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# Evangelical Quarterly

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**Paternoster:**  
*thinking faith*

# Is universalism theologically coherent? the contrasting views of P. T. Forsyth and T. F. Torrance

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In chapter seven of *The Evangelical Universalist*,<sup>1</sup> it is argued that universalism offers a number of advantages over the more traditional, evangelical tradition. Among these it is suggested that universalism offers greater theological coherence than alternative models of atonement. The purpose of this paper is to challenge that assertion. In doing so, we will interact with two Scottish theologians, the Congregationalist, P. T. Forsyth, and the Reformed theologian, T. F. Torrance. They share a number of common theological leanings; both are generally held to be within the evangelical mould, and they emphasise common features in their understanding of the person and work of Christ. Both affirm the intimate relation between incarnation and atonement; in taking human flesh all humanity is represented in Christ's life and death. Yet there is one vital distinction. Forsyth wrote at the turn of the twentieth century before the towering figure of Karl Barth emerged to prominence. Torrance not only lived and wrote post-Barth but was one of the translators of the Church Dogmatics. It is clear to me that it is the influence of Barth on Torrance that leads him to a very different assessment of universalism than the earlier Forsyth. For the purpose of this paper, Torrance will provide the main point of discussion, since he is systematically opposed to any form of dogmatic universalism. Forsyth will be examined first, since he is increasingly being lauded as one sympathetic to the universalist cause, but criticised for failing to follow through his instincts in a systematic way. This will later be judged to be an unfair criticism when historical context is taken into account.

## **P. T. Forsyth: a universalist in disguise?**

Peter Taylor Forsyth was one of the foremost British theologians of the late 19th /early 20th Century. He is best known for his work on the atonement and his conception of God as holy love. Forsyth's whole approach to theology, notably his focus on the person of Christ and the cross, has been likened to the general approach of the later Barth. One recent commentator refers to Forsyth as a

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1 G. MacDonald, *The Evangelical Universalist* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

‘Barthian before Barth.’<sup>2</sup> Their theological journeys are certainly similar. Forsyth was schooled in the Protestant liberal tradition of Ritschl, but experience of local church ministry led him to regard liberalism as a failed enterprise, unable to deal with the severity of the problem of sin. Following his theological and spiritual ‘conversion,’ it is perhaps no surprise that Forsyth turned the optimistic moralism of liberal Christianity on its head. He came to see that the problem of human rebellion against God is fundamentally moral; sin is disobedience. For atonement to be secured the demands of a holy God must be met from the human side by a holy obedience. In Christ, God took human flesh and satisfied those demands by living a perfectly holy life, learning obedience even to death on a cross. It is the incarnate life of Jesus as much as his death which carries atoning significance for Forsyth.

Of particular relevance for our discussion is Forsyth’s understanding of the universal reference of Christ’s sacrifice. God’s work of atonement in Christ is for the whole of humanity, it is ‘solidary and final.’<sup>3</sup> The Son of God dies as the representative of the whole of humanity; Christ satisfies the demands of a holy God by offering ‘perfect racial obedience.’<sup>4</sup> The true significance of the cross lies in Christ’s perfect obedience and holiness whereby God’s holy demands are met from the human side on our behalf.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that Christ died for all; the cross has universal significance. But will all be saved?

In his earlier works Forsyth is quite clear that Christ’s redeeming work is universal, yet the personal response of faith is necessary to appropriate the gift of salvation. Individual faith must always be understood within the wider context of the church and the world for which Christ gave his life. ‘The Object of our faith, Jesus Christ, is what our fathers used to call a federal person, a federal Saviour, in a federal act. It is quite true that every man must believe for himself, but no man can believe by himself or unto himself.’<sup>6</sup> When discussing the doctrine of reconciliation he insists that, while this is a finished work, the church and each individual has to ‘appropriate the thing that has been finally and universally done.’<sup>7</sup> On several occasions Forsyth maintains that any discussion regarding the scope of final salvation is mere speculation which the New Testament specifically warns against.

Yet, towards the end of his career, Forsyth seemingly becomes more sympathetic to a form of hopeful universalism. ‘Christian universalism turns on a belief...in the one final Goal and Judge and Saviour and King of all men.....Christ gathers up the conscience of the race and, in His own soul, sets it in the active

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2 J. Thompson, ‘Was Forsyth Really a Barthian before Barth?’ in *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, ed. T. Hart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 237-255.

