

**FIFTEEN YEARS OF TEACHING  
WORSHIP, COMMUNITY AND THE  
TRIUNE GOD OF GRACE**

**Kerry Dearborn, Ph.D.**  
**Professor of Theology, Seattle Pacific University  
and Seattle Pacific Seminary**  
*kdearbor@spu.edu*

**Abstract:** *Studying with James Torrance has been transformative. His Trinitarian theology and its implications not only changed the course of the author's life, but it has continued to impact numerous students' lives as they have been introduced through Dearborn's classes to Torrance's book *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. Instead of experiencing theology as dry human systems, Torrance's approach to theology has drawn many students into a life of worship and praise. As they have read and reflected on the reality of God's self-revelation in Christ and the double-movement of grace, it is like scales falling off, new vision being granted and the startling discovery that rather than having to agonizingly strive to achieve their identity, they have been given a new identity in Christ. The reality that they are embraced and drawn into God's triune communion has been liberating and the fact that Christ intercedes for them from on high and by the Spirit from within has filled them with a new and empowering assurance and desire to seek to participate in God's kingdom now.*

"Whatever you do, avoid systematic theology," my husband (a pastor) advised. "It's a misguided attempt to try to fit God into dry human constructs and presuppositions," he warned. But Masters level requirements are not easily negotiated, so I registered for a Systematic Theology class with a Scottish theologian named, James Torrance. This decision would alter the entire direction of my life, along with the lives of my husband and our children.

I remember rather vividly my first encounter with James Torrance, the start of a two-week summer intensive course through Fuller Seminary's Seattle extension program. Leaving our three small children every evening for two weeks was rather a challenge, especially since my husband, Tim, was an intensely

busy mission pastor at University Presbyterian Church.<sup>1</sup> As I entered into the classroom, James greeted us all in his lilting Scottish accent and warm, caring tone. When he launched into his lecture I can still remember the feeling of being caught up in worship.

This systematic theology did not seem like dry abstractions at all. Rather, throughout the course I felt the invitation to experience the living reality of God in Jesus Christ as revealed in the written word of God, and as present now by the Holy Spirit. Professor Torrance challenged us to let go of our unfounded presuppositions about God, and rather to embrace Christ as the true revelation of God, the one in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through whom God had chosen to reconcile all things” (Col. 1:19).

He encouraged us with the wonder of Christ’s ongoing mediation, quoting Hebrews 7:25 and reassuring us that, “Jesus ever lives to intercede for us.” He drew us into the grace of the Triune God, reminding us of Paul’s encouragement from Romans 8:26, that when we don’t know how to pray, “the Spirit of God intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.” God had not merely come down in Jesus Christ to give us a good example of how to live, which we by our own efforts somehow had to work hard to emulate.

Rather, Professor Torrance described a “double movement of grace.”<sup>2</sup> God had come to us in Jesus by the Holy Spirit, had taken on our flesh and blood and been tempted in every way as we are, yet had lived our covenanted human response to God perfectly. Jesus’ offering had become our offering, his life our life, his death our death, and his resurrection and new life, our resurrection and new life. The Spirit is with us to draw us into this perfect life of Christ’s to share in his intimate relationship with the Father. This was the breathtaking news that God had joined his life to ours in Christ, and had lifted us into God’s own triune life to be with God forever.

Through Professor Torrance’s teaching I was introduced to the wonder of the gospel that included, but was so much more than, the forgiveness of our sins. This good news centered on God’s desire to come and dwell with us and to lift us up into the communion of the Triune Persons. This was not God at a distance, but rather God who had loved us from all eternity, and who in Christ had adopted us as sons and daughters into God’s own family. This was no escapist and individualist doctrine of how to get to heaven when we die, but rather a message of such radical political and social implications that it had inspired Professor

---

1 See Tim Dearborn, “From Pragmatism to Participation: The Impact of Trinitarian Faith on Missiology,” in this volume.

2 James Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 65.

Torrance to go repeatedly to South Africa to challenge theological constructs that supported apartheid and to Northern Ireland to challenge theological rationales for sectarianism.

It was as if scales fell off, and all the fragmented bits of my theology that didn't quite fit together were rearranged and integrated around God's self-revelation in Christ, present now as the one Mediator between God and humans through the Holy Spirit. The realization that I was embraced by the two hands of God, the Son and the Spirit, with Jesus interceding for us from on high (Heb. 7:25), and the Spirit praying for us from within us, was both liberating and deeply consoling.<sup>3</sup>

I was so inspired by these classes with Professor Torrance that I asked if I could bring my skeptical husband to listen in on the class scheduled for the evening of our anniversary. Professor Torrance graciously agreed, and life was never the same. During an evening when we hosted him for dinner, he invited us both to pray about pursuing PhD studies with him at Kings College, Aberdeen. He turned to me and said, "Kerry, we really need women who are centered in Christ and who are solid theologians to teach theology. Please consider this and pray about this, won't you?" I was rather astonished by this invitation, affirmation and vision. Having had only one woman professor throughout my time in university and graduate school, it never occurred to me that this was something I could pursue, especially in the field of theology. And since my husband and I were both activists and parents of young children, we thought the idea of pursuing PhD's was fascinating but rather unrealistic. Little did we know . . .

