

# The Christian Life and Our Participation in Christ's Continuing Ministry

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*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

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and Our Participation  
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## Introduction

There has been in recent years in North America a rising emphasis on the nature and obligations of the Christian life, especially within the evangelical branches of the church, whether within mainline denominations, historically evangelical denominations or independent churches. This emphasis in itself is not problematic and could be an indicator of a growing awareness that being Christian requires a living coherence of piety and practice, faith and obedience, private devotion and public witness, personal holiness and social righteousness. In these days when there seems to be a significant moral decline, a call within the Christian church to obedience and faithfulness is understandable. This focus on the Christian life is registered in the vast sales of books like Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*. A hunger for more integrity and depth in the Christian life can also be seen in the ongoing interest in spiritual formation and the accompanying proliferation of books, seminars, and retreats on this theme.

Some in the church see the great social needs of our society and world, especially apparent and magnified by natural disasters and wars. The issue of global justice has grabbed the attention of many in the church who are wrought up over terrorism, war, human trafficking, starvation and the devastating AIDS epidemic especially witnessed in Africa. There is an acute awareness that the Christian church ought to be more involved in bearing faithful witness to the justice and compassion of God in these situations.

On another front, some long for a transformed and emerging church in which we would find "A New Kind of Christian." In such churches, Christian witness would attempt to address our postmodern society more by deeds than by words, more by community than individuals. Among the youth we saw a brief and not unrelated revival of concern for faithful Christian living embodied in the motto that was printed on thousands of armbands worn by

teenagers and admired by adults: WWJD? (What Would Jesus Do?).

In light of the seeming ineffectiveness and apparent irrelevance of the Christian faith in our secularized culture, other voices are calling for the establishment of a missional church. Such a church would be captivated by a vision that saw its very reason for being the engagement of the world through service, evangelism, and outreach. All of what the church is and does would gain its impetus and justification by virtue of its contributing to the *missio Dei*, the mission of God, to take the gospel to our postmodern culture.

I mention these interests, trends, and themes of our contemporary church not to disparage them. There is a genuine hunger for Christian faithfulness in all of these. There is much to affirm, admire and commend in these movements that no doubt reflect something of the heart of the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have no intention to commend to you yet another emphasis, program, theme or movement as a superior alternative to those just mentioned.

### **The question of a proper foundation**

Taking as my cue the theological vision of the Torrance brothers (Thomas F. Torrance and James B. Torrance), I want to raise a question about the foundations on which these various approaches to the Christian life are built—about the theological foundations that undergird them. Further, I would like to offer a theological foundation for any or every one of these movements. First, so that they might remain faithful to the gospel and its Lord, Jesus Christ. Second, so they do not lead to burnout and disillusionment in the Christian life and ministry.

The theological insight of the Torrances bears witness that if these genuine impulses of the Spirit regarding the Christian life are not properly grounded, if they do not begin with a proper theological starting point, they will be open to subversion, even co-option by alien spirits and sooner or later

take their adherents into spiritual exhaustion. As the former student of Thomas F. Torrance, Ray Anderson, has repeatedly stated throughout his 35 years of seminary teaching, “Burnout in the Christian life and ministry is essentially a theological problem.” Unfortunately, but to the glory of God, I can attest to this truth, hidden from me until well into my 20 years of university campus ministry. It turns out that theology, when grasped at its center, is the most practical aspect of the Christian life. It must undergird and direct all other Christian practice: whether prayer or the practice of spiritual disciplines, social justice, racial reconciliation, worship, evangelism, compassion for the poor, church renewal, or the *missio Dei*, God’s mission. It was not until I had a profound grasp of the Torrances’ theology that I could clearly see this. The Christian life requires a properly grasped theological foundation that directs us to the living source of our Christian work, witness and worship.

The legacy of the Torrance theological vision guards against faulty and false foundations for the Christian life and the worship and witness of the church by grounding the whole of the Christian life in its true source. The life of the church has but one foundation. There is only one thing that makes the Church Christian. That foundation is Jesus Christ. It is not first the faithfulness of Christians or the richness of their experience or the dedication of their service or even the acumen of their theological pronouncements. Theological reflection that honors this foundation takes as its sole starting point the question: *Who is Jesus?* After addressing that inquiry, and only after, can we take up two other theological questions: *Who are we in Jesus Christ?*, and *What are we to do in response?*

The first question in this theological trajectory was set out by Jesus when he asked his disciples, *Who do you say that I am?* (Mark 8:27). The Torrance brothers then ask the second and third questions in the sequence, holding

forth the reality and actuality of a) our union with the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ, and b) Our participation or ongoing communion with Christ in his continuing mediation and ministry for us and on our behalf. James Torrance often referred to these as the twin doctrines of our union with Christ and the gift of our participation in the life of Christ. For the Torrance brothers, this is the core reality of the Christian life. Union with Christ and communion or participation in Christ are the two foundational realities of the Christian life and should never be separated from each other.

For some, the words that follow in this article may be a welcome review. For others, I trust this word concerning our union with Christ and the Christian life as participation may, God willing, renew your faith, as it did mine years ago.

### **The reality to which the doctrine of union with Christ points**

A case easily can be made from the New Testament that essential to the very meaning of being a follower of Christ was that one is united to Christ. If you asked someone in the early church whether they were followers of Jesus, they might very well answer, “Yes, I am united to Christ.” Centuries later, this was also true of the magisterial Reformers. Being a Christian meant for each: I am united to Christ.

Now think of how we most often identify ourselves as Christians. Is one of the first things you think of, “Yes, I’m united to Christ”? Or would you begin, “Yes, I made a decision for Christ.” “I follow the teachings of Jesus.” “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” “I attend church regularly.” “I was baptized and confirmed.” “I’m committed to Jesus Christ.” “I am born again.” There’s nothing wrong with these answers in themselves. They contain part of the truth. Notice, however, that they all refer to something we do or have done. The emphasis is on our response and action. But does this get to the root of who we really are as Christians?

By leaving union with Christ unacknowledged, all these other definitions and declarations leave us on a precarious perch. As James Torrance used to say, we can easily be thrown back on ourselves when we concentrate on our response apart from grasping the truth, reality and actuality of our union with Christ. Jesus Christ, when viewed from within an emphasis on our making a response, can appear to be at a great distance from us. The work Christ does can be regarded as largely in the past and relatively external. The grace of God can begin to seem as if it merely provided us with a new potential. We can end up thinking: “By grace God made the Christian life *possible* by forgiving our sins and giving us a new status of being in right relationship with him. Now all *we* have to do is appropriate, apply or actualize that new potential life that God has graciously given us.” So we turn with enthusiasm (or perhaps in desperation) to one of those emphases, visions, tasks or goals I noted earlier. We attempt by our efforts to make the Christian life practical, relevant, and vital. *We* attempt to do great things *for* God. That is how I went about my Christian life for many years—as if God in Christ had given me a potentially new life. It was up to me to make it real and actual.