3 P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, (London: Independent Press, 1946), 99.

4 *Ibid*, 129.

5 P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), 78-79.

6 P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 172.

7 *Ibid*, 86.

light of the conscience of God. To a holy God the salvation of the world's evil soul is a matter of conscience.<sup>8</sup> Two years later he tentatively suggests that evangelicals ought to reconsider the notion of purgatory, stripped of the abuses to which the idea has fallen victim in the past. Here, he suggests, there may be opportunity for post-mortem conversion. 'There are more conversions on the other side than on this, if the crisis of death opens the eyes.'<sup>9</sup> Forsyth even suggests that, on this basis, prayers for the dead might be considered as scriptural and evangelical. 'I venture to say, then, that the instinct and custom of praying for our dearest dead...should be encouraged and sanctified...nothing in our Christian belief is against it.'<sup>10</sup> When I point this out to devotees of Forsyth, the common response is one of silence and a raised eyebrow.

In a recent paper, Jason Goroncy has accused Forsyth of theological inconsistency at this point.<sup>11</sup> Given his understanding of Christ's life and death as universally sufficient, a more robust, dogmatic universalism would be more logical. Yet, Forsyth does not take this path. His late references to purgatory and the life to come are speculative, and perhaps this is understandable given the historical context of these writings. He is constructing a theodicy in the context of the Great War; countless innocent lives are being lost and he is reflecting on the nature of God and the final destiny of the victims of war. His references to purgatory and the possibility of post-mortem conversion should not be wrenched out of this historical context. Forsyth is a pastoral theologian and preacher. To condemn the victims of war to eternal damnation would have been difficult in his own day, let alone in a modern context. Yet, it is clear that Forsyth's theological agenda leaves the question open. If Christ's death is sufficient for all, is it at least possible to speculate that it is finally efficacious for all?

### T. F. Torrance: universalism and election

By contrast, Thomas F. Torrance can find no such sympathy for universalism. In summarising his position I draw initially upon two papers, separated by over forty years. The later piece, presented at the 1991 Edinburgh Conference on Christian Dogmatics, opposes universalism on several fronts while, affirming in similar vein to Forsyth, the universality and finality of the death of Christ. There is no question that the New Testament affirms that Christ died for all. Yet, to move from this to a universal salvation is considered to be theologically incoherent; he describes such a view as 'heretical.'<sup>12</sup> For Torrance, the doctrine

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8 P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, (London: Duckworth, 1916), 194.

9 P. T. Forsyth, *This Life and the Next*, (London: Macmillan, 1918), 34.

10 *Ibid*, p.34.

11 J. Goroncy, 'The Final Sanity is Complete Sanctity,' in G. MacDonald *All Shall be Well* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 249-279.

12 T. F. Torrance, 'The Atonement, The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Moral Order,' in N. de S. Cameron (ed.), *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 246-248.

of universalism fails in exactly the same way as the doctrine of limited atonement. Strict Calvinism distinguishes between the death of Christ as sufficient for all, but as efficacious only for the elect. This is the doctrine of limited atonement. God's purpose will always succeed; not all receive the gift of salvation, thus Christ died for the elect. The cross always achieves its purpose of saving those destined to be saved; behind this lies a conception of God's grace towards the elect as 'irresistible.' It is a doctrine of absolute divine causality. Torrance's critique is that this implies a logico-causal relationship between Christ's death and the forgiveness of sins; 'man's proud reason insists on pushing through its partial insight into the death of the cross to its logical conclusion and so the atonement is subjected to the rationalism of human thought.'<sup>13</sup>

Now, Torrance argues that universalism operates in exactly the same way. God longs for all to be saved, Christ died on the cross for all, therefore all will be saved. The error is that we project into the atonement a kind of logical relationship which obtains in our fallen world. But the being of God cannot be reduced to this manner of operation. 'The connection between the atoning death of the Lord Jesus and the forgiveness of our sin is of an altogether ineffable kind and cannot reduce to a chain of this-worldly, logico-causal relations.'<sup>14</sup> To put it another way: are we to construct our theology from a system of philosophical logic, cause and effect? Or do we do our theology under the cross?

