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# Atonement and Anthropology: T. F. Torrance's Doctrine of Atonement as a Test Case

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**Abstract:** How does one go about drawing anthropological conclusions from Christology? One approach is to ask the question, “What account of human nature best makes sense of a particular account of atonement, X?” In order to show the fruitfulness of this approach I turn to T.F. Torrance’s doctrine of atonement. I argue that the account of human nature that best comports with T.F. Torrance’s doctrine of atonement is one in which human nature is an abstract universal that is instantiated by Christ and participated in by all other human beings. Additionally, I suggest that this approach might be fruitful for drawing anthropological conclusions from other accounts of atonement.

Christological anthropology is the approach to theological anthropology according to which Christology warrants important claims about what it means to be human.<sup>1</sup> In recent years this approach to theological anthropology has received increased attention from a number of theologians, both analytic and non-analytic.<sup>2</sup> As constructive accounts of CA continue to be provided several questions remain. First, should we affirm that human persons need to be understood Christologically?<sup>3</sup> Second, how do we draw anthropological conclusions from Christology? Third, what anthropological conclusions do we arrive at when we adopt this approach? This brief essay

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 21. Hereafter, Christological Anthropology will be abbreviated as: “CA.”

<sup>2</sup> As examples of analytic and non-analytic approaches see: Oliver Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 51–70; Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster: John Knox, 2001), 183–264.

<sup>3</sup> I assume the first question can be answered positively and I will not attempt to provide reasons for why this is so. Still, one can find arguments for a positive answer in the following works: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2.43*; Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology*, 35–67.

attempts to offer an exploratory response to the latter two questions. I suggest that one way to draw anthropological conclusions from Christology is by asking the question, “What metaphysical account of human nature best makes sense given the doctrine of atonement, X?”<sup>4</sup> Let us call this the “Anthropology and Atonement Approach,” or AAA, for short. I contend that AAA can help shed light on the metaphysics of human nature.

In order to show the potential fruitfulness of AAA I turn to T.F. Torrance’s doctrine of atonement as a test-case for the kind of results AAA might deliver. Our examination of Torrance’s doctrine of atonement leads to the conclusion that the account of human nature which best comports with Torrance’s doctrine of atonement is one in which there is an abstract universal human nature that Christ alone instantiates, and that the rest of humanity participates in this abstract universal human nature.<sup>5</sup> My argument for this claim proceeds as follows. First, I briefly expost Torrance’s doctrine of atonement, noting two crucial features of his account. Second, I suggest three categories for understanding the metaphysics of Christ’s human nature. Third, I argue that Torrance’s doctrine of atonement best fits with the view that human nature is an abstract universal. I conclude by briefly reflecting on how AAA might prove to be a fruitful approach to CA.

## Torrance’s Doctrine of Atonement

According to T.F. Torrance Christ does not just make atonement, rather, “*Christ Jesus IS the atonement.*”<sup>6</sup> Atonement, therefore, is not just accomplished through Christ’s work, but it is accomplished in Christ’s person. Hence, Torrance says,

Atonement is something done...within the ontological depths of the Incarnation, for *the assumption of the flesh by God in Jesus Christ is itself a redemptive act* and of the very essence of God’s saving work.<sup>7</sup>

This act atonement is primarily the recreation of the bond of union between God and humanity. In other words atonement here means “at-one-ment” both

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<sup>4</sup> Here “X” is the formulation of a particular account of atonement.

<sup>5</sup> For my definitions of “instantiate” and “participate” see the section below titled “Torrance’s Abstract Universal Christology.”

<sup>6</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 94. Italics and capitalization in the original.

<sup>7</sup> T.F. Torrance, “Dramatic Proclamation of the Gospel: Homily on the Passion of Melito of Sardis,” in *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 37 (1992), 155.

ontologically and relationally.<sup>8</sup> How does this at-one-ment occur? It occurs in two movements: 1) The initial, “once and for all union,”<sup>9</sup> accomplished in the incarnation, and 2) the “continuous union”<sup>10</sup> that Christ lives out over the course of his entire life and ministry.<sup>11</sup>

