

Thomas F. Torrance and the *Homoousion* of the Holy Spirit

Victor A. Shepherd

Thomas F. Torrance has become notorious for his insistence on the *homoousion* (of the Son) as essential to any sound doctrine of the Trinity, arguing that the *homoousion* safeguards the Incarnation against Arianism and any of its ingredients (e.g., Docetism and Ebionitism), the Trinity against any form of sabellianism or modalism, and the doctrine of God against any form of unitarianism or polytheism. This insistence of Torrance's can be found, however fleetingly addressed, in virtually everything he has published (not least his sermons), but his major discussions of the *homoousion* appear in three overlapping books on the Trinity; namely, *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988), *Trinitarian Perspectives* (1994), and *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (1996).

Unrelentingly Torrance has shown that without the *homoousion* of the Father and the Son the gospel is forfeited. While the difference between *homoousion* and *homoiousion* is nothing more than iota subscript, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet, this is precisely the difference between asking someone to run your business and asking her to ruin it; namely, the smallest letter of the English alphabet, with catastrophic outcomes in the balance. The *homoousion* estops any suggestion that the being of the Son is like the being of the Father, however elevated the degree of likeness. As Torrance has made plain over and over, it matters not whether the being of the Father and that of the Son are a lot like or only a little bit like; no degree of similarity can substitute for identity. Absent identity of being of the Father and the Son, the gospel disappears, leaving behind no more than religious mythology (tales spun by humans in order to try to make sense of their existence) or a human construct (such as those pertaining to the never-ending "quest for the historical Jesus"). Either of these leaves us doing what the apostles never urge us to do; namely, infer a deity lying behind Jesus as the latter is reduced to a "window" by which we may apprehend the deity that he himself is not. In other words, if all docetic Christologies leave us mythologizing in the pursuit of truth, all ebionite Christologies leave us deducing truth; meanwhile, the gospel announces itself as truth, as reality, since it is God's incursion, self-

bestowal, self-communication, and self-interpretation. Therein the gospel eclipses all mythological speculation and all inferential processes. (Incidentally, with respect to the lattermost—the process whereby the nature of God is inferred from a Son who isn't quite God—present-day Ebionites such as the questers of the historical Jesus seem not to understand that *the* characteristic of the biblical God, the Holy One of Israel, is that he *speaks*. When he speaks, those addressed know that they have been addressed by an “other”, by *the* Other; they know *what* has been spoken and therein know as well *who* has spoken. According to the logic of Scripture, any deity who is inferred or deduced or concluded is *ipso facto* an idol. In other words, the quest for the historical Jesus appears to be able to yield no more than an idol.)

All that Torrance has brought forward concerning the *homoousion* of the Father and the Son is pregnant concerning the *homoousion* of the Son and the Spirit. Torrance has admitted this in many places, not least in his most recent work, *The Christian Doctrine of God*. Here, for instance, he has written, “...we must think of our being *in the Spirit* in the incarnate economy of God's saving acts in Jesus Christ as deriving from and grounded objectively in the homoousial Communion of the eternal Spirit and the eternal Son in the Holy Trinity.”¹ Plainly the *homoousion* of the Spirit is as crucial as that of the Son in any Christian understanding of God and the participation in God's own life that constitutes the salvation of God's people. The *homoousion* of the Spirit protects God's infinite transcendence against any assumption that because such terms as “father” or “generate” are used of God, humans can co-opt or domesticate God or even comprehend God. In this vein Torrance writes, “Let us recall further here the fact that classical Christian theology placed the *homoousion* of the Spirit alongside the *homoousion* of the incarnate Son. While the *homoousion* of the Son expresses the truth that what God is in Christ Jesus he is antecedently and eternally in himself, the bracketing of it with the *homoousion* of the Spirit has the effect of excising from our thought any projection into God of the creaturely, corporeal or sexist ingredients in the terms ‘father’, ‘son’, ‘offspring’ or ‘generation’ into God.”² Educing yet

¹ Torrance, Thomas F.; *The Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) p. 149.

