

THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE

Ray S. Anderson, Ph.D.¹

Senior Professor of Theology and Ministry

Fuller Theological Seminary

Pasadena, California

ABSTRACT: I suggest in this paper that, despite the often rather obscure syntax and concepts in his writing, the theology of Thomas Torrance was deeply rooted in the church, its ministry and its mission in the world. Following a brief survey of the discipline of practical theology from Schleiermacher (1769-1864) to the late twentieth century, where a dualism between theory and practice was assumed, I argue that a new kind of practical theology emerged that involved a dynamic process of reflective, critical inquiry into the praxis of the church in the world and God's purposes for humanity, carried out in the light of Christian Scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge. It is in this sense that Thomas Torrance can be understood as a practical theologian offering a non-dualistic and praxis-oriented theology based on the self-revealing God in Jesus Christ. The paper concludes with the missiological implications of Torrance's theology. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, says Torrance, not only constituted the "re-birth" of the church as the people of God but also called forth and empowered the church to be the continuing ministry of Christ in the world through the ministry of the church in the world and to the world.

I went to Edinburgh, Scotland in 1970 to study under Thomas Torrance after reading his two early books, *Theology in Reconstruction* (1965) and *Theological Science* (1969), marking my first introduction to an incarnational theology presented with scientific rigor, and grounded in a trinitarian epistemology of the self-revealing act of God. "We are not concerned simply with a divine revelation which demands from us all a human response," Torrance wrote, "but with a divine revelation which already includes a true and appropriate and fully human response as part of its achievement for us and to us and in us."²

It was his emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ by which we are given participation in the ongoing intra-trinitarian relations between the Son and the Father that drew me to study under him.

¹ Ray Sherman Anderson passed away on June 21, 2009, Father's Day.

² Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 131.



After sitting in Torrance's lectures for two years and writing my dissertation under his direction, I came to appreciate even more the deeply devotional, even pietistic, life of faith that lay hidden behind his often forbidding erudition and the semantic thicket of his writing. Born in China of Scottish missionary parents, he was as comfortable talking about his personal relationship with Jesus as he was lecturing to an assembly of world-class physicists (as he did on the occasion of the anniversary of Einstein's 100th birthday). After returning to the United States in 1972, I kept up correspondence with him and enjoyed his occasional visits to Fuller Seminary where I was on the faculty.

In 1986 I spent a week with him in Hong Kong where we were both invited to present lectures and dialogue with Confucianist scholars on Eastern and Western versions of human nature. It was there, sharing a flat with him where we cooked our own breakfast, that I finally dared to make the transition from being his student to being a colleague, brother in Christ and personal friend—a transition made difficult only by my own deference to his immense learning, but made easy by the grace of his own humanity.

Woven through the tightly-knit fabric of Torrance's erudite and sometimes obscure theological essays, one finds the refreshing spring of a personal experience of Jesus Christ flooding its banks, revealing a passionate and compassionate pastoral heart. Only rarely does he speak of his own relation with God, and when he does it is a voice of serenity and sanity as of a soul in the grip of grace.

If I may be allowed to speak personally for a moment, I find the presence and being of God bearing upon my experience and thought so powerfully that I cannot but be convinced of His overwhelming reality and rationality. To doubt the existence of God would be an act of sheer irrationality, for it would mean that my reason had become unhinged from its bond with real being. Yet in knowing God I am deeply aware that my relation to Him has been damaged, that disorder has resulted in my mind, and that it is I who obstruct knowledge of God by getting in between Him and myself, as it were. But I am also aware that His presence presses unrelentingly upon me through the disorder of my mind, for He will not Himself be thwarted by it, challenging and repairing it, and requiring of me on my part to yield my thoughts to His healing and controlling revelation.³

³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), ix.

In line with Karl Barth's Christological epistemology, Torrance grounded the revealed knowledge of God in the personal ministry of Christ as the one who discloses to us the innermost being of God in the same act of reconciling estranged and sinful humanity to God. This is the inner logic at the heart of the atonement that binds humanity to God in a saving way and God to humanity in a knowing way. Torrance puts it this way:

Knowledge of God takes place not only within the rational structures but also within the personal and social structures of human life, where the Spirit is at work as *personalizing Spirit*. As the living presence of God who confronts us with His personal Being, addresses us in His Word, opens us out toward Himself, and calls forth from us the response of faith and love, He rehabilitates the *human subject*, sustaining him in his personal relations with God and with his fellow creatures.⁴

When my own interest turned from the more abstract discipline of systematic theology to practical theology, I discovered a rich source of theological insight into theological praxis in Torrance's writing. Human beings are lovers and worshippers as well as thinkers, and all of these aspects are potential sources of theological knowledge.