The first movement of atonement, the “once and for all union,” concerns the initial act of incarnation. According to Torrance upon becoming incarnate, the Word takes on a fallen human nature for the sake of redeeming, healing, and sanctifying human nature. When this initial union between divine and human natures occurs, the human nature, which prior to the atonement was lost and damned, becomes sanctified.<sup>12</sup> When the divine nature is united to a fallen human nature, the divine nature is not defiled by the fallen human nature, rather it “resists it [sin], sanctifying what sin had corrupted, and unites it again to the purity of God.”<sup>13</sup> Torrance emphasizes that the sanctification of human nature occurs in the initial union of the divine and human nature (i.e. the hypostatic union). In *Theology in Reconstruction* he writes, “In his holy assumption of our unholy humanity, his purity wipes away our impurity, his holiness covers our corruption, his nature heals our nature.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, we should note, regarding the “once and for all union,” that according to Torrance, that the healing union effected by the incarnation does not simply open up the possibility for the sanctifying of individual’s human natures. There is an objective sanctification of *all* of humanity in virtue of the Son’s assumption of human nature.

The second movement of atonement is the “continuous union.” This is the union between the divine and human nature takes place over the whole course of Christ’s life from his birth through his death and resurrection going forward. The result is that human nature and divine nature are united for the rest of eternity.<sup>15</sup> In developing his doctrine of the continuous union, Torrance stresses that there are certain key moments that have special atoning significance for the rest of humanity. These key moments are typically

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<sup>8</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 89.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Here I use the term “movements” because these are different acts which constitute atonement, rather they are movements in one atoning act.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Chiarot, *The Unassumed is the Unhealed: The Humanity of Christ in the Theology of T.F. Torrance* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 100.

<sup>14</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1996), 155–6.

<sup>15</sup> Torrance, *Atonement*, 228.

considered under the framework of the vicarious humanity of Christ, that is, the view in which the entirety of Christ's human life is lived both as our substitute and our representative.<sup>16</sup> Christ's vicarious humanity includes adoration, praise, joy, suffering, frustration, repentance, confession, sanctification, prayer, ministry, baptism, and faith. Concerning repentance and confession, for example, Torrance says that, Christ acts in our place in "all the basic acts of man's response to God: in faith and repentance, confession, penitence, sorrow, chastisement, and submission to divine judgment."<sup>17</sup> Considering faith, another element of Christ's vicarious humanity, Torrance explains that, Christ takes "our place at every point where human beings act as human beings and are called to have faith in the Father."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore Christ is said to offer "the amen of truth from within our humanity to the word and will of God's eternal truth."<sup>19</sup> Under each of these moments of Christ's life (e.g. confession, repentance, faith, etc.) it is Christ's actions as an individual that count vicariously for the rest of humanity. Christ was baptized, repented, confessed, had faith, obeyed, died, and rose from the dead as an individual; yet at the same time, Christ's actions affect "the humanity of every man, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes it or not, [because he] is ontologically bound up with the humanity of Jesus."<sup>20</sup>

In light of our all too brief survey of Torrance's doctrine of atonement, we should now ask, "What metaphysical account of human nature best comports with Torrance's doctrine of atonement?" I suggest that whatever answer we provide to that question must include at least two features about Christ's human nature. Let us call the first feature the Generality Feature (GF):

(GF) Whatever happens to Christ's human nature happens to human nature in general.<sup>21</sup>

Let us call the second feature the Personality Feature (PF):

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<sup>16</sup> Andrew Purves, *Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations with John McLeod Campbell, H.R. Mackintosh, and T.F. Torrance* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>17</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1996), 136.

<sup>18</sup> T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 82.

<sup>19</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 123.

<sup>20</sup> T.F. Torrance, "The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition," in *Modern Theology* 4 (1988), 317.

<sup>21</sup> This is especially significant in the "once and for all union" in which the initial act of union sanctifies all of human nature.

(PF) Christ must be able to act as an individual person with an individual human nature.<sup>22</sup>

These two features are accounted for in Torrance's doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhyypostasia*. Torrance writes:

The *anhypostasia* and *enhyypostasia* taken together tell us that the incarnation was the union of the Word of God with mankind in solidarity with all men and women [GF] yet it was union with one man or rather such a union with all humanity that it was achieved and wrought out in and through this one man [PF], Jesus of Bethlehem and Nazareth for all men and women.<sup>23</sup>

*Anhypostasia*, therefore, refers to the fact that Jesus Christ took possession of human nature, the "same or common human nature."<sup>24</sup> This means that there is a metaphysical unity between Jesus and all humanity. *Enhyypostasia* on the other hand refers to the fact that Jesus came as an individual human being, having a personal mode of existence.<sup>25</sup> In other words, Christ has a universal ontological solidarity with all humans, and at the same time Jesus is an individual human being, with individual personhood. What account of human nature can account for the GF and PF of Torrance's doctrine of atonement?

