatics*, who translated most of its volumes. He knew a little bit about Barth. I chose, for my paper in his class, the topic "Is Barth a Universalist?" I went chapter and verse. I looked through all the passages I could find in the *Dogmatics* where he speaks to the subject.

Barth was convinced of a universal *atonement*. Barth believed that Jesus Christ assumed the humanity of every single human being and that when he died, they died, and when he rose, they rose. He paid the price and won a completed salvation for them. There is something in the human heart that is used to thinking, "There's something I need to do. There's a five percent or a ten percent I need to contribute. Yes, Jesus did this wonderful work on the cross and he died for my sins, but that's not quite enough."

Often, the gospel will be preached by a well-meaning evangelist in this way. They'll describe in moving terms about all that God has done in Jesus, about how Christ lived an absolutely faithful and upright life, he endured the contradiction of sinners, was always upright, how he died a brutal death and how that is a substitute for our sins and he has paid it all. But having said this is what Jesus has done, then they will say, "now this is what you must do."

JMF: In order to "get in on it."

DT: You need to turn from sin, read your Bible, go to church. All these things are enjoined upon Christians, but they're not conditions of salvation. It's not as if I have to do certain things in order to be worthy of it. I'm included in Christ because 2000 years before I was born, he lived

my life and died my death and rose in triumph. When he rose, I rose.

People who are used to thinking in those conditional terms don't understand it when Barth says that it's complete. People think, "If he says it's complete and that there's nothing that I have to do in order to earn salvation, then he's a universalist." But that's not what he's saying. He's simply saying that we can't earn the salvation. It's a completed gift in Christ.

But he also says, in many places in his *Church Dogmatics*, that if we deny the Lord who bought us, that if we refuse to acknowledge that in Christ God has done it all, then we can be nailed to that denial for eternity. For Barth, the sinner in hell is the ultimate insane person. He's denying reality. He's denying that Christ died for him. It isn't that the price hasn't been paid—it's that he's unwilling to accept it.

An illustration has sometimes been used that helps clarify what Barth is saying here. There's a story (that I've been told is true) of a man who is convicted of murder, sentenced to life in prison. Some years later, the governor decided to commute his sentence, and so the governor issued a pardon. It said so-and-so is hereby pardoned for his crimes and may be set free from prison. This pardon was brought to this prisoner. It was already completed. There was nothing he could do to earn it, or win it—his name was already on it.

But that prisoner refused. He said, "No, I've done the crime and I'll do the time. I will not accept this pardon." Legally, he could not be forced to leave that prison even though the pardon was there for him. Hell is a monument to the person who says, "My will be done, not thine, O Lord." This is what Barth is saying.

After I finished that paper and turned it into Professor Bromiley, he wrote a note on it, that it indicated a careful research of Barth typically lacking in studies on the subject. Many people have not given Barth a fair hearing because they've heard some scare story, "Oh, he's a universalist."

JMF: Cornelius Van Til comes up, a quote from him or Francis Schaeffer, when you do a Google search.

DT: Yes. Van Til was very warm toward Barth, or maybe you could say hot behind the collar. He wrote a book titled *Christianity and Barthianism*, which gives us some idea of how he saw the two standing, even though Barth believed in the Trinity, the incarnation, the substitutionary atonement of Christ and the inspiration of Scriptures, and yet he's described as being someone who has departed completely from Christianity.

Van Til was so unhappy with Barth's rejection of double predestination and his emphasis on a universal atonement that he approached Barth, I would have to say, with a closed mind. Even though he had a fine mind, it was closed when it came to Barth.

JMF: Most of us suffer from that one way or another from time to time. (laughing)

DT: I know. I'm very open to my own ideas. (laughing)

JMF: Scripturally speaking, 1 John 2:1-2 talks about how Christ's atonement reaches not just our sins, but the sins of the whole world. Colossians 1:20 talks about how God is in Christ reconciling all things.

DT: Yes. And 2 Corinthians 5:19, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

JMF: These words are not particular. World actually means world. All things means all things.

DT: That's right. Whenever you have to add italicized words to a verse in order to make it square with your theology, you're in trouble. Whenever you have to say, "God so loved the world *of the elect* that he gave his only Son." (laughing)

JMF: Even there, the definition of elect is rooted in Paul in Ephesians 1. Christ is the elect, and we all are elect in him.

DT: Right. God loves all of us equally. He cherishes each one of us equally. He, as it were, carries a picture of each of us in his wallet. Each one of us is dear to God. When he went to the cross, all our faces were on his heart. He is overwhelmed with joy so that the heavens rejoice when one sinner returns to him and receives the salvation already won for him.

JMF: Yeah. And [on the other hand] there's a refusal that we're free to make [**DT:** Yes.], like the fellow in prison—he refuses the pardon. Who can explain that? He likes it better in prison, it works better to the way he is, or something. But for whatever reason, he refused it. Maybe his sense of justice. Who knows?

DT: Sometimes it's that, but often it's a sense of pride. "I'm not going to kneel before this man [Jesus] and confess that he did what I could not do. He died my death and he paid the price. I'm a dignified person. I don't need to humble myself and accept Christ as Savior."

But the Bible talks about someone trampling underfoot the covenant. It says how should we escape if we neglect so great salvation [Hebrews 10:29]. Paul, having given this wonderful statement of the universally completed atonement, says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," and then he says, "We beseech you on behalf of God, be reconciled" [2

Corinthians 5:20]. In other words, you're already reconciled, the war is over, but you need to be reconciled in your own heart. You need to receive that which is already completed for you. So to declare a completed atonement, to say yes, when Jesus hanging from the cross said, "It is finished," does not mean universalism. It does not mean that we can say, "That's fine, then, we can just go our merry way." No. It means that we're encouraged to believe, to receive, to accept.