² *op. cit.*, p. 158.

another implication of the *homoousion* of the Spirit, Torrance writes, “If the ontological bond between the historical Jesus Christ and God the Father is cut, then the substance falls out of the Gospel, but if the ontological bond between the Holy Spirit and incarnate Son of the Father is cut, so that there is a discrepancy between the economic Trinity and the ontological Trinity, or between the saving activity of the love of God in history and the transcendent activity of God in eternity, then we human beings are left without hope and can have no part or lot in *God’s* saving activity in Jesus Christ.”³

While Torrance and others have given no little attention to *homoousion* with respect to the Son, little work appears to have been done with respect to *homoousion* of the Spirit. The result is that while the deity of the Son has been highlighted in such a way as to forestall Christological speculation, projection, and non-biblical deduction, neglect of the deity of the Spirit has allowed a notion of the Spirit to arise which is not normed, formed, and informed by a sound Christology. It should be no surprise, then, that the Spirit is invoked to legitimize pantheism, panentheism, the salvific significance of “the world’s great religions” (whose greatness seems to be defined by no more than the number of adherents), the salvific significance of religiosity-in-general (as suggested by much of the current preoccupation with “spirituality”), or the salvific significance of irreligion (if humans can ever be irreligious, the fallen human heart and mind remaining a ceaseless factory of idolatry).

The question, then, “Do the Son and the Spirit possess the same nature or merely similar natures?” is no less urgent than the same question concerning the Son and the Father. Torrance has alluded to this briefly in several places in *The Doctrine of God* (e.g., pp. 61, 72, 148). I wish now to propose several considerations concerning the *homoousion* of Son and Spirit that parallel, where possible, the points that Torrance has made *passim* concerning the cruciality of the *homoousion* of Son and Father.

[1] If Son and Spirit are only ontically similar, then there is no protection against that rationalism which appears to be the Achilles heel of the Reformed tradition. The Christo-logic of the Reformation (which Christo-logic, we should note, always entailed a Pneumato-logic) maintained that as Jesus Christ

³ *op. cit.*, p. 197

surges over people in the power of the Spirit, this one action of God forges within them the capacity to understand God's incursion, the categories by which to understand it, and the vocabulary with which to speak of it. Reformation understanding of the nature of God's action upon people rendered unnecessary, even counterproductive, any rationalist precursor that qualified the beneficiaries of God's salvific action to understand it and speak of it. Herein the classic sixteenth-century Reformers differed from what Calvin called the "schoolmen" and their rationalist apparatus. Quickly, however, the logic of the Reformation gave way to the logic of Protestant Scholasticism. Aristotelianism returned and occupied the place in Reformed theology that it had occupied in late Medieval scholasticism. We need only recall the aftermath of Calvin wherein post-Calvinism, Arminianism, and Roman Catholic thought appeared incommensurable on the surface while at a deeper level all were aspects of a shared Aristotelianism. Arminius, for instance, was execrated by post-Calvin Calvinists, few of the latter understanding that the thinker most frequently quoted by Arminius was the indubitably Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas. Post-Calvin scholasticism recrudesced in several manifestations: Roman Catholic and predestinarian (de Baie and Banez), Roman Catholic and non-predestinarian (Suarez and Molina), Protestant and predestinarian (Beza, Gomarus and Junius), Protestant and non-predestinarian (Arminius, Episcopopus and Limborch). Regardless of apparent theological divergences or even incommensurables, all of the aforementioned presupposed an Aristotelian substratum in their theology.

As the classic sixteenth-century Reformers were aware, however, the logic of the substratum alters the logic of the stratum. Despite the theological differences between Arminius and his Calvinist neighbours (e.g., the doctrine of election and the reading of Romans 7), they were one in the foundation of their thought.

Rationalism remains the default position of the Reformed tradition (though not of the Reformed tradition only). Rationalism in some form arises when the *homoousion* of the Spirit is overlooked. While Jesus Christ is acknowledged to be the Son Incarnate without qualification, so that the nature of the Father is not inferred or deduced from Scripture's portrait of the Son, now to be inferred is the *effectual presence* of this deity. What is inferred now is not a deity lying behind Jesus of Nazareth, but the activity

of a spirit lying behind him. As this activity is not one with the activity of the Son, the spirit in question is less than holy. At this point speculation or mythologizing pertains not to the Son (as happened in the Arian controversy) but instead to the Spirit. There is an “orthodox” acknowledgement of the Son accompanied by a human projection of the Spirit’s work. Not infrequently one finds in the church an uncompromised acknowledgement of the Son – without qualification or hesitation – even as this acknowledgement is co-opted for a purpose that diverges from the purpose of Scripture. The Son Incarnate is conscripted to support aspects of liberation theology, feminist (or patriarchal) theology, ecological theology, religious pluralism, or psychospiritual theses that fall short of Scripture’s portrayal of the Spirit.