## Christ's Human Nature: Three Options

In *Divinity and Humanity* Oliver Crisp offers three categories by which we might understand the metaphysics of Christ's human nature:

Concrete Nature Christology (CNC): The Second Person of the Trinity assumes a concrete human nature.

Abstract Particular Nature Christology (APC): The Second Person of the Trinity assumes a particular abstract particular human nature which is solely exemplified by or participated in by the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>22</sup> This is especially significant in the "continuous union" for Christ himself, as an individual, had faith, prayed, was baptized, raised from the death, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 230.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Abstract Universal Nature Christology (AUC): The Second Person of the Trinity assumes a common abstract universal human nature which is exemplified by or participated in by all humans.<sup>26</sup>

Whichever category we select must be able to account for Christ's metaphysical solidarity with all of humanity and his individual, personal mode of existence as a human person. Which of these three categories best comports with Torrance's doctrine of atonement?

In order to develop an account which fits the GF and PF one could try paring up a particularist account of human nature, i.e. CNC or APC with Oliver Crisp's modified Augustinian realism— "the account in which Christ and the elect together compose one metaphysical entity that persists through time just as, on the Augustinian realist way of thinking, Adam and his progeny do."<sup>27</sup> Because this kind of account emphasizes that there is "one metaphysical entity," it, *prima facie*, seems to be able to account for the GF. But what about PF? At first glance it seems that Crisp's modified Augustinian realism might be able to address this as well. For according to Crisp's account, the moral properties of individuals, including Christ and other human beings, are accounted for by means of stage theory.<sup>28</sup> So is this particularist modified Augustinian realism account a good fit for making sense of what Christ's human nature is in Torrance's doctrine of atonement? There is at least one reason to believe that it is inadequate.

The reason why CNC and APC are inadequate for Torrance's doctrine of atonement is that throughout his doctrine of atonement Torrance emphasizes that Christ is more than just one part or stage of a metaphysical entity we call humanity. This matters for Torrance, because simply stating that Christ is a part or stage of humanity would lead to a denial of Torrance's view that atonement occurs *in* the ontological depths of Christ's humanity. Torrance wants to affirm the fact that the sanctification of all of humanity occurs *in* Christ's human nature, not just that Christ's sanctification of a particular human nature affects all other parts of humanity. Given this nuance in Torrance's doctrine of atonement, we must say that a particularist account of human nature paired with a modified Augustinian realism does not fit Torrance's Christology. This leaves us with another option: AUC.

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<sup>26</sup> These are adaptations of Oliver Crisp's account in *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 41-5.

<sup>27</sup> Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed*, 135.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

## Torrance's Abstract Universal Nature Christology

Abstract Nature Christology, is the view according to which the second person of the Trinity assumes a common abstract universal human nature which is exemplified by or participated in by all humans. In an essay titled, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” Ben Myers argues that a number of patristic writers held to this view.<sup>29</sup> One example Myers cites is Gregory of Nazianzus. In one sermon Gregory proclaims:

He [Christ] bears the title “Man”... with the aim of hallowing humanity through himself, by becoming a sort of yeast for the whole lump. He has united with himself all that lay under condemnation, in order to release it from condemnation. For all our sakes he became all that we are, sin apart – body, soul, mind, all that death pervades.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, according to Gregory, and other church fathers, Christ was both “Man” and “a man.” Like the church fathers Myers cites, Torrance also wants to affirm that Christ is “at once man, and a man.”<sup>31</sup> This could be understood as the GF and PF, which are the metaphysical underpinning of Torrance’s doctrine of atonement.<sup>32</sup>

So far so good. It seems as though Torrance’s doctrine of atonement comports with an abstract universal account of human nature. Yet Torrance’s abstract nature Christology is not without problems. We might worry: Why does what happens Christ’s human nature happen to humanity as a whole but what happens to any other person’s nature does not happen to humanity as a whole? If what happens to some person’s nature—besides Christ’s—happens to humanity as a whole, this would be a problem for Torrance’s metaphysics of

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<sup>29</sup> Myers cites Irenaeus and Athanasius as other examples. Benjamin Myers, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” in *Locating Atonement*, eds. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 83.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 30.21* in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Fredrick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002). Cited in Myers, “The Patristic Atonement Model,” 83.

