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THE NON-ASSUMPTUS AND THE VIRGIN BIRTH IN T.F. TORRANCE

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INTRODUCTION

In his Edinburgh Christology lectures, Torrance divides the biblical narrative of Christ's earthly life into what he calls 'the once and for all union of God and man', and 'the continuous union in the life of Jesus'.¹ The first concerns the event of the incarnation narrowly construed, and is Torrance's remarkably full exposition of the virgin birth. The second covers the historical life of Christ as it unfolds in the gospels. In this paper we shall expound the 'once and for all union' of God and man.

I. THE WORD MADE FLESH

In the fullness of time, as 'flesh of our flesh in Israel, the holy Son of God incorporated Himself into the continuity of sinful human existence'.² It is against this deep background in Israel that Torrance expounds the Johannine phrase 'the Word became flesh'.

All through the history of Israel that Word was behind the law and the cult, the prophets came forward under the constraint of the Word to insist that the Word must become flesh, that is, must be allowed to enter into the very existence of Israel, in judgment and mercy.³

Thus, 'John is saying that Jesus Christ is himself the tabernacle of God among men and women, himself the Word of God enshrined in the flesh'.⁴

The crucial question is what does John mean by the word 'flesh' (σάρξ)? Does this term describe 'some neutral human nature', or does it describe

¹ T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walter (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008). Chapter three is on the once and for all union and chapter four is on the continuous union.

² T.F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walter (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), p. 346.

³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 60.

⁴ *Ibid.*.

‘our actual human nature and existence in bondage and estrangement’, and thus under the judgment of God? Torrance answers emphatically:

It was certainly into a state of enmity that the Word penetrated in becoming flesh, into darkness and blindness, that is, into the situation where light and darkness are in conflict and where his own receive him not. There can be no doubt that the New Testament speaks of the flesh of Jesus as the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam’s fall, the human nature which seen from the cross is at enmity with God and needs to be reconciled to God. In becoming flesh the Word penetrated into hostile territory, into our human alienation and estrangement from God. When the Word became flesh, he became all that we are in our opposition to God.⁵

In the same context Torrance cites Romans 8:3, which affirms that Christ was made ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’. He consistently takes this to mean our actual twisted and disordered human nature.

While much of what Torrance says regarding the humanity assumed by Christ can be accounted for in traditional categories, such as assuming a mortal, corruptible body, facing temptation, bearing our curse, stepping into our situation under the wrath of God etc., it is clear that he has more than this in view. Early in his career, as shown in the 1938-39 Auburn Seminary lectures, there is some hesitancy about ascribing corruption, and thereby concupiscence, to the humanity of Christ.⁶ Nevertheless, the flesh which Jesus assumes is still called ‘the actual form of our humanity under the fall’, and ‘is not to be thought of in some neutral sense, but as really *our* flesh’.⁷ In a 1941 essay, Torrance relates the immanence of God to the fact that ‘Christ was made sin for us’. In him, God comes ‘near to sinful man, inasmuch as he was ‘made in the likeness of sinful flesh’. ‘Lib-

⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 61. The phrase ‘the concrete form of our human nature marked by Adam’s fall’ comes straight from Barth. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957-81), I/2, p. 151.

⁶ See the respective discussions on the question of concupiscence in the early Torrance in Duncan Rankin, ‘Carnal Union with Christ in the Theology of T.F. Torrance’, Ph.D. diss (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 101-10; Joannes S.J. Guthridge, ‘The Christology of T.F. Torrance: Revelation and Reconciliation in Christ’, Ph.D. diss. (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1967), p. 158. Rankin’s helpful discussion is clouded by the erroneous assertion that the early Torrance denied that Jesus possessed a human will. Torrance’s remark that Jesus was created ‘without the will of fallen humanity’ simply means that the virgin birth was a ‘pure act of God’. T.F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), pp. 118-19.

⁷ Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, p. 121.

eral theology 'refuses to take the thought of this identification of God in Christ with human sin seriously', and thus must be charged with a false transcendence.⁸

The question at this early date is how and when the flesh Christ assumed is sanctified. In contrast to Edward Irving, who taught that, having assumed our fallen humanity, Christ remained sinless in it through the indwelling Holy Spirit, Torrance ascribes Christ's purity to his divine person.⁹ This purity is whole and intact from the onset of the union in the womb of the virgin Mary. 'In this union the flesh of Christ becomes holy.... Thus we are to think of Christ's flesh as perfectly and completely sinless in his own nature, and not simply in virtue of the Spirit as Irving puts it.'¹⁰ The result is that, after the virgin birth, the early Torrance speaks of Christ entering 'the sphere of our corrupted humanity', or 'our sphere of sin and temptation'.¹¹