The Spirit then becomes the principle whereby the Incarnate Son is deemed to energize or empower an agenda of transformation not entirely congruent with Scripture’s depiction of the definitive, eschatological transformation wrought by the Spirit as the effectual presence of God. A formally correct acknowledgement of the *homoousion* of the Son now fuels social or religious programs that bear *some* relation to that “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13), but absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, what Wesley called “the general tenor” of Scripture is truncated. Church members who resist such agendas are often subtly or frontally disdained as lacking theological sophistication, when in fact (as Torrance never tired of saying, thanks to his reading of Michael Polanyi) these “simple” church members know vastly more than they can articulate; without being able to state it precisely or defend it cogently, they have “scented” a newer unrighteousness proffered as the redress of an older one. A properly articulated *homoousion* of the Spirit, needless to say, would strengthen immeasurably those who possess such theological “instinct”, as Torrance called it, however little they are able to articulate it at present.

Where the *homoousion* of the Spirit is not recognized, effectiveness in the church’s teaching, preaching, and evangelism is sought elsewhere, to the detriment of church and world alike. Frequently my students in Introductory Systematic Theology, rightly zealous for the gospel, protest, “But shouldn’t the church be concerned with converting people, with seeing them converted?” Proclaiming the gospel,

however, is not identical with converting people. Witness, proclamation, evangelism – this is always the church’s business. Throughout the book of Acts no one comes to faith apart from the mission and ministry of the Christian community. Equally true is that in the book of Acts no one comes to faith apart from the ministry of the Holy Spirit, that activity of God whereby he alone renders the church’s ministry effective just because he alone can.

Throughout its history the church, lacking both the patience of God and an agenda-free grasp of the purpose of God, has tended to overreach itself and attempt to do God’s work in the face of God’s unendurable slowness, even negligence. The result, as the world is aware even when the church is not, is that the church persecutes. Whenever it upholds the *homoousion* of the Son but fails to uphold the *homoousion* of the Spirit, the church turns its unexceptionable recognition of the Son into a weapon against people whose recalcitrance has imperilled them spiritually, as if such coercion were able to move them to a saving confession. The coercion can be physical, social, or psychological; but it remains coercion, and arises through a defective understanding of the relation of the Spirit to the Son, as the vulnerability of the crucified Son is contradicted by the non-vulnerability of a coercive church.

Tragically, pathetically, in the name of its Lord the church advertises its unbelief, for plainly its resort to coercion announces that it does not trust God to do what God insists God alone can do; namely, quicken faith in the sin-ravaged heart by means of the Holy Spirit. In other words, non-recognition of the *homoousion* of the Spirit issues in a seeming Christological zeal that merely publicizes the church’s atheism. To be sure, in his dispute with Erasmus on the bondage of the will, Luther said that apart from Jesus [i.e., apart from the cross] God is indistinguishable from the devil. Luther was aware, without mentioning it in this one instance, that it is only as the Spirit renders us beneficiaries of the cross, only as the Spirit quickens faith in the crucified, that we *know* the God who is forever distinguished from the devil.

While much has been said about Luther’s *theologia crucis* and his disavowal of *theologia gloriae*, little attention has been paid to the critical importance of the identity of the crucified and the Spirit. Briefly, a theology of glory arises whenever it is thought that God can be derived from metaphysical

speculation, whenever it is thought that the truth and nature of God can be read off nature or the face of history, and whenever the church becomes triumphalistic. Enough has been said already concerning the church's confusion between its triumphalism and the true triumph of the crucified who, raised from the dead as the church correctly notes, is nevertheless raised wounded, suffering still, and vulnerable still in the suffering of the world. As for the derivation of God from metaphysical speculation, Luther, eschewing all forms of rationalism, was always aware that only that Spirit whose activity is the action of God, and therefore the action of God the Son, could bring humans to a knowledge of God through the crucified. Once having become beneficiaries of the mercy of the crucified God, they can recognize assorted theologies of glory for what they are. Apart from Spirit-wrought living faith in the crucified God, however, biblically orthodox theology remains an ideational construct and therein akin to philosophical speculation from which one must infer or deduce God. Biblically orthodox theology may involve more accurate content than philosophical speculation, but its miss in the absence of the Holy Spirit is as good as a mile.