<sup>31</sup> Torrance, *Incarnation*, 231. Italics in original.

<sup>32</sup> Although not addressing Torrance’s own doctrine Maurice Wiles makes a similar point about *non assumptus theology* saying that, “If there is believed to be a single reality—humanity—such that both Christ and we share (albeit in different ways) in the same reality, the principle [the unassumed is the unhealed] appears more plausible that if we do not hold such a belief.” See Maurice Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM, 1976), 117.



human nature because Torrance wants to claim that Christ alone can affect all of humanity.

One way to get around this problem is to draw upon a Platonic understanding of participation. Roughly, Plato believed that particulars participate in transcendent abstract universals.<sup>33</sup> Universals do not exist at any time or place and they are unchanging. Yet, abstract universals act as causes; they cause a particular thing to be the way it is. How can drawing on Platonic metaphysics help resolve Torrance's problem? The idea is this: If we follow a participationist scheme, like Plato's, then we can say that the abstract universal human nature is the cause of a particular human being existing the way she does. If we can say this, then we can say that every human being who participates in the abstract universal human nature undergoes change because of the abstract universal she is related to. This feature allows us to make sense of how Christ's vicarious humanity creates an objective ontological change in all of humanity. However, the participation relation is not enough since Platonism claims that abstract universals are non-spatial, non-temporal, and unchanging objects. On the contrary, a Torrancean metaphysics of human nature requires that universal human nature changes in virtue of Christ's life and ministry. This is where we can introduce the concept of "instantiation."<sup>34</sup> By "instantiation" I mean a specific relation in which an abstract universal is related to a particular object in such a way that the abstract universal nature itself can be affected by other causes when the particular object it is instantiated in is subject to causes acting upon it.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when the individual who instantiates an abstract universal human nature has faith, is baptized, confesses, prays, or sanctifies human nature, etc. this affects the abstract universal human nature.

What does this distinction between participation and instantiation lead us to say about Torrance's metaphysics of human nature? First, human nature is an abstract universal. Second, all human beings, except Christ, participate in this abstract universal human nature. Third, Christ alone, instantiates human nature. In light of the latter two points we can say that what happens to Christ's human nature happens to humanity as a whole, yet what happens to any other

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<sup>33</sup> There is some discussion regarding the development of Plato's view about this relation. See Richard Kraut, "Plato" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/plato/>>

<sup>34</sup> I am using "instantiation" in a different way than it is normally used in philosophical discussions.

<sup>35</sup> The idea of a universal which is capable of being acted upon is unheard of in the philosophical literature. However, such a universal is needed if we are to make sense of Torrance's doctrine of atonement.

person's human nature does not happen to humanity as a whole. Thus, our earlier worry is addressed.

## The Prospects of AAA

In the preceding sections I have briefly argued that the account of human nature that best comports with T.F. Torrance's doctrine of atonement is one in which human nature is an abstract universal that is instantiated by Christ and participated in by all other human beings.<sup>36</sup> I have developed this argument in order to provide an example of how examining a particular formulation of the doctrine of atonement, in this case T.F. Torrance's, can yield results for our doctrine of theological anthropology. This approach, which I have here called AAA, has been shown to be fruitful in at least this one case, yet it still remains to be shown whether it will bear fruit when examining other accounts of atonement. What anthropological insights will be derived when looking at, for example, Oliver Crisp's Union Account of Atonement, Kathryn Tanner's Incarnational Atonement, or John McLeod Campbell's Vicarious Penitence account?<sup>37</sup> If the examination of these, and other, accounts of atonement show that a particular metaphysic of human nature is required for them to work then perhaps AAA will yield some interesting results in the field of theological anthropology.

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<sup>36</sup> What I offer in this essay is a mere sketch of how T.F. Torrance's doctrine of atonement and the metaphysics of Christ's human nature might be related. For a more comprehensive treatment of the topic see the forthcoming essay titled, "The One and the Many: The Metaphysics of Human Nature in T.F. Torrance's Doctrine of Atonement," in the *Journal of Reformed Theology*.

<sup>37</sup> Crisp, *The Word Enfleshed*, 119–144; Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247–273; John McLeod Campbell, *The Nature of the Atonement* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 173–188.