Nevertheless, as early as 1954 Torrance affirms that Christ enters 'our estrangement in the contradiction of sin', 'penetrates into our sinful humanity', and works out reconciliation 'in the midst of our humanity and alienation'.¹² By 1956 he declares, 'though conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus was yet born in the womb of a sinner, within the compass of our sinful flesh'.¹³ We read of Christ being 'born into our alienation, our God-forsakenness and darkness', and growing up 'within our bondage and ignorance'.¹⁴ In this context he begins to speak of Christ 'bending back' the wayward will of man into submission to the will of God.¹⁵ Expressions of this sort occur with great frequency throughout Torrance's work and continue to the end of his career.

⁸ T.F. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', *Evangelical Quarterly* 13 (1941), 133.

⁹ Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 122-24. 'We cannot think of Jesus as having original sin, for his Person was Divine'.

¹⁰ Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, p. 122.

¹¹ Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, pp. 122-23.

¹² T.F. Torrance, 'The Atonement and the Oneness of the Church', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954), 247.

¹³ T.F. Torrance, 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', in *Essays in Christology for Karl Barth*, ed. T.H.L. Parker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1956), p. 18.

¹⁴ Torrance, 'The Place of Christology', p. 18. In 1958, we have the unambiguous statement that Christ 'was made in the likeness of the flesh of sin in order that he might condemn sin in our flesh, submit our fallen humanity to the divine judgment on the Cross, and so make expiation for our sin'. T.F. Torrance, 'What is the Church?' *Ecumenical Review* II (October 1958), 13.

¹⁵ Torrance, 'The Place of Christology', p. 18.

Thus, despite the early ambiguity, it is clear that when the Word became $\sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi$, he took 'our human nature as we have it in the fallen world'.¹⁶ This entry into our estate is total. It includes, importantly, the assumption of our fallen and 'diseased mind', for Christ enters 'the root of our estranged mental existence',¹⁷ and there works out 'reconciliation deep within the rational center of human being'.¹⁸

The importance of this doctrine for Torrance cannot be overstated:

One thing should be abundantly clear, that if Jesus Christ did not assume our fallen flesh, our fallen humanity, then our fallen humanity is untouched by his work – for 'the unassumed is the unredeemed',¹⁹ as Gregory Nazianzen put it.²⁰

This fundamental truth, which the church must relearn, having suppressed it,²¹ was the 'great soteriological principle of the early church',²² without which the fathers 'reckoned the church would be soteriologically and evangelically deficient'.²³ To deny it 'is to deny the very foundation

¹⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 62.

¹⁷ T.F. Torrance, 'The Reconciliation of Mind', *TSF Bulletin* 10, no. 3 (1987), 5.

¹⁸ T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1992), p. 39.

¹⁹ This phrase is also known by its Latin shorthand as the 'non-assumptus'. I shall use this phrase as equivalent to 'Christ's assumption of our fallen humanity'.

²⁰ Torrance, *Incarnation*, 62. See T.F. Torrance, 'The Atonement. The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Cross: The Atonement and the Moral Order', in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. by Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1992), pp. 237-38; Torrance, *Incarnation*, 201; T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church. Volume 1: Order and Disorder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 175-78; T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 104.

²¹ Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 39.

²² T.F. Torrance, 'The Legacy of Karl Barth (1886-1968)', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986), 306.

²³ Torrance, 'Reconciliation of Mind', p. 5. Here Torrance notes 'that is a truth which I first learned from my beloved Edinburgh teacher, H.R. Mackintosh, who had himself been profoundly influenced by the Christology of these Greek fathers. But it was only when I studied Karl Barth's account of this doctrine that its truth broke in upon my mind in a quite unforgettable way'. For more on the patristic background of the non-assumptus see T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 149-67; T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind: Reason, Order and Openness in Theology and Natural Science* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), pp. 6-11.

of our redemption in Christ.²⁴ Rejection of the non-assumptus leads to 'the Latin heresy', which consists of construing salvation in wholly forensic and external categories, and results in an instrumental conception of the humanity of Christ.²⁵ Torrance states the implication of the denial starkly. 'How could it be said that Christ really took our place, took our cause upon himself in order to redeem us? What could we then have to do with him?'²⁶ It would mean that the love of God had stopped short of union with us in our actual condition.²⁷

However, Torrance also asserts 'that in the very act of assuming our flesh the Word sanctified and hallowed it'.²⁸ Since Torrance conceives of the hypostatic union dynamically, this sanctifying and atoning action refers primarily to the whole of Christ's incarnate life. 'The atonement began with the virgin birth of Christ, entered upon active operation at His baptism and reached its culmination in the crucifixion—the whole of Christ's life and ministry were involved in the work of reconciliation as well as His death'.²⁹ It is the reality of this healing union, the subject of which is the holy Son of God, which enables Torrance to repeatedly affirm that Christ wears our sinful humanity sinlessly.³⁰ In the act of taking our flesh, and throughout his life in it, he does not do in the flesh what we do,

²⁴ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 1, p. 175.