What I have observed in the Christian church is that whether conservative or liberal, traditional or contemporary, emergent or megachurch, is that often Christians basically live as if we are “saved by grace” but sanctified by works. We depend on our own efforts, choices, accomplishments or zeal. Grace is where we start the Christian life, but often we somehow end up “thrown back upon our own resources” and feeling under a great burden. And that sense of burden moves us to make greater efforts to serve God in some way. Then, after considerable effort over time, we become first unimpressed, then perhaps depressed, and finally even coldly cynical about the whole Christian life itself. Those efforts, and we ourselves, often fall short accomplishing for God what we (and we think, God!) had hoped for. A great

part of the problem is that we often have not grasped and we often have not been taught, either in our churches or in our seminaries, about the full extent of the grace of God extended to us in Jesus Christ. We have failed to hear what union with Christ means and of our participation in the continuing mediatorial ministry of Christ.

### **Scriptural teaching on union with Christ**

What do the Scriptures teach? What did the early church and the Reformers understand? And what legacy have the Torrance brothers left us regarding our union with Christ? Let me first summarize what that union is *not*:

- It's not essentially a moral union with the result that I agree and am committed to doing what God regards as right and righteous. That may be a moral *fruit* of our union, but that is not what our union is.
- It's not essentially a psychological union where Jesus has positive regard for me and I feel warmly connected and desirous of his approval and presence. Again that may be a fruit, but not the source.
- It's not essentially a volitional union where I am willing to obey and do the practical work which God wills and wants, intending to accomplish all that he sets out for me to do, so that my will becomes a mirror image of God's will. This, again, may be a fruit, but not the source.
- It's not essentially a union of purposes (a "telic union"), where my goals, aspirations, dreams, ideals and hopes match God's.

Union with Christ is much deeper, more enduring and far more effective in our lives than any of these aspects of the Christian life. The New Testament message is that we are so united to Christ that the core of our very being is changed because it has become spiritually joined to the perfected humanity of Jesus. The apostle Paul writes that we are one in Spirit with Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17). In his letter to the Ephesians he writes that we are presently—right now—seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6).



We are so joined that what happened to Christ 2,000 years ago has actually included us. So in Paul's letter to the Colossians we read that we have co-died with Christ and have been co-raised with Christ (Colossians 2:12-3; 3:1). Paul announces this fact as a completed action that is true of all the members of the body of Christ.

Jesus himself indicated his purpose to unite himself with us. He teaches that our oneness with him is comparable to his oneness with the Father. He declares, "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (John 14:20, ESV unless noted). He prays, "I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one.... that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:23, 26). Jesus teaches that eternal life, salvation, involves a close communion: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul announces that everything that Jesus has is also ours. He declares that Jesus himself is our wisdom, our righteousness *and* our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30). The New Testament is filled with language that points to a profound reality: we belong in an astounding way to Jesus Christ. We can be said to indwell him and he in us. We are often depicted as being "in Christ," not just with or alongside him. The book of Ephesians is full of this kind of description that frankly blows our minds and fries our rational mental circuits. We have become new creatures "in" Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), because he has made us "his own" (Philippians 3:12) in such a way that there is what Calvin called a "wonderful exchange" at the deepest level of who we are. At that level Christ takes our fallen and broken natures and gives us a share in his sanctified and perfected human nature. Who we are is no longer who we are alone, for we are not alone. We are who we are by virtue of being united to Christ. As James Torrance tirelessly reminded us, by his grace we are given the gift of sharing in the Son's union

and communion with the Father in the power of the Spirit. As the early church expressed it: He who was the Son of God by nature, became a son of man so that we who are the sons of men by nature might, by grace, become the sons and daughters of God.

When Calvin and Luther commented on Ephesians 5:21-32, following the early church teachings, they did not exposit on the nature of human marriage, but marveled that we are far more united to Christ than a man and woman are in matrimony! Marriage is a dim and distant reflection of the deeper truth about our real communion with Christ. The ultimate companion we are made for is Jesus Christ, who is truly bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh and to whom we are united by the Holy Spirit.

In the New Testament, especially in the book of Hebrews, we see that such a union had its beginning in the Incarnation, in Christ's assuming a complete humanity, from conception to his death. What qualifies Jesus to accomplish this exchange with us is his assumption of our humanity along with its fallen condition. The early church recognized the depths of the incarnation when it declared not only that Jesus was "one in being" (*homoousios* in Greek) with the Father, but also "one in being" (*homoousios*) with humanity. His divinity by virtue of his union with the Father is no more true of him than is his humanity by virtue of his union with us. The apostle Paul laid the ground for this doctrinal explication of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) when he identified Jesus with the new Adam (Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 15:45). Jesus Christ is united to us even more than we are united to the Adam of the Garden in Genesis. Thus our relationship with Christ puts our very existence on a whole new basis.

Our redemption does not just depend on what Christ did, but on who he is in the depths of his being—one with God and one with us. Our salvation, our life in Christ, was not only accomplished "by means of Christ" but "in

Christ,” as Calvin used to say and James Torrance used to regularly remind us. Our new life is not external to us and layered on over us, but is worked out first in the humanity of Jesus and then given to us through his Spirit.

### **Luther, Calvin and Stewart on union with Christ**

One older book that James Torrance often referred to was James Stewart’s *A Man in Christ*. Stewart concluded after his careful study of the New Testament that our union with Christ was the central element in the message of the gospel. That is, without union with Christ, there would be no gospel. God’s grace reaches that deep into who we are. We are no longer ourselves alone—we are who we are only in and through our union with Christ. We belong to God in Christ, body and soul.

Calvin used to warn that we ought never consider Christ at a distance. We are, to the root of our being, who we are in relationship to him who made himself one with us. This is why Luther and Calvin recognized that our whole salvation was complete in Christ: not just our justification, but our sanctification and glorification as well. To have Christ was to have the whole Christ. Christ could not be divided up into pieces, so neither could our salvation. What is complete and actual in Christ is truly ours even if it does not yet appear to be so. Our lives are hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3). Our life in him is being worked out in us by the Spirit. This new humanity wrought in us comes through the sheer gift of our union with Christ. It is not the result of us working out a potential that might be true if we properly apply ourselves. Rather, the Christian life is living out and manifesting the present reality of our union with Christ.

### **Obstacles to grasping the reality of our union with Christ**

There are significant obstacles to our even beginning to grasp the truth of our union with Christ. I’d like to give some consideration to those concerns that often have blunted if not obliterated any concerted effort to grasp this

profound theological truth.

First is the sheer wonder of the profound depths of such a grace. Would God really go to such lengths, heights and depths for us? It sounds too good to be true. But when it comes to God, shouldn't we expect the good news to sound like it is too good to be true? Is not God's grace beyond all we can ask or imagine, as Paul says? (Ephesians 3:20). Certainly this response is no reason to rule out its gracious reality.