In a somewhat "softer" form of rationalism, no conclusion or inference is to be drawn entirely naturalistically; instead the Spirit is said to facilitate illumination. The Spirit operates at the level of mind, but without reference to the heart, so that the truth of God can be known without the knower being rendered a new creature within the new creation. The Spirit is little more than the influence of a deistic deity who provides the conditions for a humanly engendered knowledge of God; there is an outer structure of "grace" (soft and dilute compared to Scripture's understanding of grace as the living God's uncompromisable faithfulness to his covenant) complemented by an inner content of human possibility and human achievement. The Spirit, then, is the divinely-supplied condition under which human achievement occurs. This notion, of course, is epistemic semi-Pelagianism.

Under such Spirit-facilitated illuminationism, "knowing" is closer to the outlook of the Enlightenment than to that of Scripture. In Scripture, to know God is to participate in the reality of God and so to be rendered forever different. Our knowledge of God is precisely the *difference* our engagement with this "Other" has made to us when we meet this "Other" *as Person*. Only if the Spirit is

God (i.e., homoously identical with Father and Son) is the activity of the Spirit that act of God whereby the God who knows himself includes us in his self-knowing.

[2] In what follows I aim at tracing item by item with respect to the *homoousion* of the Spirit some of the points that Torrance has emphasized with respect to the *homoousion* of the Son.

[a] Whatever we say of the Son we can say of the Spirit except “Son”. To deny this is to deny the deity of the Spirit, and therefore to deny the eternal Tri-unity of God. To deny the *eternal* Tri-unity of God is to deny the immanent or ontological Trinity. The result is that there remains only an economic Trinity, an economic Trinity ungrounded in an immanent Trinity. The problems that arise here are legion. Whereas the non-identity of being between Father and Son means that we can no longer be certain that the “face” of God we know by revelation is one with the heart of God in God’s innermost, intra-triune life, the parallel non-identity of being between Son and Spirit means that the “face” of God that we see in the Son might not be one with the act of God whereby the Spirit supposedly brings us to Christ and Christ to us. What, then, is the work of the Spirit? Where might the Spirit be taking us? To what end? And how shall we be able to “discern” or test the spirits if the nature or being of the Holy Spirit is that which is most in question? Plainly the denial of the *homoousion* of the Spirit is no less catastrophic than the denial of the *homoousion* of the Son. (Non-congruence between economic and immanent Trinities *for any reason*, i.e., whether on account of the Son or the Spirit, lands theology in all the problems Paul Molnar has discussed in his *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Trinity* and David Lauber in his *Descent into Hell*.)⁴

[b] Torrance earlier pointed out that any detraction from the Son detracts from the Father; i.e., whatever the Father as giver might give, he does not give himself. The consequence of this has to be that

⁴ See Molnar, Paul D.; *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Trinity*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), and Lauber, David; *Descent into Hell*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004).

while God gives, he withholds himself. The apostle's cry "He didn't spare his own Son", which otherwise has the force of "God didn't spare himself", is now denied.

In the same way, detraction from the Spirit detracts from the Son, since the gift (the Son) is willed by the Father yet fails to accomplish the purpose for which the Father gives it and which the Son longs to fulfill. (See John 12:27: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour.") In short, where the *homoousion* of the Son is upheld but that of the Spirit is denied, giver and gift are one but they remain ineffectual. God can be said to be alive, and even merciful (he spares not his own Son), but is ultimately ineffectual in that his Word goes forth from his mouth yet does return to him empty, since it does not accomplish the thing for which he sent it. (See Isaiah 55:11.) Only as the disobedient sinner is *brought to faith* by God the Spirit, and rendered a new creature, is the purpose of Incarnation and Crucifixion accomplished.