JMF: The passage, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation," I grew up hearing preached the opposite of its actual meaning. The idea was, How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation in the sense of neglecting to obey the rules and keep the rules that are going to give you this salvation, as opposed to how can we be saved if we neglect the very thing that has already saved us.

DT: Right. That would be, as you implied, turning that verse on its head, because it's talking about this wonderful salvation where God in Christ has done it all. A true salvation, one of grace. Jesus hanging from the cross said, "It is finished." He didn't say, "We're almost there, and if they just do their part, if they just keep enough of the laws..." He said, "It is finished." It's completed. It's far beyond our poor power to add or detract. All we can do is humbly accept it and live a life, as John McLeod Campbell says, of joyful repentance.

JMF: A lot of times we're given the impression that you are saved by grace and that's the starting point, but then if you want to maintain that position, you need to obey well enough or it will be taken away from you, you'll lose it.

DT: It's as if God pulls the old switcheroo on us.

JMF: Yeah—bait and switch.

DT: At first it's all grace. That's the good news, but now here comes the bad news. Now you're on probation for the rest of your life. Now you better do this and you better not do that, or else.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is consistent. He is always a God of mercy and always a God of grace. Grace is not just the beginning point of the Christian life. It's the continuing basis and foundation for our life in Christ. The Christian life is not based in my attitudes or my actions. It's based in the life of Christ.

The Bible describes a Christian as one who is "in Christ." Paul says if someone is in Christ, he's a new creation. He says, "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ." I'm hidden with Jesus. Paul says, "I'm seated in the heavenlies with Jesus" in Ephesians 2:6. He's given us

every blessing in Christ.

My life in God is grounded in Christ. He's the basis for my acceptance before the Father, not my performance. This was the Galatian heresy, that you begin in grace and then you maintain it by works. This is not to say that works don't matter, or that obedience doesn't matter, that living a godly life and doing the will of God is irrelevant. It's to say that it's not a basis for keeping your salvation.

JMF: So how does that work together?

DT: The answer to that lies in Christ. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says he is our sanctification. That's an interesting statement, because the other point of view that you mentioned would have to deny that, and would have to say "No, I'm my sanctification. Jesus does justification. He's the one who gets me right with God, and then I do the sanctification. I make myself holy. I make myself good enough. I keep myself in salvation."

JMF: We even use the Holy Spirit in that mix by saying the Holy Spirit leads us, but if we don't follow, then we don't have sanctification.

DT: If we understand that Christ is our righteousness and he's our sanctification, I think this helps us. When I come to God in Christ, I'm accepted for who I am in Christ, not for who I am in Dan Thimell. Not because I've been so good or worthy or earnest or consistent, but what I had to offer him, as Bill Gaither said, was brokenness and strife, and he accepted that. I'm accepted *for who I am in Christ*. In Christ, I'm accepted by the Father. In Christ, I stand holy before the Father. I stand pure before the Father in his humanity.

Justification, we're sometimes told, it's "just as if" I had never sinned. A better definition is: to be justified is to be accepted for who I am *in Christ*. Because I was there in him. My humanity was carried by him throughout his life and in his death on the cross. I got this from James Torrance, and I'm unashamedly using that as a central point in my own belief. To be justified is to be accepted for who I am in Christ—and then to be sanctified is what? It's to *become* who I am in Christ.

The amazing good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ is your future because he's your past. My whole life is enclosed in Christ. I'm hidden with Christ in God. I'm not tremblingly tiptoeing on the precipice every day of my Christian life. Rather, I'm living joyfully in Christ, realizing that sometimes I let him down, sometimes I struggle with the same old sins, sometimes I look inside me and see ugly attitudes, sometimes I say hurtful things, sometimes I'm not as

faithful as I ought to be to my calling.

But when we are faithless, he is faithful, Paul says, for he cannot deny himself. I'm included in him, and he's faithful. One day I will stand before the Father and he will throw his arms around me and say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," because my life was included in Jesus.

JMF: When Paul says that this new life is hidden in Christ, he means what he says. It's hidden even from us. Most of the time, we don't see it. It reminds me of a passage Paul mentions: we look in the mirror, though we see a poor reflection. We don't see who we really are in Christ—we see what you were just describing: a person who falls short, a person who is weak, the person who doesn't measure up. But Scripture assures us that Christ has already made us new. He has hidden that new person in Christ, waiting to be revealed at the time when we see him face to face and we see ourselves, really, as he's made us to be in him, face to face for the first time.

DT: Right. If we want to see who we are in Christ, we need to look at Christ. The mistake is, we look at ourselves, and then we get discouraged. This is what it means to walk by faith and not by sight. We're always tempted to walk by sight, and we look in that mirror, and we look a little too closely in that mirror. We get depressed and discouraged, and Satan whispers in our ear, "You're not worthy of the gospel. You're not worthy of being a minister, you're not worthy of being a Christian." And we're *not* worthy.

JMF: Right.

