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Participation and Atonement

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Participation and Atonement

ROGER NEWELL

How does the victory of Christ over sin and death impinge on my life nearly two thousand years later, so that, as Professor Torrance has described it, his death becomes my death and his resurrection my resurrection? I will respond to this question by briefly discussing two 'subject-centred appropriation' models and concluding with an 'object-centred participation' model. The meaning of these phrases will be unpacked as the discussion progresses. However, at the outset it is important to note that the object-centred model is based on a more radical understanding of the incarnation which has been advocated by Professor Torrance and which has ancient roots in certain Greek Fathers, that is, understanding Christ’s incarnation as a putting on of our fallen, sinful humanity. This understanding of the humanity of God in Christ will reinforce our decision to replace an appropriation-centred model with an object-centred participation in the life and death of Christ.

If it is true that this radical understanding of the depths of the divine descent into humanity deepens our insight into how our humanity is redeemed, I think it is also true that a knowledge of the human person gathered from the science of psychology deepens our understanding of the fallen humanity our Lord assumed, and thus both reshapes and enriches our understanding of Christ and the Christian’s victory over evil. TF Torrance has shown that empirical science has much to teach theology when theology relates its faith to the historical-empirical world God has created and redeemed. Similarly, I believe empirical

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2 TF Torrance, Christian Theology and Scientific Culture (Belfast, 1980), pp. 7-9.
psychology's insights into our humanity deepen our understanding of the humanity which our Lord has worn and recovered. I will use certain analyses of William James and the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, not as an alternative to proper atonement theology, but as an exercise in integrative theological thinking enriched by a deeper knowledge of our creatureliness.

The first appropriation-centred response to Christ's victory over evil we shall look at is its use as a moral inspiration for our own ethical struggle. This response can be observed in times and thinkers as diverse as Thomas A Kempis in the fourteenth century, and Charles Finney, the American evangelist in the nineteenth century. A Kempis, to whom The Imitation of Christ is traditionally ascribed, gave classic expression to the piety which sprang from the movement known as the Brethren of the Common Life, and which had a profound influence on medieval Christendom. In The Imitation of Christ it is Christ's noble life of love which inspires and arouses our desire to be Christ-like and loving.\(^3\) Christ is the inspiring banner under whom we follow. Our task is to love as Christ loves. And A Kempis promises, 'if thou couldst empty thyself perfectly of all created things, Jesus would willingly dwell with thee'.\(^4\) This leaves us with one anxious, lingering question: how do I know I have emptied myself enough for Christ to dwell with me and share his victory?

Four centuries later, Pilgrims and Puritans from Europe arrived penniless on America's shores to build God's kingdom on earth. Through obedience, prayer and sheer hard work, many were convinced that America would be transformed into God's millenial kingdom. In Finney's thought, Jesus was the model of perfect, self-sacrificing love who inspires and stimulates reasonable people, endowed with freedom, to sacrifice their own interests for the good of their fellows. Therefore our task is to make ourselves new hearts or suffer the consequences of eternal pain.\(^5\) The nagging question remains, have I, after all, managed to change

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\(^3\) Thomas A Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 3:5.

\(^4\) Ibid., 2:7.

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my heart? This question became increasingly awkward, especially as, by the end of post civil war reconstruction, the anticipated moral transformation had run aground. Finney’s postmillenial confidence in man’s co-operation in building the kingdom of God was soon followed by his successor’s premillenial pessimism.

Nonetheless for those optimistic spirits not dampened by rigorous introspection (William James’s ‘healthy minded’), appropriating Christ’s victory grants an opportunity for a modest consolation upon surveying one’s own moral advance. This gentle inflation elevates the convert who successfully slays clearly identifiable dragons such as alcohol for the fundamentalist or big business for the social gospeller. However, our dilemma is larger than a struggle against a proscriptive list of sins which one (fortunately) rather adroitly avoids. The optimism of appropriating Christ’s moral victory resolves too easily the recalcitrance of human sin, which the Reformers had perceived as a radical disobedience pervading all our faculties including reason, common sense and even the noblest aspirations of human love. The very nature of man is corrupt.