Citing John Duns Scotus, Torrance made a distinction between *theologia in se* and *theologia nostra*. As important as it is for theology to be grounded in God's own being (*theologia in se*), it is equally necessary that theology be mediated through the bounds and conditions of our life of faith (*theologia nostra*).⁵ While Torrance does not here speak of practical theology as a theological discipline, he insists that theology cannot properly be a science without being grounded in God's actual interactions with the world and with humans as recipients and interpreters of divine self-revelation.

The basis for this is Torrance's view of a scientific theology as an interaction between theory and praxis, grounded in the humanity of Christ as the actualization of divine self-revelation which makes possible not only our true knowledge of God but also knowledge of our own humanity. In this he follows the trajectory of the theological task as envisioned by the later theological method of Barth, who argued that in the self-revelation of God we

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 188.

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology—The Realism of Christian Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 21ff.

are not dealing with humanity in the abstract but in the concrete, historical occurrence of the 'humanity of God' in the form of the existence of Jesus Christ.⁶ Theology, as Torrance learned from his mentor Karl Barth, has no other basis than the incarnate Word of God, which penetrates through the Kantian barrier between the noumenal and the phenomenal so as to create a real, not mythical, epistemological basis for our knowledge of God. In the same way, Torrance has gone beyond Barth in demonstrating how the self-revealing Word of God through Christ (dogma) also becomes the basis for the on-going priestly ministry of Christ (praxis).

In the person, life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the *effect* of the Word of God upon and through humanity becomes a hermeneutical guide to its *source*. We are beginning here to see the emergence of practical theology out of dogmatic theology. Indeed, for Torrance, there can be no dogmatic theology that is not at the same time a theology based on praxis, or the act of God, as the hermeneutical horizon for the being of God.

Thus, the Christological foundations for Torrance's theology are as significant for the practical theologian as for the dogmatic theologian. In this way, I will argue, Torrance has anticipated and created a positive theological foundation for what has become a new direction in practical theology, moving beyond mere *methods* or application of truth as theory into practice, into the discovery of truth through praxis.

The Development of Practical Theology

It was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) who first developed the area of practical theology, being instrumental in the formation of a Protestant Chair in that discipline at the University of Berlin in 1821. In this era practical theology first took the form of a "theology of the subject." The first practical

⁶ See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (London: Collins, The Fontana Library, 1967). Barth admits that in his early theology he was so concerned with the *deity* of God that a correction needed to be made so as to include the *humanity* of God (p. 33). "God's humanity and the knowledge of it calls for a definite *attitude* and *alignment* of Christian theological thinking and speaking. It can never approach its subject matter in a vacuum, never in mere theory. Theology cannot fix upon, consider, and put into words any truths which rest on or are moved by themselves—neither an abstract truth about God nor about man nor about the intercourse between God and man. It can never verify, reflect, or report in a monologue . . . In conformity with its object, the fundamental form of theology is the prayer and the sermon" (54-55).

theologian in an empirical sense was C. I. Nitzsch (1787-1868), who was a disciple of Schleiermacher. He defined practical theology as the "theory of the church's practice of Christianity." This led to a shift toward the social sciences and the second major emphasis in practical theology as a "theology in the way in which the church functions."⁷

Following Schleiermacher and Nitzsch, Philip Marheineke (1780-1846) began with faith as a unity of knowledge and action. He made a distinction between theoretical theology, which thinks from the perspective of the *possibility* of a relation between life and action, and practical theology that is based on the *reality* of that relation. As a result, the theory-praxis relation became the object of reflection and practical theology received its own independent status. The focus for innovation had to be on the local congregation. Gerben Heitink identifies this third development as a "form of political theology."⁸

The early twentieth century, drawing upon certain emphases in the Protestant Reformation, developed a model of practical theology more along the lines of pastoral theology. Eduard Thurneysen, an early contemporary and life-long friend of Karl Barth, produced his classic work, *A Theology of Pastoral Care*, which focused on the role of preaching as a mediation of God's Word to humans so as to effect healing and hope.⁹ In North America, A. T. Boisen founded what became known as the "Pastoral Counseling Movement," followed by the work of Seward Hiltner.¹⁰ The shift from pastoral theology to practical theology took place under the leadership of Don S. Browning, who published a series of essays under this title in 1983.¹¹

In its early development, practical theology suffered from a dualism between theory and practice, with the theoretical aspect assigned to the disciplines of theology and biblical studies and the practical aspect given over

⁷ Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, and Action Domains* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 49.