DT: When the prodigal son comes home to the father and says, "I'm no more worthy to be called your son," the father is saying, in effect, "Whoever said this was about worthiness? You never were worthy, but you're my boy, and I love you. I've always loved you, and my forgiveness is here for you." We don't walk by sight, but by faith in Christ. The secret for living the Christian life is to abide in Christ. To look in Christ, to gaze on Christ, to live our lives out of the resources we have in Christ. Paul says, "I am crucified with Christ. It may not look like it, but I am. I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, I do live. It's a vital, vibrant life, but the life I live, I live by the faith of the Son of God. I live by his faith, and he loved me and he gave himself for me. I'm his." [Galatians 2:20, expansive paraphrase]

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Christ's Completed Work

J. Michael Fezell: Why do most Christians seem to think that Christianity is primarily about right behavior?

DT: There are probably a number of reasons. One is that a lot of the preaching they're exposed to assumes that. A lot of preaching is works religion. It's advice on how to be a better parent, how to be a better father, how to be a more effective Christian, how to pray better. All these how-to sermons leave one to think that Christian life is mostly about performance.

God does care about the life we live. He does care about the kind of parenting that we engage in and these things. But when we put the focus on the *how*, we make it look like Christianity is a matter of performance. We should be focusing on *who*. We should be focusing on *who is Christ?* What has he done for us? How has he included us in his life? Then we should see that as a basis for the Christian life.

Another reason that most Christians are focusing on behavior is that we live in a performance-based society. Raises are based on performance. Relationships are based on performance. We're used to that. It's in the air we breathe, it's in the water we drink. It's natural for us to interpret the ways of God based on the ways of humanity.

JMF: There's a difference between salvation, which is by grace, and behavior, while it's important, is not what our salvation is based on.

DT: Right. The life we live is a *response* to grace—it's not a condition of grace. It's not, "If I live well enough, then God will be nice to me, he'll be good to me, great things will happen to me." But rather, because God in Christ has done it all and continues to present me acceptable to the Father through what he has done for me, that's the basis for my Christian life.

The behavior of the Christian life, the obedience that we're called to engage in, in the Christian life, can only be carried out through God's grace — only through the presence of Christ in my life can I live the life God calls me to live. It's appropriate to preach on living the Christian life so long as we're Christ-centered. Paul Scherer, the great Lutheran preacher, a generation ago told divinity students at Yale, "When you're preaching, wherever you are in your text, make it across country, as fast as ever you can, to Christ." I think we need more Christ-centered preaching.

If Christ is the Alpha and Omega, if he is the basis for our life in God, then why do we try to

base it anywhere else in our preaching? If we offer all kinds of advice on how to live, and fail to ground it in Christ, we're preaching works religion.

JMF: What do we mean, by grounding it in Christ? What most Christians tend to get from the kind of preaching you're talking about is: "Christ is the role model, I need to measure up to the way Christ is"—so that is centered in Christ from that perspective. "How do we live like Christ did in order to be accepted by God?"

DT: That's where the model is centered in Christ but not really the way of living, the secret of living the Christian life. Then it becomes "he did his part, I do my part."

JMF: Right.

DT: In the Bible, Christ is not simply an example. He *is* an example; he has left an example that we should follow in his steps, Peter writes [1 Peter 2:21]. But Christ is also the basis for our life. He's also the one through whom I can live the Christian life. Christ is the author and the finisher of our faith. He's the one who begins our Christian life and he's the one who completes it. Paul says, "I'm crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me. And the life that I go on living in the flesh and my humanity, I live by the faith of the Son of God" [Galatians 2:20].

Christ is that living reality in my life. It's not like he's standing far off with his arms crossed, waiting to see if we're good enough for the next goodie to fall from heaven, but rather, he's my constant companion — the source of my life, the source of all the love I need, the source of the faith I need, the kindness I need, the faithfulness I need, the persistence I need.

JMF: We tend to think that if I am being faithful and I am being patient, then Christ is living in me. But if I'm not being that way, if I'm not measuring up to the standards of God, then Christ isn't living in me. So unless I'm measuring up, Christ isn't in me, and I should measure up better, in order for Christ to be living in me. What's wrong with that?

DT: The Christian life is not an on-again, off-again kind of thing like that. The Bible describes the Christian life as entering into eternal life — that he who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. We pass from death into life when we come to Christ. Eternal life is, by definition, one that is unbroken, that goes on forever.

God says, "There's nothing that can cause you to fall out of my wagon. You're mine. I'm committed to you, and the life I've given to you is for keeps. You're always going to be my boy, you're always going to be my daughter, and nothing can change that." The life we live is not an

anxious life. It's not a nervous life or a fearful life. It should be a joyful life because God in Christ has done it all, and he's going to get me safely there, and whether I'm up or I'm down, God will continue to live in me.

In the traditional English wedding ceremony, marriage is described as a covenant, not a contract. A contract would be, "If you perform well enough, then I'll perform well enough. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." Many people, even though they go through the marriage ceremony and promise undying love, in fact, see it as a contract. When the other person pleases them less than someone else, when the other person lets them down or they get sick or become disabled, they say, "I didn't love them anymore. I needed to find someone else to love."

But in the marriage ceremony, we're promising to love the person for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part. It's an unconditional promise. How can we make that kind of unconditional promise to a fallible person, a weak person, a frail person?

How can we as weak, frail persons make that kind of promise? The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians 5 when he says, "Love one another as Christ loved the church, who loved her and gave himself for her." It's the sacrificial love of Christ that is the basis for our life together in marriage. It's through Christ that I can forgive when my spouse says something hurtful or does something that's not right. I can be forgiving because God in Christ is forgiving through me. This model of a marriage is the same way that God treats us in all of life. He treats us unconditionally. He loves us for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health.