²⁵ T.F. Torrance, 'Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 39 (1986), 476-79; Torrance, 'Atonement and Moral Order', p. 238; Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 40.

²⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 62. 'Otherwise our actual human nature, mental and physical, would not have been brought within the sanctifying and renewing activity of the Saviour'. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, p. 104. If salvation 'does not take place in the ontological depths of human being', then 'there is no profound cleansing of the roots of the human conscience through the blood of Christ, no radical transformation or rebirth of human being in him'. Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 62.

²⁷ T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 201. 'Although it was not often perceived, the really fatal elements derived from an Apollinarian orientation in Christology and soteriology, namely, failure to appreciate the principle that what Christ has not taken into himself from us has not been saved, together with failure to appreciate the fact that if Christ did not have a human mind or a rational soul, the Son of God did not really become incarnate in human being, and his love stopped short of union with us in our actual condition'.

²⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 63.

²⁹ Torrance, 'Atonement and Oneness', p. 252.

³⁰ Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 371.

namely, sin.³¹ In fact, both early and later in his career, Torrance affirms the impossibility of sin based on the divine subject of the incarnation. 'If God the Word became flesh, and God the Word is the subject of the incarnation, how could God sin?'³²

Our concern here is not with how this is worked out in the continuous union of Christ's life of obedience, but rather with the once for all event of the virgin birth. While Torrance views these as inseparable aspects of one complex event, there are distinct moments in the overall movement,³³ and thus the virgin birth can be distinguished from the whole.

The *egeneto*³⁴ refers to a completed event, one that has taken place once and for all in the union of God and man in Jesus Christ; but it is also a historical event, a dynamic event, a real happening in the time of this world which is coincident with the whole historical life of Jesus. While therefore the incarnation refers in one sense to that unique event when the Word entered time and joined human existence, it also refers to the whole life and work of Jesus, from his birth at Bethlehem to his resurrection from the dead.³⁵

The result is that 'the incarnation is itself the *sanctification* of our human life in Jesus Christ'.³⁶ He sanctifies our fallen human nature *both* 'in the very act of assumption and all through his holy life lived in it from begin-

³¹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 63. 'In the concrete likeness of the flesh of sin, he is unlike the sinner.'

³² Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 63. For the earlier view, see the Augustinian discussion of peccability in Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, pp. 125-30.

³³ Torrance, 'Atonement and Oneness', p. 248.

³⁴ The reference is to the word translated 'made' or 'became' in John 1:14.

³⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 67. We feel there is a lack of conceptual clarity here. If the 'egeneto' is itself a completed event, and if it *also* refers to, and *is coincident with*, the whole historical life, it is difficult to see how any differentiation can be maintained. Yet, Torrance does make distinctions within the one movement.

³⁶ In assuming our fallen nature he 'began its redemption and healing'. Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 204. '...that identification of himself with us in our sin, is already our assumption and exaltation', but this saving union 'reaches its supreme point in the cross'. Torrance, *Atonement*, p. 150. The passion 'began with his very birth... but it was in the Cross itself that it had its telos or consummation'. T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 154. Alternatively, the resurrection is seen as the telos: 'atoning reconciliation began to be actualised with the conception and birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary', and 'was brought to its triumphant fulfillment... in the resurrection'. Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 41; Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 1, p. 242.

ning to end'.³⁷ Thus, the virgin birth, what Torrance calls the 'incarnation in its narrower sense', is a redeeming event.³⁸ With this background, we turn to Torrance's exposition of the virgin birth in the New Testament.

II. THE VIRGIN BIRTH³⁹

1. John. Surprisingly, Torrance spends very little time on the virgin birth in the synoptic gospels.⁴⁰ The theologically substantive points he makes comes from texts in John and Paul, which are not always seen as references to the virgin birth. Regarding John 1:13, 'who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God', Torrance asks if 'who were born' should be singular, in which case the reference would be to Jesus, or plural, where the reference would be to believers. Even granting the plural reading, he sees an 'extended reference to the virgin birth', in that the word for man is ἀνδρός and not ἀνθρώπου, that is, a male or a husband, and not man generically.⁴¹

³⁷ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 155. The incarnation in the broader sense is not just a once for all event, but includes the whole incarnate life of Christ 'from his birth of the virgin Mary to his resurrection'. T.F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 96.