If the moral optimist’s easy struggle fails to hear Isaiah’s judgment that all our righteousness is filthy rags, the anguished pessimist’s failed quest for moral victory engenders a damaging deflation for those whose introspective conscience is that which James describes as the ‘sick soul’. The fiercely self-critical makes an appalling discovery: every good act conceals a selfish motive and a further good deed left undone. When can one have assurance that every last evil has been confessed and confessed with sufficient contrition?

The inherent frustration of the struggle to appropriate Christ’s victory by worthy inner and outer acts prepares us for the other recurrent appropriation-centred response, namely, the utter passivity of absolute dependence whereby the inner moral struggle is abandoned and one surrenders fully to God’s victory on my

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W James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1958 (1901)), p. 137.

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behalf. William James describes the surrender of the medieval mystic as the feeling that one's will has been emptied and one has been 'grasped and held by a superior power'. Thus St Theresa described her experience or vision of union with God as a being 'wholly asleep' regarding the things of the world and herself, 'deprived of every feeling', her understanding 'so stricken with inactivity that she neither knows what she loves, nor in what manner she loves, nor what she wills ... Thus does God, when he raises a soul to union with himself suspend the natural action of all her faculties. She neither sees, hears, nor understands, so long as she is united to God'.

Nineteenth (and twentieth) century American evangelicals put this appropriation model more simply and marketably: 'let go and let God'. If you do both, you cannot fail to appropriate Christ's victory for your life. In their literature and preaching, there would follow very attractive success stories of those who have surrendered. 8 Judging by the testimonies public and published, this model appears to work for some. But others have with increasing weariness struggled to surrender and to claim the victory by faith, only to fail again and again to maintain the 'letting go'. Just to add condemnation to failure, there would always be someone nearby ready to heap guilt upon you by suggesting that (your) lack of victory is due to (your) hidden unbelief. Either way, in victory or defeat, the appropriating subject is given centre stage. The believer's failure, like his successes, too easily becomes the focus of faith detached from the faithfulness of God. Ironically, when the height of our human response is described as a sleeplike relaxation whereby God

7Quoted in James, op. cit., pp. 313-4.
8Franks, op. cit., p. 149. Franks has documented how this surrender and passivity before God became the dominant model of evangelical Christianity, following the loss of cultural leadership in the later nineteenth century. It was advocated by the leaders of the Keswick movement in England and by Americans such as Moody and Tumbull. James and Franks have documented the striking resemblance of the mind-healing techniques of passive relaxation and concentration in such overtly divergent groups as Christian Science, medieval mysticism and the positive mental attitude school. Cf. James, op.
cit., pp. 87-8, 96-7 and Frank, op. cit., p. 149.
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energizes our lives, we have a focus which is simultaneously a serious devaluation and denigration of our human response. The same devaluation occurs when one describes our faith or our love as merely a particle or stream of the divine love. If our faith was an actual part of the divine ocean, as Barth remarked, the quality of our Christian living and loving 'could not and would not be so weak and puny'.

In both appropriation-centred models, the subject is 'thrown back upon himself' as James Torrance would say, in the former to achieve tangible fruits of repentance worthy of the Gospel, in the latter to attain an inner state of faith or serenity. In addition, failure or emotional pain is a sign, never of a pilgrim taking up one's cross and stretching atrophied spiritual muscles, but of unbelief, which one must eliminate. Whether by appropriation through imitation or inner surrender, the agent becomes burdened with the demands of law: to surrender or to work. Both models inadvertently precipitate humanity's twin dilemmas of the inflation of pride as we triumph or the deflation of despair should we fail to appropriate.