Most people know the great love chapter — 1 Corinthians 13. It says, "Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." We often include it in the marriage ceremony. One time I read that passage in a wedding ceremony, and one of the groomsmen came up to me afterwards and said, "That was a really cool poem, where did you get it?" I said, "It was from the Bible, and it's describing the love that God intends to be the basis for marriage."

Having made these wonderful statements about love, we need to ask ourselves, "What does the Bible say about God?" The Bible says, "God is love." He's the only source of love. Since God is love, I can re-read 1 Corinthians 13 and say, "God hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things. God's love never ends." That's the basis for the Christian life — an enduring love that persists despite my weakness, my failings. Sometimes I don't feel particularly pious, sometimes I don't feel as devoted to God, sometimes I do things that let him down, that I'm

embarrassed about, but God continues to persist in his forgiving love, and continues to say, “You’re mine, I married you forever, this is for keeps.”

JMF: So the gospel is about a relationship — the good news is who God has made you to be in Christ, not good news about a potential bonus if you meet certain requirements.

DT: Right. Christ completed that work. He said from the cross, “It is finished.” We are offered a relationship based on what Christ has already done. James Torrance used to say, “Faith is the dawning awareness that God in Christ has done it all. He’s completed it. He’s lived our life and died our death and risen in triumph, and I was there in him when he lived and died and rose again.” It’s a completed gift. He offers me a relationship based on his completed work. My life in God is a relationship.

There’s a typical pattern in the letters of Paul. Paul moves always from grace in Christ to responsibilities in Christ. The first half of his letters talk about the wonderful things that God has done in Christ. So you have in Ephesians, “We’re predestined in Christ, we’re seated in the heavenlies with Christ, God has given us every spiritual blessing in Christ.” It’s already ours in Christ. No one can ever take that inheritance from us.

Then he moves on to saying, “Husbands, love your wives. Bosses, watch out for your workers, take care of your workers.” There are responsibilities that flow from that, but I carry those out through my life in Christ — not in order to *get* it, but because I *have* it.

JMF: He’s reminding us, “Here’s who you are in Christ — because you are a child of God, because you are in Christ — therefore act like it.” He never says, “Act this way and then God will do such and such for you.” It’s always, “Here’s who you are, so act like that, behave like that.”

DT: Right.

JMF: The behavior doesn’t change or affect who you already are in Christ by what Christ has already done.

DT: Right. A good loving parent may have a child who disappoints her and at times does things that she would not want her to do, which bring great pain to her heart, but she says, “I still love him. He’s still my son.” God is like that, only far more so. God is the source of true unconditional love that never ends. Sometimes a parent will finally, after repeated disappointments, give up and throw in the towel. But God never does. The Bible says, “Nothing shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Who is he that condemns? Christ has

already done it all” [Romans 8].

JMF: The parable of the prodigal son is an excellent illustration of that. Within the story, the son has done... you can hardly think of worse things in that culture to do. He’s repudiated his father’s fatherhood...

DT: That’s right – he said, “I can’t wait till you die, give me the money now.” That’s pretty crass.

JMF: And he’s blown the inheritance... he’s wasted everything.

DT: Right. On terrible living.

JMF: But the father never says, “You’re not my son anymore.” Even though the kid, when he prepares his little speech, he in effect is saying, “I know I’m not your son anymore. I just want to be one of the servants so I can get something to eat.” He’s still selfishly looking out for an angle. He’s not even repentant in that sense — he’s looking for an angle. “Father, I have sinned, but...” His take on that is, “Just let me be one of the servants so I can get a meal.” The father doesn’t even listen to his speech.

DT: Right. He says, “It’s not about performance. It’s not about what you can do, because you can’t do it.”

JMF: It’s about who you are, because that’s who you are.

DT: “This my son was lost and now he’s found.” “This my son.” He’s always been my son, you’re still my son, we’re going to throw a party because it never was about your worthiness or your performance.

We can picture him...he’s off in the far country breaking his father’s heart every day by the way he’s living. We can picture the father every day going out on the porch and scanning the horizon, seeing if that’s the day his boy is coming home, because he’s never stopped loving him, never stopped having a place for him in his heart.

JMF: Yet, all of us can identify with the older brother who says, “This is the most unfair dumb thing in the world.”

DT: Right.

JMF: And we can hardly identify with the younger son.

DT: That’s because we’re far more aware of the sins and failings of those around us, than we are of our own.

JMF: Yeah.

DT: We're experts in the faults of those around us.

JMF: If we are experts in our own, we're so depressed we can't believe that something like that could be true.

DT: Right. In both cases, whether we're looking at others or looking at ourselves, we should be looking at Christ. That's the problem.

JMF: Which is why Christ told the parable.

DT: Exactly. Jesus said one day,

Two people went to the temple to pray, and the one person prayed, "Lord I'm really cool. I thank you that I'm not like this wretched sinner over here. You know, I've always kept the rules." And the other man said, "Lord, I'm a sinner. I have blown it. I have done terrible things, and Lord be merciful to me, a sinner. I have nothing to offer you, I just ask you for mercy." [Luke 18]

Jesus interpreted that story. He said that the second man, not the first, went home right with God. It wasn't performance. It was receiving mercy.

JMF: Yeah. Robert Capon talks about that in his book about parables. He says the problem is that we love that parable and we say that's beautiful, I like that. But we don't want the forgiven admitted sinner to come back the following week with the same prayer. We want him to come back with the other prayer that now says, "I've been doing all the right things."

DT: Yep. But we never graduate beyond our need for grace. We never stop needing God's mercy. We live our lives by his mercy and by his grace, by the life of Christ in us.