⁸ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, 53-65.

⁹ Eduard Thurneysen, *A Theology of Pastoral Care* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962).

¹⁰ See *Vision From a Little Known Country: A Boisen Reader*, Glenn H. Asquith, Jr. ed. (Decatur, GA: Journal of Pastoral Care Publications, 1991); Seward Hiltner, *Pastoral Counseling*, (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949) and *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958).

¹¹ See *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, Don Browning, ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

to the application of the results of theological study to the practice of ministry. The line between so-called academic theology and practical theology was first drawn by the faculties of the European universities, imported by the divinity schools of North American universities, and embedded in the curricula of most theological seminaries. At the center of the discussion of the nature of practical theology was the issue of the relation of theory to praxis. If theory precedes and determines practice, then practice tends to be concerned primarily with methods, techniques and strategies for ministry, lacking theological substance. If practice takes priority over theory, ministry tends to be based on pragmatic results rather than prophetic revelation.

More recently, a new breed of practical theologians is emerging and the shape of practical theology is rapidly changing. The line between pure theology and practical theology, as well as the demarcation between theory and practice, is no longer drawn so sharply and definitively. Distinctions are still to be made, but these are differentiations within a common task rather than separate disciplines.

At its simplest, practical theology is critical reflection upon the actions of the church in the light of the gospel and Christian tradition. Practical theology, as Ballard and Pritchard say, must take on the characteristics of theology as such. It too is a descriptive, normative, critical and apologetical activity. It is the means whereby the day-to-day life of the Church, in all its dimensions, is scrutinized in the light of the gospel and related to the demands and challenges of the present day, in a dialogue that both shapes Christian practice and influences the world, however minimally.¹²

We can now say that practical theology is a dynamic process of reflective, critical inquiry into the praxis of the church in the world and God's purposes for humanity, carried out in the light of Christian Scripture and tradition and in critical dialogue with other sources of knowledge. As a theological discipline, its primary purpose is to ensure that the church's public proclamations and praxis-in-the-world faithfully reflect the nature and purpose of God's continuing mission to the world, and in so doing

¹² Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action—Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 1996), 12.

authentically address the contemporary context into which the church seeks to minister.¹³

*The Practical Theology of Thomas Torrance*¹⁴

Practical theology demands a very specific understanding of the nature of theology. It demands that the theologian hold the practitioner accountable to the truth of God's revelation in history and that the practitioner hold the theologian accountable to the truth of God's reconciliation in humanity. Torrance reminds us that the contemporary reality and presence of Christ is what makes theology a "living theology."

As the incarnate presence of the living God in space and time, he presents himself to our faith as its living dynamic Object. This has the effect of calling for a living theology, a way of thinking which is at the same time a way of living, that cannot be abstracted from the life-giving acts of Christ in the depths of human being and must therefore affect man radically in his daily life and activity.¹⁵

The task of practical theology is not simply to reiterate dislocated theological truths, but to examine theological understandings in the light of contemporary experience in order that their meaning within God's redemptive movement *in the present* can be developed and assessed. Theological truth is thus seen to be emergent and dialectical, having to be carved out within the continuing dialogue between the Christian tradition and the historical existence of church and world. While Torrance clearly holds a high view of Scripture as divine revelation, the truth of revelation is not something that can be abstracted from the person of Christ as living truth. Following Karl Barth in this regard, Torrance holds that truth is more of an "event" in which the preached or proclaimed Word has Scripture as its source while the effect of the Word as experienced through the Holy Spirit's activity in the lives of those who hear and obey constitute the praxis of truth.

¹³ I have discussed the nature of practical theology as a discipline in my book, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

¹⁴ See also, Ray S. Anderson, "Reading T. F. Torrance as a Practical Theologian," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, Elmer M. Colyer, ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 161-184.

¹⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 138.

Torrance seeks to avoid the subjective, or existential, implication of this view of truth by holding to the objective reality of the Holy Spirit as providing epistemological content in the revelatory event.¹⁶ In this way, Torrance offers us a non-dualistic approach to the relation of theology and ministry (or theory and practice).