³⁸ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 156; T.F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996), p. lxxxv; Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 82. In this context of the virgin birth as a redeeming event, Torrance adds: 'In his holy assumption of our unholy humanity, his purity wipes away our impurity, his holiness covers our corruption'.

³⁹ Throughout this discussion Torrance is indebted to Barth, *CD*, I/2 pp. 172-202. See also T.F. Torrance, 'Karl Barth and Patristic Theology', in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, ed. by J. Thompson (Allison Park, PA.: Pickwick Publications, 1986), p. 233. The material in this section from the *Incarnation* volume of the Christology lectures appears, with very little change, in T.F. Torrance, 'The Doctrine of the Virgin Birth', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 12 (1994), 8-25.

⁴⁰ There is, however, this forceful assertion: 'The genealogy of Jesus recorded in the gospel according to St. Matthew showed that Jesus was incorporated into a long line of sinners...he made the generations of humanity his very own, summing up in himself our sinful stock, precisely in order to forgive, heal and sanctify it in himself...Thus atoning reconciliation began to be actualized with the conception and birth of Jesus of the Virgin Mary.' Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 41.

⁴¹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 90. The editor notes here that the NIV has 'a husband's will'. In addition, Torrance adduces manuscript and, in his view, more weighty patristic evidence for the singular reading.

What this does is establish a correspondence between Christ's sanctifying birth 'from above'⁴² and our own rebirth out of sin. Thus, in light of 1 John 5:18,⁴³ Torrance concludes, 'it is upon Christ's unique birth once and for all that our birth depends and in his birth that we are given to share'.⁴⁴

What happened once and for all, in utter uniqueness in Jesus Christ, happens in every instance of rebirth into Christ, when Christ enters into our hearts and recreates us. Just as e was born from above of the Holy Spirit, so we are born from above of the Holy Spirit through sharing in his birth.⁴⁵

The implication is that in baptism we are born from above because we are incorporated into Christ's birth of the Spirit from above. Thus baptism 'reposes upon the virgin birth of Christ as well as upon his death and resurrection'.⁴⁶

2. Paul. Torrance sees a similar pattern in the way Paul contrasts Christ and Adam. 'Christ as the new man comes likewise from God. His likeness

⁴² He takes being 'born from above' in John 3 as having 'primary objective reference to Christ himself' and cites Irenaeus as a witness.

⁴³ 'We know that any one born of God does not sin, but he who was born of God keeps him.'

⁴⁴ Here we note Torrance's persistent conviction that there are not two unions (the incarnational union of Christ with us, and our spiritual union with him), but one union of Christ with us in which we are given to share. See Rankin, 'Carnal Union', pp. 119-45; Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance*, Issues in Systematic Theology, 11 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 201-2; Phee Seng Kang, 'The Concept of the Vicarious Humanity of Christ in the Theology of Thomas Forsyth Torrance', Ph.D. diss. (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 1983), pp. 307-8; Torrance, *Mediation*, pp. 66-7; Torrance, *The School of Faith*, pp. cvi-cxi. 'There are not two unions, the one which Christ has with us which he established in his incarnation, and another which we have with him through the Spirit or through faith. There is only one union which Christ has created between himself and us and us and himself, and in which we participate through the Spirit which he has given us.' T.F. Torrance, 'The Mission of the Church', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966), 133. What is often under emphasized in this connection is the fact that it is Christ's assumption of our actual twisted humanity, conceived in an ontologically realist manner, which drives this notion of a singular union.

⁴⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 91. A virtually identical discussion is found in T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church. Volume 2: The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 118-19.

to Adam was not in sin, but in coming into existence and in representative capacity'. The normal New Testament word for human birth, γεννάω, is 'not used of Adam and Paul never uses it of Christ'.⁴⁷ First Corinthians 15:47⁴⁸ means Christ, like Adam, came into being by divine initiative, and is a virtual affirmation of the virgin birth.

Galatians 4 is viewed in much the same way. Throughout the chapter Paul uses γεννάω to speak of human birth,⁴⁹ but in Galatians 4:4 he uses γίγνομαι (γενόμενον) to speak of the earthly origins of Jesus.⁵⁰ 'That is the strongest disavowal of birth by ordinary human generation in regard to the birth of Jesus.'⁵¹

Since Christ was 'made'⁵² of a woman, made under the law...that we might receive the adoption of sons',⁵³ and Galatians 3 links our sonship with being baptized into Christ, Torrance concludes:

To be incorporated by baptism into Christ is to partake of his Spirit of sonship which he is able to bestow on us men and women because of his own coming into existence of a woman, as a real man. So Paul can also say, like John, when Christ was born I was born a son of God, for in baptism I partake of Christ and his Spirit of sonship.⁵⁴

Thus, for Paul and John, the virgin birth shows its deep significance by being implicitly woven into the texture of their theology.