Now, at first sight this argument is open to some misunderstanding. Surely our theology ought to be rational? But that is not the point; Torrance is articulating something far more profound. In order to tease that out we need to ask how Torrance arrives here. What drives him to such a negative assessment of universalism? The answer is found in a much earlier paper *Universalism or Election?* published in 1949, where he is responding to John Robinson.<sup>15</sup> Here he raises precisely the same objection as in the much later paper, but grounds his argument in Barth's doctrine of election. Here is the theological foundation of Torrance's thought. Following Barth, Torrance understands that 'election means nothing more and nothing less than the complete action of God's eternal love.' It is God's decision to be our God, to say 'yes' to humanity and 'no' to himself in Christ. It is a double predestination, but located wholly in the person of Christ. It is Jesus Christ who is both object and subject of election; all humanity is elect in him. Christ's life and death on the cross actualises this eternal decision in time and space, and through the action of the Holy Spirit, this becomes subjectively efficacious to us. Quite contrary to the still popular view that this inevitably leads to universal salvation, Barth maintains the need for the Holy Spirit to actualise our election, for the Spirit to arouse faith in us. As Barth states, 'it is enough

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13 T. F. Torrance, edited by Robert T. Walker, *Atonement*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 186.

14 T. F. Torrance, 'The Atonement, The Singularity of Christ and the Finality of the Moral Order,' 247.

15 T. F. Torrance, 'Universalism or Election?' in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 2 (1949), 310-18.

for us to know and remember that at all events it is the omnipotent ever-loving kindness of God' through the Holy Spirit, which 'rouses faith and finds faith in this or that man.'<sup>16</sup>

What is at stake here is an understanding of the very being of God. Election is about God's being as love. It is not about some decision made in eternity which then issues in the cross as a means of actualising that decision. Torrance has so immersed himself in Barth that he grasps the true significance of this. In Christ all are elect, Jesus Christ died for all; yet to affirm universal salvation is to resort to human rational argument, based on doctrines of absolute will and irresistible grace. Salvation is rooted in the eternal love of God, not some doctrine of God as absolute willing. It is grounded in God's eternal decision to love humanity in Christ, not in absolute divine causality. In other words, to assume by simple, logical reasoning, that universal atonement means all will be saved in the end, is to replace the biblical God of love with the scholastic God of absolute will.

### T. F. Torrance: universalism and the vicarious humanity of Christ

Further light is shed on Torrance's view in the recently published collection of his lectures given to his students on the person and work of Christ.<sup>17</sup> In exploring the union of two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, Torrance makes use of the complementary doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*. *Anhypostasia* asserts that the humanity of Christ has no independent existence apart from union with God as the eternal Word. In other words there would have been no human Jesus of Nazareth apart from the incarnation of the eternal Word. This emphasises that the incarnation is an act of transcendent grace in the eternal Word taking our humanity; this resists any form of adoptionist Christology whereby Jesus of Nazareth *becomes* the Son of God. By contrast, *enhypostasia* asserts that there is a real human person in the incarnation in union with God. The humanity of Christ has a concrete existence, a fully human mind, body and will; this resists a docetic Christology which plays down Christ's true humanity. Torrance emphasises the importance of holding both doctrines as complementary.

This doctrine of the *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia* is a very careful way of stating that we cannot think of the hypostatic union statically, but must think of it on the one hand, in terms of the great divine act of grace in the incarnation, and on the other hand, in terms of the dynamic personal union carried through the whole life of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 42

17 T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), and *Atonement* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), both volumes edited by Robert T. Walker. I am indebted to a recent conversation with Robert Walker in clarifying this section of the paper.