JMF: We feel guilty doing that. Because, after all, *we* wouldn't forgive someone, and we don't forgive ourselves, for doing the same thing over and over.

DT: Right. There's a limit. We've had it, you know? That's the way we treat other people. We might be very understanding and forgiving for many, many times, but there comes a point where that line is crossed, and we give up. But when Jesus compares humans and God, he'd say, "If you, being human, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven..." God's love is far greater, it's much more than ours. So much more, that it's unconditional. The Bible says the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance. He never takes them back.

JMF: Aren't we afraid to rest in that? We've sinned, we know it, we're full of guilt, shame, doubt, frustration, and anxiety, and we are afraid to say, "This is already taken care of. I don't need to dwell on this and worry about it... I need to move on and trust in and rest in the grace

and forgiveness of God and in my relationship with him, which is separate from the consequences of what I might have done as far as having to ‘reap what I have sown’ in the sense of sin hurts.”

DT: There are consequences, and God doesn’t always protect us from the consequences of our actions. If we drive drunk, we may cause an accident, and that accident won’t be reversed the minute that we’re sorry. There are still those consequences, but God has forgiven us.

JMF: We have to learn that salvation is different from the natural consequences of our sins. We’re going to experience those, but we don’t need to fear that God has dumped us, given up on us, forsaken us, and that our salvation is in jeopardy because of the sin. That’s where we mix the two...

DT: I think we’re always projecting our human experience onto God and thinking that he is like people we know. And just as other people finally lose their temper and lose their patience...

JMF: And especially me.

DT: Right, especially myself. God must be like that. We’ve also learned that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Beware of the Bernie Madoffs who promise you an enormous return on your money. So if somebody comes along and says, “God will love you no matter what. God’s mercy is there for you — no matter what you have done or do, it is still there for you,” we say, “Wait a minute. You’re feeding me a lie. It sounds astonishing, it’s scandalous.”

Paul described the gospel as a scandal, a stumbling block. It was a scandal to both Jews and Greeks for different reasons. The gospel surprises us, collides with our common-sense understanding of things. Often, we’re far more aware of our failings than we are of the goodness of God, far more aware of our sins than we are of his mercy. So we need to look away from ourselves to Jesus.

It’s remarkable, when you look at the time when Christ was arrested and Judas and Peter both, in essence, committed the same sin — they both betrayed Jesus within hours of each other. One of them despaired and took his own life and the other, Peter, returned to the Lord and received his mercy. There was no basis for Peter to be forgiven — it was blatant what he did. He didn’t deserve another chance, he even swore, saying, “I’ve never met him, I’ve never known that man,” when he was asked “surely he was with that Galilean.” But Jesus loved him. He never gave up on Peter. He never gives up on you or me.

When bad things happen

JMF: When something bad happens, we tend to think, “This is evidence that God is punishing me for my failure to measure up. He’s against me and turned his face from me, and what hope do I have, because obviously I’m under his curse?” Sometimes that’s what someone at church tells you — there is no causeless curse, you know.

DT: God’s getting you. He’s getting even with you here.

JMF: Right.

DT: Sometimes we have that kind of a God, who’s a mean ogre with a big stick or something. It’s because we’re so focused on our own sin that we fail to look at God through the eyes of Christ. We fail to look at him through Christ. We substitute another god for the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

JMF: So what do we do with the bad things that happen to us? How do we cope with that in terms of who we are in Christ?

DT: That’s a crucial question, because as Jesus said, “In this world you have tribulation.” Sometimes we’ve been so interested to get people to accept Christianity or to come to Christ that we make promises that the gospel does not promise. “Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” “Come to Jesus and you’ll never have a difficulty. He’ll take care of everything. You’ll never have a problem, never have an adversity, never have a sickness.”

But this is not true. Paul, the greatest missionary this world has ever seen, the author of the most books of the New Testament, said that he had a terrible experience, a painful experience — there was this jagged thorn in his flesh and he kept praying to God, “Take it away.” God said, “No, my grace is sufficient for you, for my grace is made perfect in weakness.” Sometimes God says that to us. He says, “yes, you’ve experienced brokenness, you’re experiencing a terrible thing that’s happening to you in your life and you are asking, ‘God, just take it away from me.’” But God says, “That’s not my plan.”

In my own life, my late wife, Adrienne, was battling cancer. She was a godly woman, a humble Christ-centered person. When we found out she had cancer, we did everything we could. We took her to the doctors, we tried medical treatment, but there was no treatment for her cancer. We prayed, knowing that God had healed many people and that there are verses in Scripture urging us to pray to God if we’re sick and ask for healing. So we prayed over and over again for healing.

In the course of my wife's illness, she had to have surgery seeking to remove that cancer, and they removed one of her eyes. The hope was that that would contain the cancer, but it didn't. Later, it was clear to the doctors that there was no cure for her.

One day when I was praying, asking for healing, I didn't hear an audible voice, but I heard an inner voice that I believed was the Lord speaking to me saying, "Dan, you've asked for healing over and over again for her." He says, "But you've never asked what is my purpose in all of this. I want you to know, I could heal this cancer now, but she would continue to be sightless in one eye, she would continue to be less than whole in this life. Or I could heal her completely. And I'm going to heal her completely."

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. But God has a mercy that sometimes is a severe mercy. Sometimes it involves taking us through pain, through difficult experiences. God can deepen our love for him, deepen our compassion for others, and deepen our understanding of life when we walk through these painful experiences with Jesus, who continues to have nail-scarred hands.