The Gospel, however, is larger than a necessary means to my beatitude. It is by replacing the subject-centred model of appropriation with an object-centred participation in Christ, that we can revalue our de facto narcissistic focus on 'my conversion', 'my victory', as the goal and Christ's death pro nobis as the essential means. Paul's summons to be baptized into Christ's death is a summons for the subject to give priority to God's activity in Christ, to understand our life as hid with God in Christ (Col. 3:3). In other words, participation in Christ rather than appropriation of Christ for my benefit repentantly redirects our focus to knowing and loving God for his sake, thereby reflecting the quality of God's own love for us. A theology of participation integrates our faith and our works as a grateful response to the initiating faithfulness of God and makes discipleship an ongoing and natural development of faith. Thus one can both take seriously the warfare of the Christian against

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8K Barth, CD IV/2, p. 785.
Christ in our place

the powers and principalities (Eph. 6) and the hopeful mood of the Gospels, without tumbling into one of pride’s twin errors. But this possibility is contingent upon centring our subjectivity and spirituality in christology, particularly a christology which reckons Jesus Christ as the place where my sinful humanity, now inflated, now deflated, is encountered by God, judged and reconciled.

Here Jung’s psychological insights into the healing of neurosis enrich our appreciation of an object-centred participation, leading up beyond the impasse of serenity or struggle. Jung’s inquiry into the human psyche convinced him that there were struggles larger than those exposed by Freud through the analysis of our personal childhood. Using the symbols given to him through his own exploration, he charted this unmapped territory with the help of datum points which he described as the archetypes of the collective unconscious (shadow, anima, animus, etc.). Jung’s empirical investigations into the human psyche convinced him that Jesus Christ functioned in Western society as the numinous paradigm of wholeness (the integrated Self), who releases moral energy in those who respond to his self-giving love. Curiously, Jung insisted that the humanity of Jesus was irrelevant for analytical psychology, since as a perfect being, he himself had no inner conflict between good and evil. Hence for Jung we participate in a psychic archetype of the true Self (Christ), not a person in whom our inner cosmic history and the activity of world history intersect. Similarly, Jung rejected the Christian doctrine of the trinity as incomplete because a trinity lacks conflict with the shadow (the inferior self) and hence is immature. Jung preferred a quaternity to the trinity for the sake of psychological wholeness.

It is significant that both of Jung’s psychological criticisms of Christian doctrine disappear when one defines perfection in the wake of the incarnate Son’s embrace and healing of our sinful


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humanity. Then we see in Christ a place of divine warfare whereby our moral agony is lifted up and engaged as God’s atoning activity in Christ. Though his death on the cross is the culminating conflict, his entire life is atoning, for throughout he has grappled, from womb to tomb, with ancient and primordial conscious and unconscious conflicts endemic to our humanity. In Christ, God gathers up humanity’s groaning and travail within his own flesh and makes it part of God’s history, which culminates in the resurrection triumph out of failure.

Here then is a response to Christ’s victory which is not cast in terms of our appropriating the benefits of Christ’s victory through moral effort or our cessation of effort. Here is rather an interior portrait of our participation through the koinonia of the Spirit in the one true man who has experienced the agonizing conflict between sin and love. This conflict will lead us also to our daily little crosses, whose design weaves a healing tapestry across our divergent experiences of joy and sorrow, serenity and struggle, culminating in death and resurrection. When our life’s conflicts, failures and triumphs are intersected by the atoning journey of the Son into the far country, our life becomes a pilgrimage of relational union with the One who was made perfect through what he suffered (Heb. 5:8). We participate by the Spirit in the Son who bent back our twisted humanity as he ‘grew in wisdom, stature and favour with God and man’ (Luke 2:52). The word ‘grew’ (prokopto) is literally a nautical expression meaning ‘to beat one’s way forward blow by blow’. Participation in the prokope of God sheds light on certain Pauline themes. For example, Paul uses the same word to tell anxious Philippians that his very imprisonment is advancing the Gospel (Phil. 1:12). Similarly, Paul at once accepts the prophecy of Acts 21 that he will be jailed if he proceeds to Jerusalem and yet feels compelled to continue, knowing that God had advanced the Gospel by lifting up his Son high on a cross and thereby had drawn all men unto him (John 12:32).13