[c] Torrance points out that the fatherhood of the Father does not lie in his being the Father of believers (thus requiring creatures in order to be who he is) but rather in his being Father of the Son and therefore eternally, intrinsically Father. In the same way, the *homoousion* of the Spirit means that God is eternally, intrinsically the ceaseless *activity*, the "doing", of the Father loving the Son and the Son reciprocating that love in the bond of the Spirit. In other words, the *homoousion* of the Spirit is essential if love as act (rather than mere attitude) is to be eternally operative.

This truth is freighted concerning Christian discipleship. For instance, Leviticus 19:2 can be defended as the "root" commandment of scripture (in contrast to the "great" commandment): "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." On the one hand, God's holiness is his unique Godness and therefore he alone is holy. On the other hand, God's people are commanded to be holy, the "root" commandment of scripture gathering up all others. Since God is love eternally in the sense of ceaseless activity, God's people are holy inasmuch as the "root" commandment is seen to be related to the "great" commandment": we are to love the Lord our God, together with our neighbour. We love God and neighbour alike, however, not through adopting an attitude or assuming a posture, but by being "doers of

the Word” (James 1:22). We are not to “love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:18) What is real is not merely to be apprehended; what is real (ultimately, God, and his claim upon us and our concrete obedience in the sphere of his love and in fellowship with him) is to be *done*. (John 3:21) Love as ceaseless activity expressing one’s nature characterizes God’s people inasmuch as it first characterizes God himself.

[d] The *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against all forms of unitarianism. Absent the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Father arises wherein the God who is infinitely transcendent is inaccessible – and unknowable, since if God were *only* infinitely transcendent, humans couldn’t even know this much. Absent the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Son arises wherein Jesus is rendered our “chum”, lending himself to all our agendas, never challenging or correcting us. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, a unitarianism of the Spirit arises wherein God is indistinguishable from a subjectivism that has surrendered all appreciation of truth and has elevated religious “inwardness” uncritically. The *homoousion* of the Spirit means that the Spirit is *Holy* Spirit only in conjunction with the Father and the Son. A profounder grasp of this point would do much to spare the church charismatic distortions that arise from a unitarianism of the Spirit, even as the charismatic dimension of the church has highlighted the frigid unitarianism of the Father and the naturalistic unitarianism of the Son.

Similarly the *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against polytheism, for the Spirit is not a second deity, a different sort of deity, or a subordinate deity. The Holy Spirit is simply *God*.

And, of course, the *homoousion* of the Spirit is a bulwark against dependency on the church. Earlier it was noted that the Father needs nothing creaturely in order to be Father. In the same way the Spirit, whose activity is related much more closely to the church than to the creation, needs nothing ecclesial in order to be Spirit. (This point is to be noted with respect to those theologies in which the Spirit is tied to the church, inheres the church, or is anything other than Lord of the church.)

[3] In his discussion of the *homoousion* of Father and Son Torrance has highlighted its gospel-significance by asking, “What is implied if Father and Son are *not* of one being?” The same question

must be put concerning the *homoousion* of Son and Spirit: What is implied if this latter truth ceases to remain embedded in the church's consciousness?

[a] God is utterly unknowable. Arius had said that no creature (e.g., the Son) can mediate knowledge of God. If the Spirit is not God, without qualification, then God is not known in the biblical sense, where knowledge is not the mastery of information but transformation through engagement with, and surrender to, an "other" who is person. If the Spirit is not God, our knowledge of God is no more than a matter of "reading off" facts about God from the face of Jesus, confusing knowledge as the accumulation of information with that biblical "knowing" which is transmutation. Human knowledge of God, it must be remembered, is precisely the difference, the transformation, arising in the knower through her self-abandonment to the Person of God. Where the *homoousion* of the Spirit is neglected, knowledge of God (so-called) is a one-sided cerebralism or "informationism" in which orthodox truths (abstractions by definition) are assimilated while the heart remains unaltered by the concrete Truth which is reality.