Second is fear. Our union with Christ often is avoided because of fear that if we say we are united to him at the ontological depths of our being, we will collapse ourselves into him and confuse ourselves with him. That misunderstanding of our union with Christ is a possibility that could be expressed not just in what we think, but reinforced by *how* we are taught to think. We learn that what things really are is what they are all by themselves. They are individual substances, all one stuff. So, if two things are truly united, the difference between them as well as the distinction of each must be lost. Either one thing would turn into another, or both would turn into a third thing. Following this pattern of thinking, union with Christ would mean we turn into Christ or he would turn into us, each ceasing to be what we were. The Torrances were quick to warn that it is this way of thinking about ourselves as individual substances (a way that can be traced back to Aristotle) that leads to such confusion. If we assume that we are what we are independent of anything else, then a relationship, such as union, cannot contribute in any essential way to what things actually are.

But what if Aristotle was wrong? What if the essence of being human is defined by what we are by virtue of our being in some kind of relationship with God? What if relationship is essential to human being and not optional or accidental, but constitutive—such that we would not be what we are except by virtue of the relationships in which we exist, especially in

relationship to God? If that is the case, then the Triune God who has his being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit reconstitutes our humanity by forging a new relationship with fallen humanity through his Incarnation and his entire life, death, resurrection and ascension as the New Adam. In that case, Jesus Christ has become our Lord from the inside of our humanity. We are now what we are because of *Whose* we are!

It was the truth of our union with Christ that led the Torrances to rethink our Aristotelian ontology (the study of the nature of being itself), and conclude that being itself, divine and human, is “onto-relational.” If relationship is essential to who we are, then in union with Christ, we are really united, but remain distinctly ourselves without confusion with Christ. We are most truly ourselves when we are united to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Union is a continual relationship with Christ at the deepest level of our being, not a confusion of ourselves with Christ.

Grasping the truth of our relationship to Christ calls for the renewing of our minds so that we begin to think differently about what makes us who we are. In the end, we even have to approach reading Scripture differently. The challenge becomes not so much taking the Bible literally, but taking it realistically. When Paul declares that we are seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6), we have warrant, despite our Aristotelian philosophical training, to grasp this realistically. The good news is that we as Christians are united to Christ in such a way that all that is ours is his and all that is his is ours. Paul refers to this reality when he states, “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means by grace we are united to Christ as his true brothers and sisters. Nothing less. That is who we are in him.

## **No place for us: antinomianism?**

As noted above, some people worry that any real union must confuse us with Christ. This idea can be reinforced if we feel somehow compelled to trace out a false logic—a third obstacle, which goes something like this: If who we are is who we are in Christ, and our whole salvation is complete in Christ, then there is no place for me and no significance to what I do. This is the antinomian objection, that if we are really united to Christ then there is no reason or purpose for my choices or obedience. I can do what I like.

This might be one of many possible *logical* implications of our union with Christ. But theology is not the result of strings of logical implications. And simple logical inferences are never necessarily true. Second, everything depends on what we mean by “union.” The New Testament affirms a profound union with Christ, the completed work of Christ, and the wonderful exchange, and yet it also calls for our involvement, our activity, our participation. Union in the New Testament sense does not rule out response, obedience, action and decision, but includes them.

Can we make any progress in understanding how these elements fit together? I think the answer is yes, and the Torrances lead the way. Union with Christ in this realist way does not eliminate the trusting obedience of the Christian life, but actually strengthens it!

## **A personal union**

The biblical picture points to the union of persons who remain persons. The union is a personal union, not mechanical or functional or impersonal. Such a personal unity calls for interaction, for inter-relationship. A personal unity means that neither person is lost, but the distinction of persons is maintained while the personal, deliberate and chosen interaction takes place. Unity in this frame means the establishment and fulfillment of the creature in relationship to God through the humanity of Jesus Christ, bone of our bone

and flesh of our flesh. This union is a reflection of the Triune relationships but now mirrored in God's relationship to us in Christ and through the Spirit. Jesus can pray *to* the Father in a meaningful way even though he is one in being with the Father in the Spirit. From all eternity the Son can glorify the Father and the Father glorify the Son and yet be one. It turns out that the oneness of God is a unity where relationship is intrinsic to the being of God, so that if God were not Father, Son and Spirit, God would not be God. Aristotle's presuppositions about what things can be and how they exist are apparently incorrect. Relationship can be essential to who, at least, God is—and who we are.

### **A saving relationship**

Within those relationships there is real interaction, personal activity. So the saving relationship of exchange into which we are taken by grace, calls for interaction, inter-relationship, and responsiveness. Salvation, rather than being an impersonal steady state of being, like a statue, is a relational reality. This is what makes salvation personal and alive. Being united to Christ is not being formed into a perfect, inert statue, but more about living and being in a dynamic relationship where there is intimate giving and receiving in a wonderful communion. That relationship determines the essence of who we are and who we are becoming.

Perhaps we can draw a distant comparison with marriage in answer to the question, "Why should we do anything if we are united to Christ and our whole salvation is complete in him?" Raising the question that way about our union with Christ would be like asking why two people who are married should live together, since they have entered into the fixed state of matrimony. But isn't marriage by definition a sharing of life together? It would make no sense and be a violation of the logic of relationship to say, "Since we're already married, there's no point in living together." So too, in

our union with Christ. As James Torrance used to exhort us, following Calvin, union with Christ and communion or participation in Christ are twin doctrines that can never be separated and never collapsed. Our unity with Christ in a relationship of wonderful exchange is a completed gift in which we personally participate so that the truth and reality of who we are in Christ becomes more and more manifest in our lives as we grow up into him.

We live our lives in union with Christ because we live and move and have our being by being in communion with Christ. It is a personal reality in which we are meant to participate. Neglecting our active participation is neglecting our present salvation established in Christ. What does it mean to be a Christian? It means living daily by the grace that unites us to Christ as his brothers and sisters. Nothing less. That is who we are in him.

### **Who we are: our identity in Christ**

What does our union with Christ add up to, if it is not a moral, psychological, volitional or telic union? Perhaps the best word we can use in our contemporary situation to convey who we are “in Christ” is to say our union with Christ determines our identity. Identity seems to be summed up in who or what gives us our meaning, our purpose, our significance, our security, our dignity and destiny. These elements are essential to who we think we are, and how we act and respond to things around us. Union with Christ means that he is the sole and ultimate source of our meaning, purpose, significance, security, dignity and destiny. Others may remind us of our identity in Christ by what they say to us and in how they treat us. We may, and indeed ought to, remind others, be signs and witnesses to who others are in Christ. But only Christ, our Creator and Redeemer, can be the source of our identity. This is why we worship God alone. We worship what gives us our ultimate identity. In this sense who or what we serve or treasure indicates our identity. We can serve/worship only one real Master, the One to whom



we belong, body and soul.