18 T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, 84.

Torrance finds the origin of these doctrines in the Patristic period, notably in Cyril of Alexandria's *Contra Theodoretum*.<sup>19</sup> It is of interest that Karl Barth also employed these terms in his own Christology as he expounds the dynamic nature of the incarnation as an event. 'It is in virtue of the eternal Word that Jesus Christ exists as a man of flesh and blood, as a man like us...but it is only in virtue of the divine Word that he exists as such.'<sup>20</sup>

Now what significance does this formulation have on questions of particularism and universalism? It is central for Torrance that the union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ is understood soteriologically. There can be no separation between Christ's person and his work. Thus, the doctrine of *anhypostasia* emphasises that the Son took possession of our common humanity; Christ died in solidarity with the whole of humanity. But without the complementary doctrine of *enhyposstasia*, the solidarity between Christ and all humanity becomes universal and causal, thus leading to universal salvation. This is precisely the foundation of the earlier critique of universalism which we noted Torrance describes as a 'logico-causal relationship.' The doctrine of *enhyposstasia* asserts that the Son came as an individual, seeking solidarity through personal interaction and relationship. In other words, these complementary doctrines hold together the tension between the universality of Christ's saving work for all humanity, and the particular outworking of that in time and space. It is this dynamic which Torrance sees as reflecting the biblical balance between the universality of the cross and the particularity of the human response of faith.

For Torrance, the way in which we come to know Christ must be analogous to the way in which the Son took human flesh in history. The Gospel challenges us to respond to the claims of Christ; it challenges each individual to make a decision which is to accept and appropriate the decision which God has already made about us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore the human response of faith requires a 'divine transcendent act within man corresponding to the divine transcendent act by which the Son of God became human.'<sup>21</sup> The personal response of faith is entirely mine, but engendered by the Holy Spirit through whom my decision is 'an act of obedience to Christ who has already made a decisions on my behalf in his obedience to God on the cross.'<sup>22</sup> No-one can confess 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.

It is clear from these considerations of Christology why Torrance was so opposed to any form of universalism. In his view, such claims cut to the heart of the person and work of Christ. To assert universalism is to emphasise the universal humanity of Christ over against the particular human Jesus of Nazareth. It thus undermines the particular obedience of the Son through whom we are saved and consequently underplays the role of the Holy Spirit in leading us into an understanding of the ineffable mystery of Christ's death on the cross. It is for

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19 Ibid, 84.

20 Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I/2* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 165.

21 T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation*, 27.

22 Ibid, 27.



these reasons that Torrance considers dogmatic universalism to be a ‘form of blasphemy against the blood of Christ.’<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

To return briefly to Forsyth, it is my contention that his references to the possibility of universal salvation are indeed speculative. His Christological instincts were akin to Barth, but he did not have access to Barth’s understanding of election or the related dynamic understanding of the incarnation by the doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*. As a result, criticism that Forsyth is inconsistent in failing to follow through to a more dogmatic statement of universalism is wide of the mark. Forsyth was far too able a theologian to turn speculation into dogma. On the contrary, as Torrance maintains, it is universalism that is *theologically* incoherent. To take Barth seriously, as Torrance makes clear, any dogmatic affirmation of universal salvation ultimately denies the character of God and compromises the particular, vicarious humanity of Christ.

So the argument in *The Evangelical Universalist* that universalism offers greater theological coherence is misplaced. It is a form of logical coherence, but in view of Torrance’s criticism that is quite different from being *theologically* coherent.

A final thought. I have heard it said by some well intentioned evangelicals that universalism is attractive, for pastoral reasons, but that they find the argument unpersuasive. That seems a rather odd. Are we suggesting that the final outcome of God’s dealings with us will, in some way, be less than satisfactory? Are we in danger of thinking that ‘our own moral preferences are somehow better than God’s?’<sup>24</sup> As one not convinced by the universalist argument, I am content to trust that God in his wisdom will do that which is faithful, loving and just.

## Abstract

The possibility that universalism could be regarded as an acceptable position within evangelical theology has been reformulated in MacDonald’s book *The Evangelical Universalist*. This paper offers a response to one of the claims made therein, that universalism offers a more theologically coherent approach than other models. This claim is challenged by a comparison of universalism in the writings of P. T. Forsyth and T. F. Torrance. It is suggested that recent attempts to describe Forsyth as a universalist are misplaced. It is further argued that Torrance’s consistent opposition to universalism stems from his engagement with Barth’s doctrine of election. While some still regard Barth as guilty of incipient universalism, it is argued that Torrance sees that this cannot follow, especially on the basis of the Christological doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*.

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23 T. F. Torrance, ‘The Atonement’ in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, 248.

24 D. Fergusson, ‘Will the love of God finally triumph?’ in K. Vanhoozer (ed.), *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 197.