⁴⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 92.

⁴⁸ 'The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven'.

⁴⁹ Galatians. 4:23, 24, 29.

⁵⁰ See also Romans 1:3 and Philippians 2:7.

⁵¹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 93.

⁵² In accord with the linguistic argument, 'made', following the KJV, not 'born' is Torrance's preferred translation.

⁵³ Galatians 4:4.

⁵⁴ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 93. 'St. Paul could say, 'It pleased God to reveal His Son in me'. In a profound sense the Word becomes flesh in the Christian by his incorporation into Christ...and that is why real faith is always a virgin birth in the soul, for Christ, as St. Paul says, becomes formed within the believer.' Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 2, p. 70. 'When were you born again? In your conversion? In your baptism? The profoundest answer you can give to that question is, when Jesus Christ was born from above by the Holy Spirit. The birth of Jesus was the birth of the new man, and it is in Him and through sharing in His birth that we are born again'. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 2, p. 128.

3. The Virgin Birth in Doctrinal Perspective. The virgin birth is not a theory explaining how the Son became man, but rather 'an indication of what happened within humanity when the Son of God became man'.⁵⁵ Thus, it cannot be 'understood apart from the whole mystery of Christ', for it is a sign pointing to the mystery of the hypostatic union. Nevertheless, it does have much to tell us about the way this mystery has taken 'in its insertion into our fallen human existence at the very beginning of the earthly life of Jesus'.⁵⁶

Since the virgin birth points to the mystery of Christ's person, and the resurrection reveals that mystery, the two are inseparable. The virgin birth 'and the resurrection of Jesus from the virgin tomb are twin signs which mark out the mystery of Christ'.⁵⁷ This is the case because the incarnation is a once for all act of assumption of our sinful flesh, and a continuous union 'carried all the way through our estranged state under bondage into the freedom and triumph of the resurrection'.⁵⁸ At the virgin birth the mystery is veiled because it 'is inserted into the flesh of sin, the *sarx hamartias*, as St. Paul called it'.⁵⁹ The resurrection authenticates the virgin birth. 'It is the unveiling of what was veiled, the resurrection

⁵⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, pp. 94-5. Here we see again that the virgin birth into our humanity is conceived as a compressed version of the dynamic hypostatic union wrought out in Christ's historical life.

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, pp. 95-6.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 96; Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 2, p. 160; T.F. Torrance, 'The First-Born of All Creation', *Life and Work* (December 1976), pp. 12, 14. Like the denial of the non-assumptus, 'to bracket off the Virgin Birth from the death and resurrection of Christ, inevitably leads to a deficient understanding of the atonement as only an external transaction expressible in legal terms'. T.F. Torrance, 'The Truth of the Virgin Birth', *Herald Scotland*, 14 January 1994. The realist manner in which Torrance sees our rebirth as reposing on, or participating in, both of these 'twin signs' is seen in the answer he gave to a highlander's question during his time as moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Asked if he was born again, Torrance replied in the affirmative. Asked when he had been born again, Torrance replied 'when Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary and rose from the virgin tomb'. Torrance, *Mediation*, pp. 85-6.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 96. 'Both these acts were sovereign creative acts of God's grace in and upon and out of our fallen humanity'. Torrance finds the assumption of our fallen humanity, and thus the bracketing of the virgin birth and the resurrection, as well as our own participation in his birth from above in our baptism in Irenaeus. T.F. Torrance, 'The Kerygmatic Proclamation of the Gospel: The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching of Irenaeus of Lyons', *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 37 (1992), 116-17.

⁵⁹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 97.

out of our mortality of what was inserted into it and recreated within it'.⁶⁰ The humiliation of Jesus, as well as the new life of our humanity, begins at Bethlehem, and both are carried through into the unveiling of the resurrection. Thus, 'the virgin birth is the basis of the mystery of the resurrection'.⁶¹