The problem is, there are many sources we may look to in order to derive or secure our identity. In our secular society none of them have to do with the God of the Bible, revealed in Jesus Christ. So we can seek to establish our identities through our work or careers, through financial success, possessions, through social approval, personal achievement, leisure activities, educational achievement, political power and influence and through relationships with family, friends, co-workers, “lovers,” etc. The list is endless. Representatives of these various spheres of human life often broadcast grandiose promises of giving us a more secure sense of identity *if* we will only fulfill certain conditions: get that degree, achieve that promotion, buy a certain thing, live a certain place, realize some potential, fall in love, fulfill a certain fantasy, etc. But these are all conditionally offered potential sources of identity. Only *if* and *when*, a, b, or c is achieved, can you then gain a more secure identity, be somebody. Even more important, these things cannot give us our real identity. They are false idols and cannot provide us with any ultimate or lasting meaning, purpose, security, dignity, or destiny. They cannot tell us who we are, for they do not know, and do not care! They are not your Creator nor your Redeemer. They are no gods!

### **The danger of Christ-plus**

The danger in the church, the believing community, is to acknowledge Christ, but then seek out supplemental sources of identity. That amounts to serving two masters—trying to live a Christ-plus life (Christ plus x, y, or z). But what we add on can never serve as sources of identity. They can only be spheres in which we live out our identity given to us as a free gift by the grace of God. Once we add on the plus, the plus will inevitably make itself the key and central point. A competition will be set up in which the plus element demands to take over and serves as the real ultimate source of

identity. These plus elements turn into idols which, in the end, enslave us. We necessarily depend upon what gives us our identity. We worship what we think can secure for us our meaning and significance. When that thing is anything other than our Creator and Redeemer, we have crossed over into idolatry—worshiping something creaturely, not the living God.

This dynamic is addressed often in the New Testament, especially in the letter to the Galatians and in the letter to the Hebrews. Adding on something to Christ is not a neutral and safe thing. It is a danger and ultimately means Christ is not being honored as the only ultimate source of identity, is not the only object of our worship. We become at best divided in mind and heart, soul and body. As we say these days, “this is not sustainable.” Being in union with Christ means he provides us with our true identity as a freely given gift of his grace. We become the children of God sharing in his very Sonship with the Father by the Holy Spirit.

### **The Christian life as participation in Christ’s continuing ministry**

So then what light does our union with Christ shed on the Christian life of obedience, or our calling to ministry? I have found that the word participation, which is a translation of the biblical Greek word *koinonia*, is indispensable. Our obedience and our ministry can only be properly grasped as a sharing in or participating in the obedience and ministry of Jesus Christ.

But if Christian life and ministry is somehow participation, what is it that we actually get involved in? Christ has completed his once-for-all ministry. How can we get involved in that? We can’t attempt to redo what he has done. How, then, can we participate? This line of questioning indicates that we often forget or perhaps never fully grasped the fact that the risen Christ ascended in his bodily form with his humanity, a humanity not only intact but now glorified. James Torrance used to put these questions to his classes: “When do we really see the true humanity of Christ? Was it when he was

hungry? Was it when he was asleep in the boat? Or was it when he was angry in the temple? No. We see Christ's true humanity and so ours, in his ascension. There we see our humanity sanctified and glorified in him as he takes us with him as our substitute and representative into the very presence of the Father."

The humanity Christ assumed at conception was not cast off like the empty external fuel tank of the space shuttle, only to fall back to earth some minutes after its blastoff for outer space. No, the incarnation is permanent because, as Paul put it, the man Jesus Christ is (and remains to this day) our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). His perfected humanity remains the only meeting place for God and humanity to meet.

But not only does his humanity abide, his ministry also continues. His gracious service did not end at the cross. Yes, the reconciling work was finished, but that reconciling work was for the sake of our living out of that recreated relationship now securely reestablished. As we see throughout the book of Hebrews, we serve a living Lord who continually intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25). He remains the one true apostle, the one true leader of our worship, the one true pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Our Lord Jesus Christ remains ever vigilant, ever active. He is no retired Savior who is now unemployed.

All our responses to Christ are nothing more than following Christ in his present activity and engaging in the ministry that he is actively doing now through the Holy Spirit. When we preach the gospel, we participate in the apostolic ministry of Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit continues to bear witness to Christ and to our need for Christ. When we love a neighbor, or love an enemy, for the sake of Christ and witness to his kingdom, we are merely catching up with God. We're merely going to work with God. When we pray, we're joining Christ in his faithful prayers of intercessions for us

and for the world. When we worship, we are joining in with all the faithful, including those who have gone before us who are continually worshipping following the leadership of Jesus Christ, our great worship leader (*leitourgos*, Hebrews 8:2).

Even when we confess our sins, we join with Jesus himself who is the only one who truly knows the depth of sin, who is perfectly repentant for us and so received the baptism of John the Baptist. But as our great mediator who knows our weaknesses, he takes our weak faith and meager repentance and graciously makes it his own, perfects it and passes it on to the Father. And by the Spirit we can begin to share in his perfect repentance. On the basis of the work of Christ to save us, rescue us from sin, we are saved for participation, fellowship, communion in an ongoing relationship of wonderful exchange.

When we see our whole lives this way, we join with the apostle Paul, who proclaimed, “I live yet not I but Christ who lives in me.” That is not just a platitude that sounds nice. The whole of the Christian life is actually a participation in the life and ministry of Christ. So we can say, “I pray, yet not I, but Christ prays in me.” “I obey, yet not I, but Christ obeys in me.” “I have faith, yet not I, but Christ has faith active in me.” “I hunger and thirst for righteousness and reconciliation, yet not I but Christ in me.”

The joy, peace and love that Christ wants for us is not a joy, peace and love that are like Christ’s that we somehow achieve with God’s help. No, by his Spirit, Christ tells us he intends to share with us *his* joy, his peace, his love, and his righteousness (John 15:11; 14:27; Ephesians 1:8; 1 Corinthians 1:30). And, from the foundations of the earth, he never thought otherwise! Never view yourself apart from Christ, for that is not who you are.

### **Going against the grain**

Though we can live in denial, hiding the truth by attempting to depart

from Christ, doing so cannot undo the truth of who we actually are in Christ. We may get splinters, but we cannot change the grain of the wood when we go against it. The only choice we really have is 1) to affirm the reality with our minds and in our actions, or 2) deny the reality of who Christ is and who we are in relationship to him. We have no power over Christ to create the reality or to annihilate it. He is Lord and Savior.

In seeking to honor Christ in their actions, some ask, What would Jesus do? But a better question, if we want to truly participate with Christ, is this: What is Jesus doing? Answering this question leads us to seek to discover what Jesus is doing in the present situation and consider how we can get involved with his activity. When we see the depth of the grace of God in uniting us to Christ to share with us his communion with the Father, what else can we possibly do with our lives except to go where he goes, do what he does, and live for the glory of the Father as he always has and still is doing?