The humanity of Jesus not only means that I'm included in Christ's life now, and that he represents me to the Father and all those good things. It also means he continues to bear our scarred humanity. Jesus, who appears to the disciples after he rose again, still had scars in his hands. My Jesus has scars. He tells Thomas, who doubted that Jesus had really risen again, "Behold the nail prints in my hands." In other words, you'll know me by my scars.

Jesus understands. God understands our pain. He understands our difficulties. He knows about our scars. He walks through those scarring episodes of life with us, brings us comfort, brings us mercy, but doesn't always give us that detour. God doesn't guarantee us an untroubled passage from here to heaven, only a safe arrival.

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The Trinity, United With Humanity

J. Michael Fezell: The doctrine of the Trinity is something that, for many Christians, is an abstract thing... it's "I don't know much about it, and what difference does it make?" What difference *does* it make?

DT: The Trinity is tremendously relevant to everyday life. It's true that some people, because it seems abstract or puzzling, can't get their minds around it and so they say it's an article of faith, and leave it at that. A member of my congregation that I served in southern California was raised in a Unitarian church, where they don't believe in the deity of Christ or of the Holy Spirit — there's simply God out there who made everything. But once she discovered the joy of a Trinitarian understanding of God, she said to me, "God seems so much more personal to me now."

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that Jesus Christ is not an *emissary* of God — he's God himself, condescending to step into our life, take our humanity upon himself, to experience our pain, struggles, temptations, and challenges. Through it all he was faithful to his Father, faithful to his purposes, all the way to dying and rising again for us. So the first thing the Trinity does, is it makes God personal to us.

Another key aspect of the Trinity is that the Trinity preserves for us an understanding of God as *love*. If God is a solitary being for all eternity and then created a world, how can we understand that God would be loving? We can understand that he might decide to treat us in a way that we might think is nice, but can God know what is love, if he's a solitary being? But the Bible says that the Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. There's a relationship of love, of union and communion between God the Father and God the Son that has been going on since all eternity past. The Holy Spirit participates in this tri-unity of love with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit experience. The Trinity is the foundation for the doctrine of the love of God.

It's also important for the knowledge of God. If God had not come to us as a human, in Christ, then how do we know what God is like? Jesus may have said some inspiring things about God which we all like, but how do we know he's right? Maybe someone else would come along with a different picture of God, and who's to say? But if Jesus is God himself come among us to open his heart to us, then God becomes personal, touchable, believable. So the Trinity is a very practical teaching.

Sometimes we get caught up in concepts that don't help us. A good way to talk about the Trinity is as a communion of three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who all share the same reality from all eternity. They're inseparable: you never have one without the other two. It's a communion of three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It's not as if God was two persons and then at Christmas suddenly God morphs into three. God always was three, and God the Son becomes man the first Christmas.

JMF: For most people, you can understand Father, Son, and Spirit. But the idea that Father, Son, and Spirit are one God is troubling. How can people be helped with that?

DT: We know they are one because it's declared many times in Scripture. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one. He who has seen me has seen the Father." He was declaring a one-ness between himself and the Father. How can they be one? One powerful teaching that the church has had for many centuries goes back to the Cappadocian divines—the doctrine of *perichoresis*. *Perichoresis* is saying that the three persons of the Trinity interpenetrate each other. They mutually indwell each other.

This isn't just some neat idea that some theologian thought up in an ivory tower one day. Jesus said, "The Father dwells in me and I dwell in the Father." There's a mutual indwelling, and when we understand that the Father, Son, and the Spirit are spiritual or spirits, we can see how they could interpenetrate each other, or mutually indwell each other. In this way, among other things, you not only have the oneness, they all interpenetrate the same reality, but we also can understand how when we encounter one person of the Trinity, God the Father, or God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, we're really up against all three. You can't separate them.

JMF: There's also the term "hypostatic union." How does that fit with who Christ is and who we are in him?

DT: The hypostatic union refers to the union of God with humanity in the Incarnation. Some people think of Jesus as being God in a man, and they explain the puzzle of the incarnation of Jesus being God and man by saying, "The Spirit of God came and descended on Jesus, and that's the incarnation." That is *not* the incarnation. We Christians believe, based on Scripture, that God dwells in *us*, but we're not an Incarnation, we're not the Incarnation. The Incarnation was a union of the person of the Word, Jesus (as we call him since his life on earth), with humanity.

This is an amazing idea — that God united himself with the human race. There are some challenges to that, because we don't normally think of ourselves as being one bundle of

humanity. We tend to think of, I am an individual, you're an individual, you have your problems, I have mine. We think of ourselves as independent of one another, as autonomous actors. There is a sense of individual identity and individual responsibility, but the Bible also sees us as being part of one bundle of humanity so that what affects one affects all. The Bible says about the sin of Adam, "One died, therefore all died."

When Christ united himself with humanity, he didn't unite himself with a particular man who lived in Judea long ago—he united himself with the humanity of the entire human race. That's why sometimes we refer to this doctrine as "the all-inclusive humanity," because he includes all of us in his humanity, so that his representation of us is not just a legal one, where we agree to let him represent us, perhaps, or God agrees to treat him as if he is standing in for us, but he includes us in himself, so that what happens to him happens to us, so that he has lived our life, but we were there in him. He's died our death, but when he died, we died. When he rose, we rose.

This is why Paul writes to the church in Colossians chapter 3: "Set your sight on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." You have died. Christ died long ago, but when he died, you died. We're included in his humanity.

JMF: If we're already in union with Christ, he's already drawn us into himself, and as part of humanity, we're seated with Christ at the right hand of the Father, our life is hidden with him and so on. How does *repentance* work with that? If we're already included with Christ, where does repentance come in, and what is its role in the context of that relationship?