The spiritual reality to which we belong has a range of content which we cannot infer from what we already know, but which we may get to know more fully only through heuristic acts of exploring entirely new ground and grappling with novel connections and ideas . . . Hence intensely personal acts of relation, discernment and judgment belong to the epistemic act in every field of rational knowledge and fundamental science.¹⁷

This kind of heuristic thinking is what Torrance has called a "backwards kind of thinking." There is a "backward correlation" from the new to the old (cf. Matthew 13:51-52).¹⁸ This is also similar to what Torrance calls axiomatic inquiry. Axioms are formulated out of experience and used to penetrate deeper into the inner logic of that which is to be known. While axioms are not susceptible to ordinary standards of proof, they serve as keys to penetrate into the inner structure of reality in order to cause this inner reality to reveal itself to us. This, in turn, gives rise to new axioms by which we may continue to advance further in our understanding of God's self-revelation through the person and life of Christ.

Torrance argues that through the Incarnation, the divine Son assumed the humanity common to all descendants of Adam and Eve through the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus thus served as a vicarious representative of all humanity in his priestly ministry of bearing the consequence of sin in his death and delivering humanity from the power of sin through his resurrection.

[T]he key to the understanding of the Eucharist is to be sought in the *vicarious humanity of Jesus, the priesthood of the incarnate Son*. Eternal God though he was, he condescended to be our brother, and since we are children sharing in flesh and blood, he partook of the same, made like unto his brothers in every respect, so that he might

¹⁶ See Thomas F. Torrance, "The Epistemological Relevance of the Spirit," in *God & Rationality* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 165-192.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 111.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 15ff.

be a merciful and faithful High Priest in the affairs *towards God* to make expiation for the sins of the people.¹⁹

For Torrance, revelation is always knowledge of the self-revealing God mediated to us through Jesus Christ. Simultaneous with that act of self-revelation, not sequential to it, a corresponding movement from below to above constitutes an act of reconciliation by which humanity is vicariously represented in the personal life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The two-fold significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ means that through the person of Christ all that belongs to the innermost being of God is revealed to us through Christ and all that is demanded of God from humanity is fulfilled through Christ.

As with Karl Barth, Torrance held that the act of God is the hermeneutical criterion for the being of God. This becomes a Christological statement when Christ is viewed as the definitive act of the self-revealing God binding the historical people of God through Israel to the Incarnation of God in the historical person of Jesus Christ for the sake of and on behalf of all humankind. In a masterful summary statement Torrance writes:

And at last in the fullness of time the Word of God became man in Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, within the embrace of Israel's faith and worship and expectation, himself God and man, in whom the covenanted relationship between God and Israel and through Israel with all humanity was gathered up, transformed and fulfilled once for all. In Him the revealing of God and the understanding of man fully coincided, the whole Word of God and the perfect response of man were indivisibly united in one person, the Mediator, who was received, believed and worshipped together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit by the apostolic community which he creatively called forth and assimilated to his own mission from the Father. Thus as both the incarnate revelation of God and the embodied knowledge of God, Jesus Christ constitutes in himself the Way, the Truth and the Life through whom alone access to God the Father is freely open for all the peoples of mankind.²⁰

The knowledge of God which results from the historical act of God's self-revelation in Christ is not only *revealed knowledge* of God's inner being as grounded in the eternal relations of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but is also

¹⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 110.

²⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard Publishers, 1992), 9.

a *vicarious participation* of humanity in that intra-divine relation as the basis for a *saving knowledge* of God.²¹ This has far-reaching implications for practical theology. The mediatorial role of Christ works from both sides of the revelatory event in such a way that our knowledge of God through Christ is not only saving knowledge, that is, it is a subjective reality, but it also brings the objective reality of God's Word into our contemporary situation in such a way that the praxis of the Spirit is actually the praxis of Christ occurring through the praxis of the church.