It can reasonably be proffered that an operative denial of the *homoousion* of the Spirit underlies evangelicalism's preoccupation with apologetics. Few Christians would object to the heuristic apologetics that helps doubters past obstacles to the gospel by, for example, exposing the lack of cogency of naturalistic, reductionist arguments against faith. Entirely different is the apologetics that establishes, and maintains the need to establish, the conditions for the possibility of God, then for the possibility of incarnation (for instance), then for the possibility of faith, the actuality of faith, and finally the assurance of faith. In its commitment to apologetics, has not much contemporary evangelicalism tacitly denied the *homoousion* of the Spirit, assuming that philosophical demonstration can do what the Spirit ought to do but seemingly fails to do? In the same vein, does the preoccupation with apologetics deny the truth that the integrity (albeit not the structure) of reason is compromised in the Fall?

All of this is undercut by the efficacy of that Spirit who is God; specifically, God working to bring the putative human knower into the sphere of God's self-knowing. Insistence on this work of the Spirit is not to turn faith into an exercise in irrationality; faith reasons as surely as faith trusts. It is, however, to

admit that while the structure of reasoning survives the Fall, the integrity of reasoning concerning God and humankind's relationship to God is compromised by the Fall. Such compromised integrity can be restored only by means of grace, in faith. Hans Urs von Balthasar's articulation here is a salutary reminder:

“...the word of God is not of this world and hence can never be discovered in the categories and accepted patterns of human reason.”

“I was appointed by God from all eternity to be the recipient of this...eternal word of love, a word, which, pure grace though it be, is...more rational than my reason, with the result that this act of obedience in faith is in truth the most reasonable of acts.”⁵

[b] Torrance has pointed out that absent the *homoousion* of the Son no unity can be posited between God himself and what the gospel presents as the revelation of God. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, no unity can be posited between what the gospel presents as the revelation of God and that appropriation without which “revelation” as such has not occurred. Revelation is revelation only if there is a human participant. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, “revelation” would be no more than rationalistic ideation or non-rationalistic emotion stimulated by human proximity to a depiction of the Son, however orthodox. The apostolic portrayal of Jesus Christ then becomes the stimulus to concepts and affects aroused naturalistically, to which the Holy Spirit is subsequently applied in order to sanctify them, all without any apprehension of Christ as the One who bears and bestows that Spirit who magnifies *him*. In short, it appears that to overlook the *homoousion* of the Spirit is to find even Scripture, and specifically its depiction of Jesus, advancing a religious paganism within the church.

[c] Torrance has stated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son the gospel cannot be God's *self*-bestowal or *self*-communication; i.e., God may be said to bestow and communicate, but now necessarily something less than, other than, *himself*— and all of this on account of a deficiency in the Son. Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit the gospel cannot be God's *self*-bestowal, God's *self*-communication, because it never reaches us. Here there is a frustration on the part of God in that what he wills in himself and

⁵ von Balthasar, Hans Urs; *Prayer*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986. Translated by Graham Harrison), pp. 61, 62.

accomplishes in the Son, he cannot effect in us. Such divine “frustration” leaves the church looking elsewhere for effectiveness.

The Protestant Reformation, aware of the deity of the Spirit, did not undervalue the experiential dimension of faith; indeed, the Magisterial Reformers, concerned with doctrinal correction and re-articulation to be sure, nonetheless gave far greater place to “the Word *in the heart*” than they are commonly thought to have done. One need only read Luther, where he speaks of “hearing the voice” together with grasping the doctrine, of the bridegroom saying ‘you are mine’ and the bride saying ‘you are mine’; or read Calvin and notice his frequent use of words such as “feel” in the *Institutes* and Commentaries. The Reformation’s concern for assurance, the assurance of faith (i.e., of one’s salvation) is attestation enough. For this reason the Reformers acknowledged the experiential aspect of crucial biblical texts such as Galatians 3:2 – “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit [an unambiguous reference to an event in their lives whose vividness was undeniable and therefore could serve as the foundation of Paul’s point] by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” In other words, was the startling vividness of their Spirit-wrought immersion in Christ the result of their appropriating the gospel in faith, or the result of having endeavoured to conform to a lifeless code? What they could never deny or forget was the vividness of the Spirit within them.