### **What does participation look like? Jesus and feeding the 5,000**

The story told in Mark 6:30-44 illustrates how our union with Christ and our participation in his ministry are held together. As it begins, Jesus took some unanticipated initiative. He told the disciples that they should feed these 5,000 people. They'd been listening to the teachings of Jesus until very late that afternoon. There was, perhaps, just enough time to get home by nightfall to prepare supper. So the disciples were astounded at Jesus' suggestion. How could they possibly feed so many? They didn't have two years' worth of wages in their wallets to buy bread, and they certainly didn't have a chain of bakeries ready to deliver truckloads of it.

Jesus had asked them to do the impossible. But Jesus was not stymied by their incredulity. He had another word for them: "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." I'm sure the disciples must have wondered at the relevance of such a request. But the situation got worse. The results of their

count yielded only five loaves and just two fish. The disciples did not know what to do next.

Jesus provided some leadership. He directed the disciples to get all the people to sit down in groups. The people actually did what the disciples asked, though it would not have been clear what would follow. Some must have muttered, “It’s getting a little late, isn’t it? I thought he was finished.” But most, it seems, went along and were willing to wait and see what Jesus and his disciples would do.

Next, Jesus took from his disciples the few loaves and fish. He looked up to heaven, directing his gaze and his words of thanksgiving for the food to his heavenly Father—since what was going to take place not only would involve Jesus and his disciples but also Jesus with his Father. He broke the fish and loaves in pieces, giving them to the twelve standing around him.

At this point, the disciples were called back into action. Jesus directed them to hand out the food to the people. They responded and began to do so. I suspect that the people followed the example of the disciples and broke off pieces to give to those next to them. Almost without realizing (Mark here is so understated!), “they all ate and were filled.” Not only that, but from those five loaves and two fish, there were twelve baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish leftover! Twelve baskets—one for each of the disciples. Can you imagine their reaction as each one brought back a basket full after handing out just a few scraps?

How did this happen? We could simply say Jesus performed a miracle. Of course, but how did he go about it? Was it with great fanfare, a spectacular Hollywood magic show complete with light, mirrors and smoke by which the amazing Jesus impressed us again with his phenomenal powers? Not at all. Jesus did not multiply the loaves and fish by himself. In fact, he drew very little attention to himself. In lifting the food to heaven and saying a blessing,

we see, again, that Jesus understood himself as dependent on and in relationship to his Father. This situation was like all the others he encountered in his earthly life: Jesus only did what he saw his Father doing (John 5:19).

Jesus participated in the actions of his Father. Further, Jesus had said to the disciples, “You feed them,” and they did. Jesus (with his Father) could have provided the loaves and fishes needed out of thin air, or perhaps from a few stones and twigs. He also could have had the disciples stand back, saying to the crowd, “Watch this, boys!” and sent those loaves and fish flying instantly right into the laps of all 5,000. What an amazing magical moment that would have been! But he didn’t go about it that way at all. He involved his disciples and what they had to offer. They got to participate with him in his feeding the hungry with his heavenly Father.

I am not suggesting that Jesus needed the disciples—or even their fish and loaves. That would be a gross misrepresentation of the truth. Jesus can act independently of his disciples. But rather, what we find here, is that Jesus delighted to find ways for his disciples to get involved in the very things he and his Father were doing. Did these disciples have the understanding or the resources needed for the task? Not at all. But Jesus found a wonderful way for them to participate in his humble exhibition of the divine compassion of his heavenly Father. The disciples got to be involved in the very thing Jesus (and his Father) was doing. I’m sure they were astounded—not just that all the people got fed, but that he took what was theirs, made it his own, and then gave it back to them to serve the people in his name. Can you imagine the joy and wonder of being involved in God’s feeding of 5,000? What a privilege!

### **Partnership with Christ**

This Gospel story illustrates Christian life and ministry. What is needed, good and right, is always overwhelming, even seemingly impossible. We

hear a word from Jesus that sounds like “You feed them,” and we quickly become aware that we have so little. It’s humiliating, at least to our pride, to admit how meager our resources are compared to the compassionate aims of God. At that point the question becomes, Will we act in faith, trusting in the character of the one calling for our action and obedience? Will we give him what we have so we can see what he will do with what little we really offer to him?

We may offer to him our failures and our sin in confession, or offer our resources, action plans and obedience with thanksgiving. Will we trust him to do with our meager action just as he did with those first disciples? Will we marvel at the miracle of participating in Christ’s own obedience to the Father in his continuing ministry to his neighbors and his world? That’s the wonder of Christ’s Lordship—he always makes room for our participation, though we never really have what it takes. It is only in partnership with him, in fellowship and communion, in union with him, that we reflect the glory of God as his children.

### **Preaching, teaching and counseling in participation with Christ**

Ironically, having understood something of our participation in the ongoing ministry of Jesus, in turning to the related topics of preaching, teaching and counseling, we can easily revert to addressing people in ways that ignore the reality of our union and participation with Jesus. When we turn our focus on our own obedience, we are in the habit of thinking that our individual will is the key to our behavior and actions. If something is going to get done, then we tend to depend on one of two things: 1) the strength of our own wills, or 2) the effectiveness of our native or learned skills, and their deployment in the programs, plans, techniques or formulas available. And so, if we feel we lack both these, we may simply conclude that we must have no responsibility at all. It must be someone else’s calling since we’ve got



nothing to work with, it seems.

How do we properly call people to join us in the Christian life as communion, fellowship, and partnership with Christ?

First, let's consider how all of Scripture is structured as it invites us to participate. As the Torrance brothers reminded us so often, all the commands of God are built on the premise of the unconditional covenant promises of God. All obedience is moved by faith in the character of God. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" is the foundational refrain throughout the Old Testament (see Jeremiah 31:33, Genesis 17:8 and Exodus 6:7). God made a unilateral covenant with Abraham: "I will bless you... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3). That covenant is renewed throughout Israel's history. It was not, Paul reminds us, until 430 years after God made his covenant with the people who were to be a light to all the nations, that God provided them with the law (Galatians 3:17). The law comes after, falling within the circle of the unconditional promise of blessing.

Notice, also, how the Ten Commandments unfold. They were given after the great Exodus of Israel from slavery under the Egyptians. Then, in Exodus 20:2, we find a theological preface to those holy obligations: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" Then the commands follow as a result of this saving work. We could insert a "so" or "therefore" before each one. "I graciously brought you out of Egypt, *so* you shall have no other gods before me. *So* "you shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain." So, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy." So, "you shall not murder...commit adultery...steal....covet."

That theological preface calls all Israel, and us, first to remember who God is and who we are in relationship to him. It does not first address our wills or set up conditions. It announces the unconditioned, good, gracious and

faithful character of God. The stipulations of obedience are built on that foundation. From our New Testament vantage point, God's own faithfulness is further demonstrated in the fulfillment of that promise. In Jesus Christ, God has become our God and we have been set free and have become his people in an unimaginably intimate way. We became united to Christ who lived, died, was raised and ascended for us that we might share in his divine life. All our obedience, then, is meant to follow the same pattern. Trusting in God to be true to his character provides the foundation for all obedience, for behind the promises made to us stands the Great Promise Maker and Promise Keeper. It is this God who then subsequently calls us to a life of obedience in relationship to him.