Our knowledge of the Father and the Son, of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the Father, is mediated to us in and through Jesus Christ in such a way that in a profound sense we are given to share in the knowledge that God has of himself within himself as Father and Son or Son and Father, which is part of what is meant by our knowing God through the Spirit of God who is in him and whom he sends to us through the Son. Now it is because we do not know the Father or the Son except through the revealing and reconciling work of Jesus Christ, that our knowledge of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is, as it were, a function of our knowledge of Jesus Christ.²²

This movement provides the ontological and objective basis for the life and ministry of the church in its continuing praxis of Christ's revelation and reconciliation. The Holy Spirit mediates the very person of Christ to us, not merely the benefits of Christ's death. The whole of Christ's life of obedience, prayer and worship thus becomes the objective and ontological basis for the Christian's life of faith. The church, as the body of Christ, participates in Christ's on-going ministry of revelation and reconciliation. In the Incarnation, the Son of God penetrated into the ontological structures of fallen humanity in order to restore humanity to its proper and divinely purposed existence through the reconciling ministry of Christ, which continues as the ministry of

²¹ "He is in Himself not only God objectifying Himself for man but man adapted and conformed to that objectification, not only the complete revelation of God to man but the appropriate correspondence on the part of man to that revelation, not only the Word of God to man but man obediently hearing and answering that Word. In short, Jesus Christ is Himself both the Word of God as spoken by God to man and that same Word as heard and received by man, Himself both the Truth of God given to man and that very Truth understood and actualized in man." Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science*, 50.

²² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 55.

the church. This is the incarnational basis for a practical theology of the church's life and existence.

What is supremely needed, therefore, in all the churches today, is a far more profound understanding of the Incarnation, the coming of God himself into the structures of creaturely and human being, in order to restore the creation to its unity and harmony in himself—that is, a Christology with genuine *substance* in it once more, the theology of the incarnate Son of God, the one Lord Jesus Christ, '*being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.*' And then, in intimate correlation with such a Christology, what is supremely needed also is a far more profound understanding of the Church as a divine creation within the ontological structures of the universe, entrusted with the mission of healing and reconciliation in the depth of being.²³

This continuing ministry, or praxis, of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit takes place in and through the life of the church without making the ministry of Christ subject to human manipulation and control. "That is the living God who still acts here and now through Jesus Christ in the Spirit, but *in the Spirit* means in God's own distinctive way and with God's own distinctive kind of power, and therefore beyond any realm of human control and manipulation."²⁴

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 283. "This in turn transforms the whole conception of the analogical relation in the sacramental participation. Not only is it one which has Christological content, but it is an *active analogy*, the kind by which we are conducted upward to spiritual things, and are more and more raised up to share in the life of God. This is an elevation or exaltation into fellowship with the divine life through the amazing condescension of the Son who has been pleased to unite Himself with us in our poverty and unrighteousness, that through redemption, justification, sanctification, eternal life, and all the other benefits that reside in Christ we may be endowed with divine riches, even with the life and love that overflow in Christ from God Himself." Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. II (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 145.

²⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 291. "That is the epistemological relevance of the doctrine of the Spirit. Certainly the history of Christian doctrine makes it clear that wherever the Church has allowed the reality of the historical Jesus Christ to be depreciated there it has also lost a doctrine of the Holy Spirit, through the dissolving of the Spirit into the immanent reason or into man's own attempts at understanding. The doctrine of the Spirit, i.e. of the objective reality and personal Being of the Spirit, stands or falls with the acknowledgment of the active coming and activity of the Being of God himself within our space and time in Jesus Christ." Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, 235.

The Word of the gospel (*kerygma*) that the church proclaims, says Torrance, "is in the fullest sense the sacramental action of the Church through which the mystery of the Kingdom concerning Christ and His Church, hid from the foundation of the world, is now being revealed in history . . . in *kerygma* the same word continues to be 'made flesh' in the life of the Church."²⁵

Correspondingly, says Torrance, "the church constitutes the social coefficient of our knowledge of God, for in the nature of the case we are unable to know God in any onto-relational way without knowing him in the togetherness of our personal relations with one another."²⁶ Here again we find insights that transform practical theology from being merely preoccupied with methods for achieving pragmatic success in ministry. If every act of ministry through the power of the Holy Spirit reveals something of God, as Torrance would surely agree, then the very social structures of that ministry have a coefficient value as a hermeneutic of the Word of God. This is what Torrance means by a "living theology."

It is as we are nursed and trained by the social coefficient of knowledge embodied in the society or community to which we belong that we also gain the powers of judgment to relate experience to patterns of meaning, and then the initial acts of recognition develop into acts of identification, which complete the process of inquiry in which we come to engage.²⁷

It is for this reason that Torrance places such importance upon the empirical content of knowledge of God revealed through the church's praxis of life in the Spirit as the basis for our cognitive and theoretical theological formulations. In other words, the church's theological formulations are not only the result of its reflection on Scripture as an objective, impersonal and abstract Word of God, but also include the empirical actions of the church in its Spirit-led praxis of worship, ministry and communal experience as the Body of Christ. Here again Torrance seeks to avoid the dualism of setting

²⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, II: 158-9.

²⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 46. Torrance says: "Hence, if the Word of God is to enter the forum as speech to man through the medium of human words it must be directed to man in community, and if that Word creates reciprocity between God and man it must create a community of such reciprocity within human society as the appropriate medium of its continuing communication to man." *God and Rationality*, 146-7.

²⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 104.

theory apart from practice by viewing the word of Christ and the work of Christ as two aspects of the one event of the Word of God.

It is, I believe, still within the matrix of Eucharistic worship and meditation upon the Holy Scriptures, and evangelical experience in the fellowship and mission of the church, that the empirical and theoretical components in our knowledge of God are found fused together, in a kind of stereoscopic coordination of perceptual and auditive images, and thus provide us with the cognitive instruments we need for explicit theological understanding of God's interaction with us.²⁸

Thus theory and practice are united within this form of practical knowledge that works itself out within the praxis of the church. This model of practical theology, with its emphasis on ecclesial praxis and the attainment of practical knowledge, goes a long way towards healing the rift between theory and practice. Torrance's insistence on the ecclesial context, where prayer, worship and obedient response to the Word of God take place, fits well within the scope of practical theology as we now understand it.

We can now understand why the practical theology of T. F. Torrance leads to a theology of pastoral care. The vicarious humanity of Christ overcomes the epistemological dualism with regard to the self-revelation of God as well as provides a unitary basis for understanding the relation of theory and practice. The vicarious humanity of Christ also overcomes the dualism between theological and psychological approaches to the healing of persons. For Torrance, the atonement is thus grounded in the Incarnation in such a way that in assuming humanity under physical, psychological and spiritual distress, Christ not only provides an objective basis for the forgiveness of sin but also for the healing of humanity.

²⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 49. "In so far as worship and prayer are through, with and in Christ, they are not primarily forms of man's self-expression or self-fulfillment or self-transcendence in this or that human situation or cultural context, but primarily forms of Christ's vicarious worship and prayer offered on behalf of all mankind in all ages . . . Hence when worship and prayer are objectively grounded in Christ in this way, we are free to use and adapt transient forms of language and culture in our worship of God, without being imprisoned in time-conditioned patterns, or swept along by constantly changing fashions, and without letting worship and prayer dissolve away into merely cultural and secular forms of man's self-expression and self-fulfillment." Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 213.

I remember sitting in on Torrance's lectures to the divinity students at Edinburgh in 1971 and hearing him announce the assignment for the final paper, which was to write on the relation of the Incarnation to atonement. "I do not want an essay on the Incarnation nor do I want an essay on the atonement," he warned the students. "I want an essay on the *relation* of the Incarnation and atonement." The students were quite distressed at this for they had learned to think in a dualistic way regarding the Incarnation and atonement.

In stressing that the atonement is grounded in the Incarnation of God and not merely in his death on the cross, Torrance has often cited the statement of the Cappadocian father, Gregory of Nazianzus, "what Christ has not assumed is not healed; but that which is united with his Godhead is also saved."²⁹ In becoming human flesh, the divine Logos assumed not merely the form of humanity but humanity under the burden of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual pain and suffering. It is in the very person of Christ, Torrance argues, that God takes upon himself the consequence of the fall and the resulting distress which humans experience as subject to natural catastrophes, moral evil, and demonic oppression.

The implications for pastoral theology are significant. Instead of relying upon psychological strategies alone to assist persons in dealing with their anger and pain, the pastoral caregiver can bring God to the side of the person who is suffering as one who becomes an advocate (*paraclete*). God's anger and outrage at evil can be expressed as more than divine affect; through Christ God has entered into the "godforsaken" place (Matthew 27:46) where the absence of God's supernatural power is countered by the presence of God's suffering love.