DT: We often think of repentance as being a condition of grace. We sometimes say, for example, "That person did something mean to me, and I'm not going to forgive him unless he's sorry and unless he changes." That's the way we're used to treating other people. But the amazing news of the gospel is that God doesn't say, "After you repent, after you change, then I'll forgive you."

If we could transform ourselves, if we could turn over a new leaf, then Christ didn't need to come — he should have just come to earth to congratulate us. In fact, we're not able to repent unless he comes in and transforms us. On one hand, Christ already lived our life, he took us up into his life, but on the other hand, we're now called to respond to the gospel. We're called to say *yes*. We're called to say, "I confess Christ died for me. I confess: when he died, I died."

Repentance is a lifelong process of becoming who I already am in Christ. Repentance, rather than being a condition of grace, is a response to it.

JMF: We often talk about participation in the life of Christ. How does that work?

DT: Participation is a relational term. It's talking about living in a relationship with Christ. The Bible records that "God created man, male and female, created he them." Adam and Eve's being as humans was as a being-in-relation. They were created as male-and-female, not just as a male over here and a female over there, but as persons in relation.

We're relational beings. God is a relational being. God is a God of relationships as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We're invited to participate, to live in a relationship with One who has already included us in himself in his life, death, and resurrection. We're called to say *yes*, we're called to believe, and yet paradoxically, our believing is a gift of God. Our believing is a sharing in the faith of Jesus. "The life I live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." [Galatians 2:20]

JMF: When we talk about faith being a gift of God, is it a gift that he gives to only some people? Not everybody believes, so is it a gift he just gives to some, or is it a gift he gives to all, and they don't accept the believing or the faith? How does that work?

DT: This is one of the oldest questions that the Christian church has discussed — and debated for many centuries. Some have said, "God decides who gets the gift of faith, and if you're predestined to believe, you'll believe, and that's that." Others have said. "No, God doesn't have anything to say in it. All he does is lay the offer out, and then we decide whether to believe." Both sides have an element of truth, and they're both mistaken.

It is true that faith is a gift of God. It's God's grace. It's not because I was pious enough or good enough to make the right decision, make the right move, have the right attitude to God. It's also not that God pushed certain buttons so that some people believe and become Christians, and the others don't.

If I believe, it is because God has granted me faith, but I need to embrace the faith that he offers me. There's no way around that. If I become a Christian, it is because God draws me. The Bible says, "No one comes to me unless the Father draws him." So if I come to faith in Christ, it's because the Father drew me. He wooed me. Augustine says, "God is the infallible seducer." He draws us to himself. I became a Christian when I was seven years old. I went for it and confessed Christ as my Savior. But it was the Holy Spirit who drew me to God at that time.

What about those who don't believe? If God gives faith, and other people don't believe, God must not have given them faith. At that point we have to say, "No, that's not quite right." The Bible has passages that make clear that there still is the responsibility to believe, to say yes. For example, in 2 Corinthian 5 when Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." On one hand, that's complete — grace is already there for us. We're already reconciled, in that sense, by what Christ has done. But in the next verse he says, "Therefore, we beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." So we are called to be reconciled. We're summoned to believe. We're summoned to say yes. We're summoned to take up our crosses and follow him.

The Bible holds us accountable. It says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" And, "He who believes in the Son of God has eternal life and he who believes not does not have eternal life" in John 3. So I summarize that question about how some believe, and some not, by saying that in the Bible, if I believe, blame God, if I don't believe, blame me. If it looks like I'm trying to have my cake and eat it too, that's simply the witness of Scripture.

JMF: Some people say that it's dangerous to put too much emphasis on grace, and that the primary emphasis needs to be on godly living, and grace is a part of that. But if you put too much emphasis on grace, then it's dangerous, and you'll fall into antinomianism. There seems to be a great fear of that among some people.

I've seen talk shows where there are people representing various streams of Christianity, and some have said, "If we take away hell as a means of scaring people into doing the right thing, then everything will fall apart. We've got to have some kind of a hammer to hold over people's heads to make them behave right," as though that's the primary issue. [They think that if] you get carried away with all this grace talk, everybody's going to run amuck and do what's right in their own eyes.

DT: It's well-meant as a genuine pastoral concern, that whatever is preached should have a good impact on people's lives. I understand that. At the same time, I get concerned when we make pragmatic concerns our primary criterion. We're looking for "what works." We want to have leverage to use on people so we can get the results we want. We'll preach hellfire to scare people into living the right life so they don't do bad things.

The Bible does speak about last judgment. It speaks about hell as being the destiny of those who reject Christ. But when we use that lever and say "If you step out of line you'll go to hell,"

we not only are contradicting the gospel (which declares that it's by grace that we're saved, not by works), we're also damaging people's spiritual lives by creating a mean God who is not a God you'd want to draw near, but an angry God with fierce streaks on his face who detests the individual. The pastoral consequences of that are bad.

Sometimes we want to use levers with people to try to raise money for the church. We'll say, "If you give, then God will give you even more money back. If you give \$100, God will give \$1000. If you give \$200, he'll give a million, and so forth." And it seems to work! People say, "That would be great! I've got some financial difficulty. I'll give." But this makes God into more of a Coke machine than a loving Father — a God who you have to make deals with — a God that you have to connive with financially.

But God loves to give good gifts to his children. We don't have anything to offer him. He has all things already. When we get concerned, when we use pragmatic concerns to determine theology, we always end up damaging the people's relationship with God, damaging their understanding of God. It makes them draw further away from God rather than be closer to him.