James Torrance, in full harmony with his older brother Thomas, used to point out that all the imperatives of Scripture are founded on the unconditional indicatives of grace. Obedience is not a method to cause God to be gracious to us. No. God's unconditional grace brings with it a call for our unconditional obedience. The imperatives (commands) point out obligations that come after grace, not the conditions that have to come before grace. The imperatives of our obedience describe the shape of our participation in the covenant relations in which we live and move and have our being. They show us the direction of the grain of relationship so that we don't get splinters.

But are there consequences for disobedience? Yes, there are. When we move against the grain of our relationship with God, we won't enjoy the relationship and its benefits. In fact, we experience negative consequences. We cannot receive the benefits when we fail to trust in God and participate in the life he has provided for us. Our failure, however, does not negate the unconditioned grace of God. Our disobedience has no power to undo what Christ has done. We cannot change the grain of God's character and decision

for us in Jesus Christ. We can live in denial, we can close our eyes and cover our faces at noonday and say the sun is not shining, but our denial has no power to create a counter-truth and counter-reality.

The promises of God and the faithful character of God behind those promises are the foundation for all our responses. So all our calls for action, for participation, must be built on the proclamation of the faithfulness of God and his being true to his Word of promise.

### **The pressure to preach sanctification by works**

If faith in our gracious union with Christ is the foundation for all our obedience, then how do we build on it? Do we merely yell more loudly what God wants his people to do? Do we give endless advice? Do we perpetually offer as the key to effective Christian life—new programs, new methods, new understandings, improved seminars and conferences? Do we change from plan A of preaching the unconditioned grace of God, to plan B and threaten people with a subsequent conditional grace of God? Do we preach as if God were finished with his part of the plan so now the rest of what God wants done is all up to us, as if he had no further plans—so that, if we fail, then God’s ultimate plan fails? Do we preach grace for salvation but works for a life of obedience?

I’m afraid we often do resort to these tactics. Despite the pattern of biblical teaching that begins with God and his faithfulness, we feel the pressure to preach and teach and motivate folks to obedience by addressing the naked will with raw commandments. We can be tempted to speak as if we are God’s slaves and as if God depends on us, as if God is at a distance, and ministry is really up to us, as if God’s grace merely establishes a potential that we, if we are able, realize and actualize and make true by our efforts.

But this is not how Jesus or the apostle Paul addressed the “problem of the Christian life.” For if all the imperatives of Scripture are founded on the

unconditioned indicatives of grace and the character of God represented by them, then when obedience is not forthcoming, we must go back and strengthen the foundations and not attempt to find another one. We must go back to preaching and teaching and discovering the character and heart and promises of God, for everything that we are called to do mirrors what God is always and continually doing for us and in us—all on the basis of the vicarious ascended humanity of Christ and our union with him. Obedience is built on trust—not trying.

### **Preaching the indicatives of grace as the basis for the imperatives of grace**

If we are intent on seeing people more faithful to Christ, we must first show the faithfulness of Christ to them, for their own faithfulness can only be a participation in the faithfulness of Christ. If we want folks to be forgiving, then the basis for that is the announcement of God's forgiveness for us. If we see that we need to be generous, then we need to hear of God's great generosity to us and even to the unjust. If we are concerned that people do not seem to care for the lost, then we need to be reminded that Jesus is the one true Apostle sent to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10) and remember—that includes us! He is still drawing people to himself, and still sending us to participate in his mission to the lost.

If we announce we should be more compassionate towards the poor, then at the same time we need to hear of God's own heart towards the poor. We need to see his provision for the orphan, widow and foreigner and even ourselves, as we recognize our own spiritual poverty. If we are concerned for racial reconciliation, then we require being continually reminded that God in Christ has already recreated us into being one new humanity (Ephesians 2:15). We are reconciled to God and to each other in Christ. We can count on that work having already taken place, rather than see ourselves as given the

task of realizing an ideal that God has merely put before us and is waiting for us to “make it happen.” Then, all of our efforts in this direction will be moved by faith in the completed work of Christ and his ongoing ministry so as to make the fruits of that reconciliation he accomplished visible. All our activity will be generated by faith in God. Paul referred to this as “the obedience of faith.” This is what he declared and it is what oriented and motivated his ministry from beginning to end (see Romans 1:5 and Romans 16:26). This is the only kind of obedience that Paul is interested in, for it alone reflects truly who God is in Jesus Christ.

## **Legalism**

For every act of desired obedience, we must present and focus on the character of God manifest in Christ that corresponds to that imperative. That is because all obedience that gives glory to God must arise out of faith, hope and love for who God really is, both in himself and towards us. The apostle Paul says both at the beginning and the ending of Romans that his whole ministry is to bring about the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). He explains that any obedience that does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

We often think that legalism is the problem of someone who is committed to a very consistent obedience and so who needs to be corrected by allowing for their inconsistent obedience! It’s as if we see the cure to legalism being inconsistent, haphazard obedience, participation and communion. But the reality is that legalism is obedience that does not arise out of faith, hope and love in the character of the gracious Lawgiver. It’s obedience without faith. James Torrance often reminded his students of Calvin’s concern to avoid “legal repentance” (repentance without trust in the gospel of grace), focusing instead on “evangelical repentance” (repentance in light of the grace and forgiveness of God that is offered to sinners out of God’s sheer goodness,

righteousness and mercy).

It is a grave mistake to merely preach the commandments by addressing the will of the Christian and calling for volitional conformity to the standards of God. Concentration on the requirements of God or even the ideals of God may tempt hearers to a faithless obedience. It is even more dangerous to misrepresent the character of God by speaking as if God had two sides to his character, as if God were two-faced or double-minded, first offering grace and then switching to a concern for moral and spiritual conformity to his will and threatening the withdrawal of his grace. Preaching this way communicates that although we are first saved by grace, we are really sanctified by works. It says the Christian life may have begun by grace but is essentially lived out in a conditional and contractual relationship with God. Under such guidance many, I think, see their lives under a great impossible burden.

I know someone who said they wished they could be a nonbeliever again so they could become a Christian all over, experiencing afresh the grace of God. The Christian life for them had become a terrible burden of trying to do things for God yet always falling short. Admonishments to do things for God, merely because he demands it, undoubtedly indicate a concern for faithful and consistent lives. However, when such admonishments become the theme of ministry, they obscure the truth and actuality of Christ's gracious and unconditioned continuing ministry and our union with him. They reflect a view of Christ as at a distance, sending us out to do for him what he is unwilling or unable to do himself. According to this view, Jesus somehow has become dependent upon us. Taking this tack, we end up communicating that, at least subsequent to our conversion, God can no longer be more faithful than we are! He becomes a God limited to doing what we do for him. While Jesus substituted for us on the Cross, now we substitute for him and

act in his place and on his behalf since apparently he's left us and is no longer employed.