By the time I began my own theological teaching career, Professor Torrance had published the heart of his systematic theology courses in *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*. I have used this book in almost every introduction to theology class I have taught, as well as in my graduate level, "Doctrine of God" course. The liberating impact on my students has generally been threefold.

## **1. Scales Falling Off**

Like me, for my students the first experience in exposure to Torrance's theology is one of scales falling off, those encrusted layers of false presuppositions about God that have little to do with God's revelation in Christ. In his book, Torrance offers a striking contrast between a human-centered approach to worship, which he calls, "unitarian worship," and a trinitarian approach to worship that is consistent with the biblical revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Christians'

---

3 Torrance described this Irenaean view of God in *Worship*, 65-67.

profession of faith in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.<sup>4</sup> Students connect deeply with his description of a rather common approach to worship in which worship is associated with what happens on Sunday morning, and is largely about what we the worshippers are doing and experiencing.

As one student wrote recently,

Unitarian worship is 1) human-centered worship. It focuses on what (2) we can do to worship God — on our faith & our worship & our prayer & our offering to God. (3) We become our own priesthood instead of Jesus . . . In unitarian worship a constant fear may be that we are not 'good enough' or that our efforts are not 'good enough.' But in trinitarian worship, it's not about us . . . . Worship is no longer me trying to reach across a gap but rather rejoicing in God's presence and provision for me in Christ.

Another student summarized unitarian worship as follows,

This unitarian style worship takes the focus of worship off of God and puts it onto ourselves instead. It is more concerned with what is visible, such as the pastor and worship leaders than the triune God. In this style of worship God is viewed at a distance and there is no personal or intimate connection with God. The unitarian style is very human-centered compared to trinitarian worship.

Many students become aware that they have for the most part adopted a deistic view of God, a remote God who is hard to reach, and who is uninvolved in their daily lives. They have believed that God has given them a ticket to heaven through the death of Jesus on the cross, but in the meantime, that it is up to them to try to muddle through. They can request God's help from time to time, but mostly the Christian life has been about their efforts and their struggles to measure up.

For many of them the trinity they have known is "the Father, the Son, and the Bible." They believe that the Father's wrath has been appeased by the death of his Son, and Jesus has completed his job of covering over our sin. They tend to respond in one of two ways to these beliefs. Some have felt the weight of trying to live out Jesus' command and to work hard to figure out what would Jesus do (WWJD), *if* he were here. Others have dismissed obedience as legalism, and tried to sooth themselves that Jesus' death paid the price so they are justified by grace through faith whatever they do. Most realize that they have been so steeped in radical individualism and the need for self-reliance that they have been largely closed off to the reality of God's presence with them by the Holy Spirit. One student wrote that without a sense of the intimate relationship we

---

4 Torrance, *Worship*, 19-24.

can have with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, God has been “just the vending machine God, who is distant and up in the sky.”

Reading and discussing Torrance’s book, students also awaken to the reality that they have reduced “worship” to just a brief period each week during a worship service, and to primarily mean when they are singing. Worship for them was related to going to church, which “can be a drag since it is all about us performing. It can be tiresome to know we have to perform every Sunday.”

## 2. New Vision

Four significant paradigm shifts for students hopefully occur through the baptism of their theology in the Christ-centeredness and Trinitarian richness of James Torrance’s book and theology. The first is that worship is so much more than what they do when they are singing each week in a church service. “This is a revolutionary concept,” wrote one student. “It means that our entire lives are for the Glory of God. Worship becomes not an event, but a style of life. Even outside of the service, the Triune love of God is still active. This has the power to change the world.”

Other students comment on the freedom of knowing that worship does not begin when a church service starts nor does it center on them. Rather, “I get the privilege of participating in the ongoing worship of heaven, and the communion of the Trinity by the Spirit in the Son.”

Second, understanding the ontological transformation that occurs through the life, death and resurrection of Christ is profoundly eye opening for students. It is a radical departure from the extrinsic Christology most have known. The blinding scales of equating the entire gospel with “Jesus came to die for my sins so I can go to heaven when I die” seem to adhere tightly. Thus it takes much prayer, discussion and study before it becomes evident that atonement begins when Jesus is born and joins his life with ours. When they begin to consider that as Torrance taught, reconciliation is the heart of the gospel, there is a sense of wonder that God wants at-one-ment with them. They begin to realize that here is a God they can trust, a God who is for them, rather than against them. Here is a God who desires our cleansing, healing and restoration, rather than a God whose wrath needs to be appeased.