JMF: In the Old Testament, there are examples of where Israel disobeys and God sends a plague or a punishment on them. How are we to understand that in terms of the New Testament, when we find Christ presenting God as full of grace, mercy, and compassion? When we find something bad happening in our lives, we look at the Old Testament and we think "God is sending this punishment on me because I've sinned." How are we to look at that?

DT: You'd get different answers if you asked various people. This is an area that we don't hear about much nowadays, but to my mind the Bible speaks of not a spectator God, but an active God — a God who is involved in life. The Bible says, "In all things God works for good to those who love him." God is working in all things. God was working in the thorn in the flesh that he sent to Paul. Calvin explained that by saying that there are two causes behind things that happen, there's a divine cause, and then there could be what he calls a secondary cause.

Some individual might go to harm someone and attack that person. God didn't push a button and tell that person, "Go and attack that person." But God is nevertheless working in that event to bring about good. He's not stumped by history, he's not stumped by what evil people try to do. The classic example of that is the cross, where the Bible makes clear that Jesus was crucified by the set foreknowledge and purpose of God. Evil men perpetrated it, and they're held accountable. God didn't push a button and tell them to murder Jesus. But God, in his providence,

takes the worst thing that could happen and turns it into the best thing that could happen. The execution of the innocent Son of God is turned into our eternal salvation.

When bad things happen, God is working for our good. The Bible says, “Whom the Lord loves, he chastens.” We need to ask God to give us a teachable heart when we’re going through a difficult time. We can ask for help, we can ask for deliverance, but we can also ask, “Lord, what are you trying to show me through this?”

JMF: Are you working on any projects right now that we can look forward to?

DT: I’ve been working on a book on our life in Christ. That’s been a tremendously exciting topic for me, because all of our lives as Christians are taken up into life of Christ, and I want people to see what a difference that makes for their marriage, what a difference it makes for their life before God as they’re trying to grow in godliness, what a difference it makes for the things we’re called to do as Christians — to see that in all things we’re called to abide in Christ and draw from the life of Christ in all that we do.

The Bible says, “Christ in you is the hope of glory.” Paul says, “I can do all things through Christ.” One Christian was telling a friend that this was his life’s motto — “I can do all things through Christ.” The friend looked at him, scowled, and said, “You mean you can’t do anything without Jesus?” He said, “Yeah, I can go out and make a big mess of things and stumble around,” he says, “but if I want to do something worthwhile in life, I need to do it through Christ.” I’m working on that as a project.

JMF: Many people look at the concept of “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” as being from the perspective of “I will ask Christ to help me with everything I do,” and help me do this, help me do that. As long as I’m asking Christ to help me do everything, then I am participating with Christ, I’m doing all things through Christ who strengthens me. But if I don’t pray that and I’m not thinking about that, then I’m not living in Christ — so therefore you need to be praying the way I’m praying, otherwise Christ isn’t in your life.

DT: That turns a good promise of Scripture into a formula. I don’t think that’s the point. We have died. Our life is hidden with Christ in God. I am included in Christ, and I can’t extract myself from that union. I am intertwined with the life of Christ in my life.

JMF: That’s the foundation of our hope, isn’t it? If any point rested on how well we do something and it wasn’t entirely by the grace of God (what he’s already done and made of us in Christ), then that’s the point where we’ll fall short, and it will all fall apart.

DT: Right. I also think that we need to be careful that we don't bring in Jesus as a means to our ends. You know, I can do all things through Christ, so I'm going to ask Jesus to help me with my plan or my project. We need to open ourselves to the Lord and ask, "What are *you* trying to do in my life?" Then we need to depend on him to help us accomplish *his* purposes.

JMF: Yeah. It's like praying, "Lord, please make the Cubs win."

DT: Exactly. Let me hit a home run.

JMF: Let the slot machine hit the jackpot.

DT: Exactly.

JMF: As we finish up, what is something that you would most want people to know about God?

DT: I would want them to know that in Christ, God is closer to them than the air they breathe, and that God loves you tenderly, unconditionally, and he is ready right now, right where you are, to take you to a new level in your life. He's already forgiven you, he invites you to trust in his forgiveness, he's already secured for you a place in heaven. Believe it. Live your life out of Christ and spend your journey with Jesus — enjoy and entrust knowing that God will never, ever let you down.

JMF: That makes me have to ask this — What if I'm a rat? How do I cope with my rat-ness in light of what you just said?

DT: If you're a rat, you're a part of a rat race, because all of us have some rattiness to us. [Oliver] Cromwell once was having someone paint a picture of himself, and the painter was painting a rather idealized portrait. Cromwell stopped the artist and said, "Paint me warts and all." The Bible paints us warts and all. God knows those flaws. He knows flaws that you and I have, that we don't even realize, and he still cherishes us. He loves us dearly, like a loving father carries a picture of his son in his wallet. God, as it were, carries a picture of us in his wallet. He knows all about those flaws, and he still loves us and cherishes us infinitely.

JMF: That's what makes the gospel good news. Not the hope that maybe someday I'll measure up to some kind of perfection, but the fact of what Christ has already done.

DT: You're already loveable, and he wants to transform you into the image of Christ, and if it takes 1000 years, that's fine. When he's through transforming you into the image of Christ, Christian, he won't love you any more than he does right now.

JMF: Thanks for being with us again.

DT: I've enjoyed it, thanks for the opportunity.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. Daniel Thimell, Associate Professor of Theological and Historical Studies at Oral Roberts University. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included*.

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