Preaching the commandments apart from the promises of the unconditional and unconditioned grace of God is like putting people at sunset in a windowless room with the door shut and the lights off and telling them, "On the count of three start enjoying the sunset!" Few have such imaginative powers! But if we could take someone to the top of Sentinel Dome on the 3000-foot-high western-facing ridge of Yosemite Valley, just at sunset, all we would need to do is declare, "Watch!" and their joy would be irrepressible. The sunset itself would call for and draw out the right response to it.

So in preaching, only the glory and the character of God can draw out of us a faith that leads to a faithful obedience. Otherwise, our sacrificial endeavors are most often driven not by faith, hope and love, but by guilt, fear and anxiety as we are thrown back upon ourselves and our own five loaves and two fishes while standing in front of 5,000 hungry souls. Only the presentation of the heart and character of God fully revealed in Jesus Christ can bring us to the point of faithful obedience. This is why all our preaching and teaching must take as its starting point the question of who this God is, not the questions of what should we do or how should we do it. However, this is often not the starting point for preaching, teaching and counseling in connection with living the Christian life. I think that contributes to the weaknesses of our churches and burnout in the Christian life and ministry. It will also erode any of the new initiatives (mentioned at the beginning of this essay) intended to renew the church.

### **Too much grace?**

There is one further concern that I have seen James Torrance respond to on numerous occasions. Some professional theologians, pastors and

laypersons fear that we can preach too much grace. They would counsel that we have to somehow counterbalance grace so as to prevent people from taking advantage of grace. But what are we going to preach and teach to substitute for and counterbalance what is perceived as over-generous grace? Will we offer some new means for us to condition God into being gracious? Or preach a stingy God or a God dependent on us? A God who cannot be more faithful than we are? If so, despite all our good intentions, we will end up misrepresenting the true God of the Bible to get people “doing things” for God. And they will miss out on the truth that the Christian life is not so much about doing things *for* God, but doing things *with* God, through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit.

### **Grace means no exceptions**

The problem with the critique of “too much grace” is that it assumes a very inaccurate view of grace. If it were somehow possible to preach too much grace, then it isn’t really grace that’s being preached! I think that our understanding of grace is unfortunately often quite insufficient. This is in large part due to the general, cultural understanding of grace. Grace is often taken to mean making an exception to the rule. So we have “grace periods,” and we say someone is gracious when they let us off the hook of responsibility. The grace of forgiveness can be taken to mean diminishing the seriousness of sin or pretending it never happened. But we cannot take our cues from these misguided understandings.

Following in the pathway of Torrance’s understanding, I submit that real grace makes absolutely no exceptions. If it did make exceptions, it would not be gracious! Grace provides everything needed, and by the Spirit transforms our hearts and minds to be more and more like Christ’s. Grace accepts us where we are as we repent and takes us to where he is going so we may be with him forever. Grace is God’s commitment to get us, in the end, where we



belong, even at God's own cost. The God of grace remains faithful even if we are less than faithful (2 Timothy 2:13).

As James Torrance used to point out, the unconditional grace of God means the unconditional obligations of grace. But these are the obligations of being in a gracious relationship with God through Christ, not the conditions to get God to be gracious towards us. Presuming upon grace (as if it were some kind of commodity that God doles out) is not the same as living in and receiving grace. Living in fellowship and communion with God, in union with Christ, means going where he goes and doing what he's doing, not going where he does not go and doing the kinds of things he is not doing or involved in. The obligations of grace are spelled out as imperatives, as commands, in the New Testament. Living according to these commands is the way we continue to receive daily God's grace.

Saying we have God's grace, and thinking there are no obligations at all, is saying there is grace but I don't have to receive it. Disobedience means not receiving grace and not living in our fellowship and communion with Christ. Disobedience presumes upon grace, and so amounts to actually rejecting grace! We can certainly warn people about presuming upon grace and not receiving it. But we are not free to mischaracterize God and present him as limited in his grace or as if he needs to be conditioned by us, otherwise he will not be gracious to us. God's grace is always a free gift (Romans 5:15-17; 6:23). And God is always gracious. That is the character and quality of his *agape* love.

### **The grace of God's "no" to our "no"**

God is eternally and implacably opposed to sin, whether in the world or in us. In his divine providence, sin and evil have no future. God would not be gracious if he were not committed and able to bring to an end all sin and in the end make things right. God has said "yes" to us in Jesus Christ. When we

say “no” to God and his grace to unite us and transform us, then God says “no” to our unbelief. He says “no” to the disobedience that comes from our distrust of God and his character as revealed in Jesus Christ and according to Scripture. God is opposed to all that is against us and against his gracious will for us. If God did not say “no” to what is evil, God would not be gracious. If God did not say “no” to our “no,” he would not be gracious. But note this: when God says “no” to our “no” to him, he is not changing his mind or his heart or his purposes towards us. By negating our negation of his grace, he is reaffirming his “yes” to us in Christ. He says, “No, I said yes!”

How strongly does God object to our rejection of him and his love and grace? Just as strongly as his love for us is. For it is because of his love for us that he rejects our rejection. If he did not love, there would be no reason for him to bother in objecting to us. Rather, his “no” to our “no” is just as strong as his “yes” to us because it is an expression of his “yes” when it meets up with our “no” to him. God’s love and resistance to us (his wrath) are not opposed to each other. His wrath serves his loving purposes. His wrath is to get us to see the error of our ways and to turn around and receive his grace. His anger serves the same purposes as his love: to bring us into right relationship with him through Christ and by the Spirit. God is not double-minded, but aligns perfectly with Jesus who came to save, not condemn (John 3:16-17).

### **The grace of God’s judgment**

And what about God’s judgment? We know God’s ultimate purposes because we see them revealed in Jesus Christ and hear of them in Scripture. Jesus came into the world because of God’s love. He did not come to condemn the world but to save it. God’s will and heart is that all come to repentance and receive his unconditioned grace—his freely offered forgiveness. He does not wish that any eternally perish. Christ died for all. So

whatever we think about God's judgment it should not contradict or call into question Jesus Christ and his revelation and accomplishment of the will of God.

We avoid that error in our understanding of God's judgment when we understand that it is his "no" to our "no"—his "no" to our unbelief and disobedience. God's judgment reinforces his gracious and saving purposes. God recognizes evil and is absolutely opposed to it. It will all be done away with in the end. But God, in his grace, judges our sin in Christ—he exposes it for what it is, shows us the truth about it, sorts things out so that we are released from deceit, even self-deception, so that we repent of it, let go of it, and turn to God to receive his freely given grace and forgiveness. God will use whatever means (judgment) to get us, sooner or later, to recognize our sin and our need for his grace and forgiveness and for him to make right what we have made wrong, sometimes very wrong. God judges unbelief and the sin and evil that comes from it—but he judges it because he is loving and gracious. God would not be loving and gracious if he did not sort out what is evil, what needs forgiveness and restoration and do all that he can to turn around and offer up to judgment the sin and evil we have done, or that others have done to us or to others. And that is what he has done in Jesus, who took on God's judgments, doing away with sin and evil and rescuing us!