Torrance summarizes his teaching on the virgin birth under a series of headings. First, it establishes the reality of Jesus' humanity. There is both continuity and discontinuity here.⁶² He was born in 'the same flesh as our flesh', yet 'he was not born as other men are of the will of the flesh'.⁶³ This also entails the denial of any synergism. Man is involved, 'but he is the predicate, not the subject, not the lord of the event'.⁶⁴ Second, the virgin birth entails the disqualification of human capability in approaching God. Third, the virgin birth is not an entirely new act of creation, 'not a *creatio ex nihilo*, but a *creatio ex virgine*'.⁶⁵ It presupposes the first creation and its fall, and is the beginning of the new creation.⁶⁶ Fourth, the virgin birth represents a break in the sinful autonomy of man. Our very existence is 'involved in original sin'.⁶⁷ His birth into our condition 'far from acquiescing in its sin, resists it, sanctifying what sin had corrupted, and unites it again to the purity of God'.⁶⁸ Thus, in contrast to the doctrine of the immaculate conception of Mary, we have event which means 'that out of Mary a sinner, by pure act of God, Jesus is born ... and that his very birth sanctified Mary, for it is through her Son that she is redeemed

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² 'It was a real birth...Jesus was not a product of a casual historical continuity, nevertheless the Incarnation was a coming of God right into the midst of human conditions. Jesus was not created *ex nihilo*, but *ex virgine*, therefore right in the midst of human choices and decisions'. Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', p. 130. See T.F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 14.

⁶³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 99. 'The word became flesh, not through any synergistic activity, but a gracious decision on the part of God... Jesus was not born because of the sovereignty of man, not through the will of the flesh.' Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', p. 130.

⁶⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 100.

⁶⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, pp. 99-100.

⁶⁷ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 100. It is important to note that in calling the virgin birth a sanctifying act Torrance habitually, as here, brings it into close connection with the removal of original sin. Yet it is clear that it is only so inasmuch as it is the origin of the continuous union carried out in Christ's whole life. See Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 82.

⁶⁸ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 100.

and given to share in the purity and holiness of God'.⁶⁹ The setting aside of human autonomy is seen in the fact that 'man in the person of Joseph is set aside'.⁷⁰ Fifth, the virgin birth is the archetype for all of God's gracious actions. Mary, seen as passive and receptive, is 'the normative pattern of the believer in his or her attitude toward the Word announced in the gospel, which tells men and women of the divine act of grace and decision taken already on their behalf in Christ'.⁷¹ This point is thus a fuller statement of the fact that our rebirth reposes on Christ's birth of the virgin. All of this means that in the virgin birth 'we have a powerful force keeping the church faithful to the basic doctrine of salvation and justification by the grace of God alone'.⁷²

III. ANALYSIS OF THE ONCE FOR ALL UNION IN THE VIRGIN BIRTH

While Torrance provides a robust and illuminating theological discussion of the virgin birth, his affirmation of the non-assumptus in this context raises a number of questions.⁷³ Torrance is emphatic that Jesus 'incorporated himself into the continuity of sinful human existence'. The

⁶⁹ Ibid. Torrance sees the emergence of the doctrine of the immaculate conception as the long term result of denying that in the virgin birth Christ assumes our sinful flesh. 'Thus there developed especially in Latin theology from the fifth century a steadily growing rejection of the fact that it was our alienated, fallen, and sinful humanity that the Holy Son of God assumed... which forced Roman Catholic theology into the strange notion of the immaculate conception'. Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 40. Also, Torrance, 'Latin Heresy', pp. 476-7; Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 1, p. 149. Of course, classical Protestantism denies the assumption of sinful flesh by Christ and also rejects the immaculate conception. While Torrance acknowledges this state of affairs in the West, he sees an equally strange notion in the 'fundamentalist conception of "verbal inspiration" of the Bible'. Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 40. For him, the assumption of our fallen humanity entails the assumption of the fallen human word of the Bible.

⁷⁰ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 100.

⁷¹ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 101; Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 95. In the context of a discussion of predestination, Torrance sees in the relation between the human and divine in the virgin birth the rejection of three common soteriological options. 'We have here therefore a repudiation of adoptionism, that is, correspondingly, Pelagianism ... the repudiation of docetism, that is, correspondingly, determinism ... the repudiation of Arianism, that is synergism.' Torrance, 'Predestination in Christ', p. 131.

⁷² Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 104.

⁷³ We shall leave aside the issue of whether $\sigma\rho\chi$ in John can bear the sense which Torrance gives it, since his exegetical case rests more with the Pauline texts in Romans 8:3 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, especially the former.

virgin birth, as we have repeatedly seen, despite the absence of a human father, 'was truly of the flesh just like that of all other human beings'.⁷⁴ Jesus, within the matrix of Israel, assumes our fallen, alienated humanity. Yet we are also told that the virgin birth represents a break in the sinful autonomy of man. It is a sovereign act where man and his sinful will, 'man in the person of Joseph, is set aside'.⁷⁵ Christ 'breaks through the continuity of adamic existence and opens up a new continuity in a new adam, a new humanity'. Thus, Jesus 'was therefore *both* in continuity and discontinuity with our fallen humanity'.⁷⁶

The basic framework on which this analysis rests is beyond dispute. The virgin birth as an event, through the flesh of Mary in the womb of Israel, has horizontal continuity with our humanity. In addition, through the sovereign work of the Spirit in the descent of the Son, it vertically intersects that history, so there is also discontinuity. On the traditional view, the continuity lies in the fact that Christ is fully human, mortal, and subject to temptation. The discontinuity lies in his human nature being preserved from intrinsic corruption. This, with all due respect for the mysterious ground on which we tread, gives Jesus continuity with our humanity and discontinuity with respect to its 'fallenness'. Torrance, however, affirms continuity and discontinuity with our *fallen* humanity. This is a less clear conception.