In light of the normative place of Scripture in the thought of the Magisterial Reformers, there is no stepping around the force of Paul’s *experience*: the Damascus Road arrest, and subsequent visions, voices, and trances. And then there are his “revelations”. On the one hand he does not preach them, content to preach only Christ crucified. On the other hand, apart from his revelations he would not be an apostle at all and therefore would have nothing to say. The apostle candidly admits the “abundance of revelations” (2 Cor. 12:1, 7; cf. Gal. 1:12; 2:2); they have all left him as one of those who “*love our Lord with love undying.*” (Eph. 6:24)

In the history of the church Roman Catholics appear to have visions while Protestants do not. Does a tacit neglect (to say the least) of a *homoousion* of the Spirit result in large areas of Scripture remaining closed to Protestants? Abraham is the prototype of faith in older and newer testaments. We are told that

“...the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision” (Gen. 15:1). To be sure, the vision was given to convey the word, but the vision cannot be discounted. Yet Protestants, rightly Word-oriented, do little with other scriptural depictions of God’s approach and self-impartation. Why? Jean Brebeuf, Jesuit missionary to the Huron aboriginal people of Georgian Bay was privileged to “see”, one night amidst his comfortable life in France, a flaming cross suspended above the Huron encampment in the New World. Thereafter he never doubted what he was to do or why. How is his vision or dream different from mere fantasy or wishful thinking?

Jonathan Edwards spoke much of “Religious Affections”: a felt response to an object grounded in an understanding of the nature of that object. Edwards distanced all such affection from emotion or passion, for emotion presupposes no understanding of what has aroused it, while passion, said Edwards, is problematic in that its passivity contradicts the act and event that faith and obedience are; in addition, passion entails loss of self-control, whereas the fruit of the Holy Spirit includes self-control. Nonetheless, while religious affection presupposes an understanding of the nature of God, it ever remains *affective*, as Edwards never tired of pointing out in his exploration of Spirit-wrought faith.

Similarly John Wesley, in his landmark tract “The Almost Christian”⁶, maintained that unbelievers are characterized by lack of faith in God, while believers are characterized by – faith in God? By love for God, insists Wesley, even as he immediately goes on to speak of their faith. Wesley, who never ceased to insist on justification by faith, is making the point that faith in Christ and love for Christ presuppose and imply each other. Without love for Christ, faith in Christ degenerates into “beliefism”, where the assimilation of doctrine is substituted for living engagement with the living Lord. Without faith in Christ, love for Christ denies the necessity of the atonement and hinges justification on the quality of the believer’s love.

The Pauline *corpus* is where Protestants customarily look first; certainly it is where the Magisterial Reformers looked first – even as their descendants, post-Reformation Protestant scholastics, overlooked a major dimension of Paul himself. What can be vouchsafed to the apostle can be vouchsafed to anyone.

⁶ Wesley, John; *The Works of John Wesley*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984. Edited by Albert C. Outler) p. 137.

The question the church must ask is, How are genuine revelations to be distinguished from religious ‘boilovers’? In truth, the Spirit-formed, Spirit-informed, Spirit-normed affective or experiential aspect to faith is a matter the church neglects only at its peril, for deficits in the church spawn the cults.

As a pastor (for 36 years) I have come to see that people suffer enormous affective deprivation; specifically, Christians suffer from affective deficits related to faith. It is little wonder that needy, vulnerable people are thereby exposed to the blandishments of psychoreligious nostrums that don’t deliver what they hold out. Always to be kept in mind are two facts: human affective need, both natural and spiritual, and the affective, experiential dimension of genuine gospel faith.

[d] Torrance had intimated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son, God has not condescended to us in Jesus Christ, and his love (so-called) has stopped short of becoming one with us. Torrance’s point is incontrovertible. The Father would have given us something to fix us, even done so out of love, but it would have remained a fix that allowed him to fix us at arm’s length.

Given the *homoousion* of the Son, none of the foregoing would apply, in that God would have loved us defencelessly; but absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, his love would have stopped short of saving us as his self-giving remained finally ineffective. Self-giving to the point of self-immolation would have remained self-inhibiting, even self-defying, as it failed to result in a people that lives for the praise of God’s glory. (Eph. 1:12)

[e] Once again, Torrance insisted that absent the *homoousion* of the Son, there is no ontological and therefore no epistemological connection between the love of Jesus and the love of God. God could be said to love us in Jesus even though God were not actually that love in himself. This being the case, there might be a dark, unknown God behind the back of Jesus Christ. In other words, while God could be said to love us, his love would not necessarily *exhaust* his will and way and work concerning us. God could be loving us as *an* act of his even though there might remain some other attitude/act wherewith God visits us, whose nature or purpose we do not or cannot know.

Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, there is no ontological and therefore no epistemological

connection between the Son and that “spirit” which may infuse us and inspire us to lofty human heights. Moreover, that spirit has to be less than holy, since such a spirit has to be less than God, creaturely by definition. While giver and gift may remain one, the “giving” of grace is not one with giver and gift. Then who or what effects the giving, and what are the implications of this for giver and gift? Plainly “another spirit” has to be operative. Then what is ultimately the nature and purpose of such a spirit? Spirits abound, to be sure, yet absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit we can only regard them as self-defined rather than as the power that Jesus Christ bears and bestows and therefore the power in which Jesus Christ acts; we can only be ignorant of what such spirits intend or what they achieve.

It must never be forgotten that spirits abound not only in the world but in the church—perhaps especially in the church, given the church’s chronic difficulty in distinguishing faith from the idolatry of religion. Yet absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit, the discernment needed in the church is inherently impossible—a circumstance that is not only tragic but puzzling in that the book of Acts depicts discernment as the principal manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the nascent church.

[f] Torrance has indicated that absent the *homoousion* of the Son the acts of Jesus Christ are not the acts of God, and there is no final authority for anything he said or did. Absent the *homoousion* of the Son “spirituality” can’t be distinguished from self-indulgence. Faith always presupposes Jesus Christ as *author*, as he acts in the power of the Spirit; faith also always presupposes Jesus Christ as *object*, as he effects in the spiritually inert both the capacity and the desire to embrace the One who has first embraced them. Apart from the *homoousion* of the Spirit, faith is reduced to a natural, intrapsychic capability that we “choose” to vest here or there. Such a notion renders the Holy Spirit entirely superfluous. (The church today, intoxicated with “spirituality” and its inherent naturalism, has not yet seen that the contemporary church’s deity is bi-une and its soteriology pelagian.) The result of viewing faith as a natural, human capability is to render it a human virtue, to render faith in Christ a subset of “faith-in-general”, and to say that it is faith as contribution, albeit faith correctly vested, that saves.

Stung by the world’s accusation regarding its putative narrowness, the church attempts to redress its

reputation by means of a non-Christic Spirit. It forgets that the effectiveness of a knife depends on the narrowness of its cutting edge, and therefore only a precisely delineated Christology and Pneumatology add up to an effective theology. That surgery required for the most profound heart transplant (Ezekiel 36) cannot be performed with something as broad and therefore as blunt as a crowbar. In addition, the church today appears in danger of forgetting that only a Christological exclusivity is Pneumatologically comprehensive and therefore salvific. If it ceases to be the case that faith is quickened only as the risen, victorious Crucified acts on people in the power of the Spirit, and if faith is thereby reduced to a natural talent or virtue, then the predicament of those lacking such a talent is hopeless. To say the same differently: if Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, brings with him a renewed cosmos and therefore a renewed humanity, and if this is ours only as we are rendered participants in it through the power of the Holy Spirit, then only the exclusivity of Incarnation, Cross, and Pentecost are salvifically inclusive.

[g] Torrance maintains that absent the *homoousion* of the Son we shall be judged by a God who is arbitrary in that he bears no relation to Jesus Christ and all that the latter stood for.

Absent the *homoousion* of the Spirit we shall be judged by a God who made provision for us, admittedly, but merely made provision for us, in the course of which he made himself proximate to us in our fallen humanness, but *merely* proximate. By whom, then, are we to be judged? Plainly by someone who left it to creaturely spirits, left it to us to “make the connection”. Instead of being judged by a God who is arbitrary in that he bears no relation to Christ, we will now be judged by a God who tantalized us with the sufficient provision he made and placed before us while leaving us to flounder as fallen creatures in our “freedom of choice”—which is, of course, no freedom at all but simply the randomness of indeterminism.

The last word must be given to Thomas F. Torrance himself: “...unless the Being and Activity of the Spirit are identical with the Being and Activity of the Father and the Son, we are not saved.”⁷

⁷ Torrance, Thomas F.; *The Christian Doctrine of God*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) p. 169.