But note this: God's judgment is not the same as condemnation. Judgment is meant to prevent us from being condemned! God judges because he loves—judgment is God's resistance and "no" to our sin, even to the sin in us, so that we turn around (repent, confess) and receive his grace and the power to resist temptation and evil. God's judgment is gracious. His aim is to rescue and deliver us from evil, so that we might be saved and the sin and evil be condemned. God's purpose is not that anyone eternally perish, but that all sin, evil and unbelief be eradicated, condemned to oblivion. Only God can

separate us from our sin without undoing us—but that’s what he’s provided for us in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ dies in our place as God, in Christ, and does away with our sin and evil. Jesus, not us, condemned sin in his “flesh” (his human nature, Romans 8:3). Jesus then rose and ascended to eternal life with the Father so that we too may die and be raised with him into new life delivered from all sin and evil. Anything less would mean that God is not gracious. Only those who somehow might manage to reject God’s judgment (and so his grace and forgiveness) will face the prospect of being condemned with their sinfulness.

Scripture and its warnings, including the teaching of Jesus, leave open the possibility that some might face condemnation. It’s presented as a real possibility. But that is not because condemnation is God’s purpose and heart and mind towards any of his creatures—towards those created in his image, created in, through, and to (as an inheritance) Christ (Colossians 1:15-16). No one has to face condemnation. But if anyone does, it will be because they somehow have come to a place where they reject God’s judgment and absolutely refuse grace, refuse his forgiveness, refuse to receive and live out their life of union and communion with Christ. That is, they somehow finally reject and deny the reality of who God is, who they are, and what he has done for them in Christ. They will not be condemned because of some kind of arbitrary limit to God’s grace, but because of their somehow coming to a final and absolute repudiation and hatred of God and his grace, mercy, love and goodness. The reality is that God’s gracious judgment in Jesus Christ in our place and on our behalf is what God does *to prevent* anyone from experiencing final condemnation.

### **God’s gracious work of sharing in Christ’s sanctification for us**

The sanctifying work of Christ brought to completion in us by the Spirit’s glorification will leave no trace of sin in us who are receiving God’s grace. It

will, one day, all be done away with, and that's a very good thing! Think for a moment: what would it be like in heaven if it were full of people for whom God had made a few little exceptions here and there? Wouldn't it be fairly much like the condition we find ourselves in today? The only difference is that we'd be in that condition of uncleanness eternally! Where would be the grace in that? Grace is God's forbearance, God's patience, God's long-suffering. But in the end there will be no exceptions for sin. Evil has no future. Jesus was victorious.

God accepts us where we are unconditionally, in order to take us where he's going, just as unconditionally. No exceptions! Grace means that God is for us and will not give up on us, no matter how long it takes or how far we have to go, or how many times we fall. God would be less than gracious if he only met us where we are and then left us there! He'll pick us up because our whole salvation is complete for us in Christ and we belong to him. United to Christ, all that is his is ours. So Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is our wisdom (about God), our righteousness, and he is our sanctification (1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV). By his indwelling Holy Spirit, we are meant to share even in his perfectly sanctified humanity.

What God in Christ has done *for* us, the Spirit works out *in* us. So Paul can say: "I live, yet not I, but Christ in me" (Galatians 2:20). We do not work up our own knowledge of God, our own righteousness, our own sanctification. But we share by the Spirit in what is his! This is all of what we receive when we receive him who gave *himself* for us (Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 5:2; Titus 2:14).

Grace is God's faithfulness to see us through to his perfect end, even if we sometimes resist or are ungrateful, or only want his blessings because we prefer them to hell! The gracious love of God is implacably committed to perfecting us with Christ's own glorified humanity. True love longs for the

perfection of the beloved.

Can we preach too much of this kind of grace? No! We preach the inexorable love of God, who will not give up on us and has pledged himself to see us to the glorious end of being his children through Jesus Christ. Isn't this the way to lead people to a faith, hope and love that trusts and believes that "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Philippians 1:6, ESV)? We have a hope that knows God desires our sanctification, and believes (as Paul tells us) that, "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24, ESV). Can we believe this promise too much? Can we count on God too much to provide us with even our sanctification in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30, ESV)? The answer is no! God is abundantly gracious because he makes no exceptions. On that we can rely.

### **Conclusion: the obedience of faith, hope and love**

The Christian life must be moved by faith, hope and love for God's Word spoken and living—a Word that presents a God who out of his own graciousness promises to be faithful and to give us an inheritance as his children united to Christ. This Word invites unswerving confidence in Christ's continuing work of ministry and the power and joy to enable us to participate in it through our union with him. All our endeavors built on this foundation will reflect in word and deed the very character of God and exude a joyful trust in his continuing work.

Putting our trust in ourselves, our programs, commitments, convictions, techniques, skills, training or our sophistication and formulas for success, no matter how ideal, morally ambitious, or spiritually sincere, can only lead to lives that indicate a God who wants slaves not children, a God who depends upon us and who cannot be more faithful than we are; a God who begins with grace but who somehow ends with conditional blessings. The good news is

that this is not the God of the Bible, nor the God we worship today. Rather, God has united himself with us, and us with himself, so that all that we think or do, we do as his children, participating with him in all that he is doing in our world now through the continuing ministry of Christ by the power of the Spirit.

The Christian life is nothing but the gracious gift of daily thanksgiving for our real union with Christ, sharing in his glorified humanity and participating by faith in his faithful and continuing ministry to us and all those around us. On this we may surely build our lives in Christ's name and live to the praise of his glory!

## About the Author

Gary W. Deddo works for Grace Communion International and is president of Grace Communion Seminary. He earned his PhD at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland under Professor James Torrance. He is Founding President of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, and author of numerous articles and books, including *Karl Barth's Theology of Relations* and *George McDonald: The Devotional Guide to His Writing*. Click [here](#) for articles by Gary Deddo.

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## About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news,

and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this e-book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to [www.gci.org/participate/donate](http://www.gci.org/participate/donate).

Thank you for letting us share what we value most — Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

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We talk with leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary  
Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School  
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary  
Gordon Fee, Regent College  
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews  
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary  
C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis  
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries

Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University  
Paul Molnar, St. John's University  
Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network  
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary  
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews  
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University  
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews  
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

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Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to [www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).

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## **Grace Communion Seminary**

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

### **Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?**

Worship: to love God with all your mind.

Service: to help others apply truth to life.

Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.

Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"

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Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.

Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to [www.gcs.edu](http://www.gcs.edu). Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, [www.deac.org](http://www.deac.org). The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S.

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Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

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For more information, go to [www.ambascol.org](http://www.ambascol.org)

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