Missiological Implications

The theme of the vicarious humanity of Christ reappears in Torrance's discussion of the role of Christ in the mission of the church to the world. "We are to think of the whole life and activity of Jesus from the cradle to the grave," says Torrance, "as constituting the vicarious human response to

²⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 154.

himself which God has freely and unconditionally provided for us."³⁰ Any presentation of the gospel that strips Christ of the saving significance of his humanity is "unevangelical," argues Torrance. "How, then, is the Gospel to be preached in a genuinely evangelical way? Surely in such a way that full and central place is given to *the vicarious humanity of Jesus* as the all-sufficient human response to the saving love of God which he has freely and unconditionally provided for us."³¹

The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, argues Torrance, not only constituted the "re-birth" of the church as the people of God, but it also called forth and empowered the church to be the continuing ministry of Christ in the world through the ministry of the church in the world and to the world. Not only did he pour out his Spirit upon the Apostles inspiring them for their special task, and not only did he pour out his Spirit in a decisive and once for all way, at Pentecost, constituting the people of God into the New Testament Church which is the Body of Christ, but within that Church and its Communion of the Spirit he continues to pour out special gifts for ministry, with the promise that as the Gospel is proclaimed in his Name he will work with the Church confirming their ministry of Christ to others as his own and making it the ministry of himself to mankind.³²

Between the word of the Kingdom and its power of healing there is what Torrance once called an "eschatological reserve" in which the Word is borne in hope and faith.³³ The incarnational community lives and functions between these two moments, between the cross and the *parousia*, between the evangelical word of forgiveness and the final act of restoration and reconciliation. In this way the church is viewed as existing in the world for the sake of the world. It does not possess Christ for itself at the expense of the world. The gospel given to the church to proclaim through its witness and presence in the world has already entered the world through Christ. In this way, the mission of the church is not an extra-curricular activity but rather an indispensable component of its own being in the world.

³⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 80.

³¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 94.

³² T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 121.

³³ Conflict and Agreement in the Church Vol. II, 159. See also, *Royal Priesthood—A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, second edition, 1993), 45-47.

The Christ proclaimed in the gospel through the church has a counterpart in the Christ clothed with the needs of the world. In one of his most eloquent missiological utterances, Torrance says:

The Church cannot be in Christ without being in Him as He is proclaimed to men in their need and without being in Him as He encounters us in and behind the existence of every man in his need. Nor can the Church be recognized as His except in that meeting of Christ with Himself in the depth of human misery, where Christ clothed with His gospel meets Christ clothed with the desperate need and plight of men.³⁴

We are not surprised to discover such a strong missiological imperative in Torrance's theology, since he was born in China of missionary parents. Beyond that familial heritage, however, his vision of God's purpose in assuming humanity in the person of Jesus Christ is understood to be a mission to all humanity already completed in Christ. Mission is not to be understood as a way of actualizing a gospel imperative through practical methods and means. On the contrary, the actuality of God's reconciliation of the world in Christ (2 Cor. 5:19) is itself the dogmatic basis for a practical theology of mission. Practical theology, as envisioned by Torrance, therefore calls theology and the church back to its roots as a fundamentally missionary church with a particular vision and a specific task to perform in the world. As a missionary church it is crucial that it remains faithful to its missiological task and vision. One of the primary tasks of the practical theologian is to ensure that the church is challenged and enabled to achieve this task faithfully.

The legacy of Thomas Torrance is to be found in his own faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. As a scholar, he sought to discipline the human mind to think in accordance with God's revealed truth. Woe to anyone who attempted to 'stare him down' on a matter of theological substance. In theological debate he pressed forward with a tenacity that was as uncompromising as it was unrelenting. In the midst of a lecture at New College, Edinburgh in 1972, a student from Germany attempted to convince professor Torrance that perhaps something could be said on behalf of Bultmann after all, on the basis of human self-understanding as leading to faith. "My dear young man,"

³⁴ "Service in Jesus Christ," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, Ray S. Anderson, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 724.

Torrance replied, looking over the top of his glasses, "Not only do I not see how one can be a theologian and think that way; I do not see how one can be a Christian and think that way." End of discussion!

What is not so well known, however, is his legacy as a devoted Christian. After a stunning lecture at Fuller Seminary on what he called the 'Latin Heresy' in Western Christian thought, he was found sitting with students in the cafeteria talking to them about their relationship with Jesus. This too was part of his faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. He loved the church because he loved Jesus. Those of us who were privileged to be his students cherish his legacy of scholarly, Christian witness to Jesus Christ. In the doing of theology, he taught us, it is never enough to be clever or even brilliant; one must be truthful in practice as well as in proclamation. I continue to read him for the sake of this truth.