13 Phil. 3:10-11. Cf. also Acts 14:22, Eph. 4:12-16, 2 Cor. 4:8-10, 16.
What precisely does our participation in Christ look and feel like when our sinful humanity responds to the Gospel? It is the merit of Jung’s analysis to provide a picture of the process whereby narcissism is transformed into wholeness. (It is a picture we shall recognize). Whenever the movement from narcissism to love occurs, the psychological consequences are epitomized by the symbol of the cross. Jung categorically states that all personal development leads to an ever menacing awareness of the conflict between good and evil which involves nothing less than a crucifixion of the ego, its agonizing suspension between two irreconcilable opposites. Participation in Christ or being buried in Christ’s death (Paul), cannot be reduced to a mystical relaxation technique of surrender, for it describes a profound inner conflict whereby the subject begins to make unconscious struggles conscious. Jung describes the terrain the neurotic or schizophrenic must traverse in order to experience the healing process whereby one ceases projecting inner conflict (or repressing), takes responsibility for them, and then voluntarily participates in the crucifixion of the narcissistic ego. Unless I take up my little cross daily and daily lose my life to find it, I will project my inner conflicts and fight a legion of external battles and opponents who become not adversaries to agree with quickly or enemies to love, but rivals to defeat. And who after observing would doubt that many theological debates with external opponents are compensatory jousts fought in order to avoid inner battles and a radical repentance within our inner selves?

I believe our pilgrimage of participation in the Gospel, when seen in a dimension of psychological depth, reveals a baptism of the self into the death and resurrection of Christ which is both more costly than a selective and self-congratulating imitation, and is a more profound description of our encounter with God’s activity of grace on my behalf than a mental-emotional technique of

14Collected Works, vol. 9, pt. II, p. 44.
15This is corroborated by Alfred Adler’s description of mental illness as the refusal to die daily. Quoted in Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death (New York, 1973), p. 265.
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relaxation and surrender. For as we participate in the Gospel, we come to realize that God uses man not only when he is a passive instrument, but as we share in the life of Christ, we truly experience our human capacity to create, explore, repent and serve. It is important to understand that the creative love of the Father never seeks self-denial or self-sacrifice as an end in itself or as inherently virtuous. The narcissistic ego is not to be crushed, but judged, forgiven and healed by its baptism into Christ’s life and death. As CS Lewis’s Screwtape reminds us, God desires to put to death our self-preferential love in order to replace it with a new kind of self-love, ‘a charity and gratitude for all selves, including (sic) their own ... for he always gives back with his right hand what he has taken away with his left’.16

All the models we have discussed grasp the importance of getting beyond detached conceptual contemplation of ideas about the atonement. It is never adequate to merely analyse the atonement intellectually. However, the two appropriation models we have discussed are cast in such a way as to isolate us within a self-preoccupied, narcissistic model, which severely minimizes the power of Christ’s atonement to burst away our old wineskins of anthropocentric strategies. The twin movements of Christ’s participation in our fallen creatureliness and our ‘blow by blow’ participation in his life, death and resurrection cast us loose upon the gracious sea of the Trinity. I thereby allow myself to be caught up in the form of death and resurrection.

We may describe the form of dying and rising chronologically, but in daily living it is rarely a succession of events. Death and resurrection interpenetrate all the time.17 It is by this pilgrimage that the entire person, both intellectually and emotionally, receives and stands under the imprint of the crucified and risen Word of God. My human, noetic response, like the ontic gift of grace, involves me in risking myself in an active, participatory way.

17See Maria Boulding, Marked for Life, Prayer in the Easter Christ (London, 1979), pp. 7-10 for a helpful discussion.
I have tried to describe a way of union and communion with Christ in which I come to know him both in the fellowship of his sufferings and the power of his resurrection. This is a communion where my failures and weaknesses are not necessarily signs of an inadequate surrender and failure to appropriate Christ's victory, but which may become by the Spirit, moments of depth encounter with my own evil and the love of God which has descended to touch me in the very hell of my sinful humanity. This grants us a revelation of our successes and our failures. Our weaknesses may become the avenues of God's strength. Our victories and moral advantages may become the repentant womb of a grace which reveals that, like Paul, my consciously cultivated virtues conceal an unconscious chaos of greed and pride. Both triumphs and failures become a place of meeting with the God who transfigures them into dwellings of surprising forgiveness. And this engenders a gracious spirit in me towards others who are similarly undeserving but forgiven. For I too have been touched by the judge whose righteousness does not condemn, but bears my condemnation for me in sacrificial love. Jesus Christ becomes for me not only the truth, but the way and the life.