Of course, the reason for this break in sinful continuity is that the virgin birth is a redeeming, sanctifying event. When holy Son of God unites himself to our corruption, the incarnation in the 'narrower sense' cannot but be a healing event. Torrance can speak, as we've seen above, of this sanctification as if it were fully accomplished. The rationale for this lies in the holistic way he views the hypostatic union as a single, complex, dynamic whole. Incarnation and atonement entail one another. The person and work of Christ are inseparable. The work of Christ is not 'added to' the hypostatic union, but simply the hypostatic union in action.⁷⁷ Thus, the 'parts' in the historical existence of the Son interpenetrate one another and cannot be artificially separated. As a result, since the hypostatic union commences in the virgin birth, Torrance sometimes speaks of it in terms of what is accomplished by the union as a whole.

⁷⁴ Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 151.

⁷⁵ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 100.

⁷⁶ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 94.

⁷⁷ 'Reconciliation is not something added to hypostatic union so much as the hypostatic union itself at work in expiation and atonement.' Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 1, p. 240.

Two things are certain. Torrance grants that the union has certain 'moments', and his whole treatment of the life of Christ takes seriously the linear sequence and distinguishable quality of the events in view. Thus, organic inseparability notwithstanding, we cannot simply opt out of chronological questions. Second, he is emphatic that the post virgin birth humanity of Christ is our flesh of sin, for he wrestles with it, 'bends it back', throughout the whole course of his life. Large swaths of Torrance's analysis assume not only the full presence of our corruption throughout Christ's life, but the ever increasing intensity of the conflict between our sin and the faithfulness of God within the incarnate constitution of the mediator.⁷⁸ Strikingly, he can even say 'that the union of God and man in Jesus Christ is not thought of as somehow ontologically complete at Bethlehem'.⁷⁹ The hypostatic union does not reach its telos until the cross and resurrection.

This leaves us with a few critical questions. In what sense does the virgin birth sanctify the humanity Christ assumed?⁸⁰ What is the relationship between the sanctification in the virgin birth and the sanctification throughout the whole life of Christ? Is there something analogous to the definitive, progressive, and final sanctification of the believer at work here? In what state does this healing assumption leave the post virgin birth humanity of Christ? Put in Torrance's own terms, just how is Christ's humanity our actual, concrete humanity marked by the fall, *and* in discontinuity with our fallen humanity? Any discontinuity at all, it would seem, leaves Christ with something less than our fallen humanity at the very outset of his life. Of course, the ground of the discontinuity lies in the fact that our diseased humanity is now united to the Word of God; but if this were the *sum* of the discontinuity, as much of Torrance's post virgin birth analysis seems to assume, why is 'man, in the person of Joseph', set aside?⁸¹

⁷⁸ For one example, see T.F. Torrance, 'The Atoning Obedience of Christ', *Moravian Theological Seminary Bulletin* (Fall, 1959), 70-1.

⁷⁹ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, p. 14. 'It begins there by entry into the enmity between the justice of God and our sin, but it is completed in the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.'

⁸⁰ Donald Macleod, 'Dr. T.F. Torrance and Scottish Theology: A Review Article', *Evangelical Quarterly* 72 (2000), 67. After citing a couple of Torrance's assertions on the virgin birth as a sanctifying event, Macleod says 'such statements desperately need clarification'.

⁸¹ Would not a birth, albeit from above, in which, from the moment of conception, the Word assumed the humanity of Mary and Joseph be more in accord with assuming our fallen humanity?

Clearly, *something* redemptive happens to our humanity in the very act of its assumption.⁸² Torrance himself attributes it to the joint action of the second and third persons of the Trinity. It is the Son and Word of God who takes on our flesh, and the conception itself is a *creatio ex virgine*, a transcendent 'act of the Spirit...which breaks into our humanity'.⁸³ Yet, we are not told precisely what this narrow atoning event consists of, or how it relates to the whole, and that lack of clarity hangs over his subsequent discussion of Christ's life.

We can focus our concern here in the following manner. We shall refer to this as the issue of dyotheletic⁸⁴ clarity. It is clear that in assuming our flesh, Christ assumes a will which is enslaved, alienated, and in bondage to sin. Torrance regularly uses the harshest 'reformed' language about the bondage of the will Christ assumes. What precisely happens to this will and, by implication, to the nature of which it is a part, in the virgin birth?

If it is *healed* in the act of being assumed, then Christ's human nature, post virgin birth, is not in fact fallen, and this is clearly not Torrance's doctrine. If the human will is *regenerated* in the act of assumption, then Christ's post virgin birth humanity would be equivalent to our redeemed, but sub-eschatological, humanity and this is clearly not Torrance's doctrine. If the human will is *enabled*⁸⁵ in the act of assumption, giving it a measure of freedom whereby it can deliberate, wrestle against itself, and choose obedience, then Christ's post virgin birth humanity would be *almost* our fallen humanity, but not identical with it, and this is clearly not Torrance's doctrine. Yet, it seems that this third option, or something like it, is what Torrance assumes, since it alone allows the humanity of Jesus to be a genuine actor in synergistically (along with the divine nature and the presence of the Spirit) 'bending back' the fallen will in conformity to the divine will. This would create a two stage process. First, in the virgin birth, the will is sanctified, thereby gaining a measure of deliberative capacity. Then, throughout the dynamic, historical union, into the telos of the resurrection, the will is fully healed. This appears to simply convert a reformed conception of the fallen human will into a more 'semi-pelagian' one by means of the virgin birth.

We are fully aware that this 'ordo salutis' characterization is not something Torrance ever attempts. He insists on the holistic nature of what happens to our humanity in Christ. The union *as a whole* is what he calls

⁸² Even Mary's humanity is said to be sanctified by the virgin birth.

⁸³ Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 95.

⁸⁴ Referring to the two wills, human and divine, in the person of Christ.

⁸⁵ Here we have in mind something weaker than the previous option which left Christ with a humanity identical to that of Christians.

the 'great *paliggenesia*' of our humanity.⁸⁶ Yet, as we indicated above, the question cannot be avoided, precisely because he insists that the virgin birth is itself a sanctification of our nature. The presence of one complex, interlocked event, does not, even in his own exposition, eliminate sequence and decisive moments. His silence on the nature of 'initial' sanctification in the decisive moment the virgin birth results in a lack of clarity about the fallen nature of the assumed humanity. More narrowly, this raises the question of dyotheletic clarity. That is, precisely how does the fallen human will of Christ get 'bent back' into conformity with the divine will by the vicarious *humanity* of Christ? The forceful assertion of the non-assumptus, along with a once for all act of sanctification in the virgin birth, leads to a lack of clarity as to the status of the assumed humanity, and especially the human will of Christ, after the moment of conception.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Torrance, 'Atoning Obedience', p. 71; Torrance, *Incarnation*, p. 119; Torrance, *The School of Faith*, p. xxxviii. The reference is to the Greek word translated 'regeneration'. See Matthew 19:28, Titus 3:5.

It is significant that the New Testament does not use the term regeneration (*paliggenesia*), as so often modern evangelical theology does, for what goes on in the human heart. It is used only of the great regeneration that took place in and through the Incarnation and of the final transformation of the world when Jesus Christ shall come again to judge the quick and the dead and make all things new.

Torrance is surely correct about the Matthew 19:28 text and its relation to the end of all things. But the Titus 3:5 text is almost surely about 'what happens in the human heart', since it is a *washing* of regeneration coordinate with the renewal of the Holy Spirit who was poured out *on us*. Torrance himself, in another context, sees the text as referring to Christian baptism. However, he sees Christian baptism as reposing on the baptism of Christ and, more decisively, upon the whole descent and ascent of the Son. 'The baptismal language of descent and ascent applies fundamentally to the descent of the Son of God into our mortal humanity and to His ascension to the right hand of the Father.' Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement*, 2, p. 109. See Torrance, *Incarnation*, pp. 76-7. It is in this sense that Torrance affirms 'the Gospel speaks of regeneration as wholly bound up with Jesus Christ'. Torrance, *Mediation*, p. 85.

⁸⁷ While we cannot show the implications of this for the continuous life of Christ here, let us state what seems to be the conclusion. In Torrance's exposition of Christ's human life we have a human will which is perfectly obedient, perpetually under condemnation (he 'condemns sin in the flesh' throughout his incarnate life) and in need of being 'bent back' to the divine will, progressively sanctified, and progressively hardened and finally reprobated (and, we might add, ontologically and not merely forensically) at the cross. This anomalous situation is rooted in the lack of clarity at the origin which we have discussed above.