The vicarious nature of Christ, whose birth is “the birthday of the whole human race,”<sup>5</sup> who lives my life, offers his obedience for me, and has completed

---

5 St. Basil, *On the Nativity of Christ* (*Patrologia Graeca* 31: 1473A) (attributed though uncertain authorship).

the covenant for me, is like an entirely new language for many of my students. Students read with awe from Torrance's book:

The good news is that God comes to us in Jesus to stand in for us and bring to fulfillment his purposes of worship and communion. Jesus comes to be the priest of creation to do for us, men and women, what we failed to do, to offer to the Father the worship and the praise we failed to offer, to glorify God by a life of perfect love and obedience, to be the one true servant of the Lord. In him and through him we are renewed by the Spirit in the image of God and in the worship of God in a life of shared communion. Jesus comes as our brother to be our great high priest, to carry on his loving heart the joy, the sorrows, the prayers, the conflicts of all his creatures, to reconcile all things to God, and to intercede for all nations as our eternal mediator and advocate. He comes to stand in for us in the presence of the Father, when in our failure and bewilderment we do not know how to pray as we ought to, or forget to pray altogether. By his Spirit he helps us in our infirmities.<sup>6</sup>

Third, students resonate deeply with the idea that Christ is present with us by the Spirit to empower us to participate in his life and ministry, particularly caring for and advocating on behalf of those who have been marginalized and disadvantaged. This generation of university students has a heightened awareness of the need for Christian engagement in social justice. Yet, taking the world's problems on their shoulders can feel overwhelming, depressing and daunting. To realize that they are not alone, that it is not their ministry, but God's, and they are invited and empowered by the Holy Spirit to share in it is both exciting and empowering. As one student wrote, "Because I know the Triune God of love, I have no reason to fear and I have no reason not to get my hands dirty" participating in the Spirit's work of bringing heaven to earth.

Fourth, students discover their views of others and of creation changing. They grasp how a human-centered approach can turn God, others, and creation into something to be exploited. Torrance alludes to the pragmatism of our culture through a story in which a man overlooking waterfalls and Yosemite Valley's stunning beauty from the Sierra Nevada mountains saw it merely in terms the water that could be accessed through building a dam there.<sup>7</sup> In class we talk about their Bible Study groups that tend to be focused on needs, how to solve problems and how to get God and others to meet their needs. Students reflect on their language about trying to "fit God into their lives" and realize that idea is as absurd

---

6 Torrance, *Worship*, 14.

7 Torrance, *Worship*, 70.

as trying to fit the ocean into a recently dug hole in the sand.<sup>8</sup> They begin to grasp why, "Who is God?" is the central theological question, rather than the many "how to" questions that, as Bonhoeffer wrote, can be our way of trying to make ourselves the center and to classify and box God into our mental categories.<sup>9</sup>

When they operationalize this new Christ-centered, "who is God?" framing of their theology, they realize it doesn't make sense to ask, "What would Jesus do?" As Torrance writes, "The Christ whom we remember is not an absent Christ."<sup>10</sup> He is the resurrected and living one who abides with us and in whom we are invited to abide. Rather they begin to ask, "What is Jesus doing now, through his Spirit, and what would it look like for us to participate in Christ's work by the power of the Holy Spirit?"

Understanding that God in Christ has joined his life with theirs opens their eyes to the reality that God has joined his life in Christ with all people, and with even the created order. A student responded, "I am able to look at all things beautifully created through the Father, Spirit and Son, rather than looking at how everything can best benefit me. I am able to focus on communion with others, knowing that the triune God created us and our world through God's triune love."

### 3. New Identity

Finally, having their vision cleansed to see God more fully in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ raises some deep questions about their own identity. Initially they ask, "If everything is done for me in Christ, if he fulfilled the covenant for me and on my behalf, what is left then for me to do?" They feel the wonder of God's love and embrace of them, and their connection with others and with creation, all loved and reconciled by God (Col. 1:20). Yet, they wonder what it means for their lives and vocation that they have been "incorporated into Christ."<sup>11</sup>

In order to deal with this, students spend a fair amount of time in small groups studying passages like John 15:1-17, and the more than forty Pauline passages that refer to our life "in Christ."<sup>12</sup> We cover the board with brief summaries of

---

8 We connect this idea with the legend about Augustine's encounter with the boy on the beach who says his attempts to fit the ocean into his little hole, were like Augustine trying to fit the Trinity into his mind.

9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, tr. Christian Kaiser Verlag (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1960), 30.

10 Torrance, *Worship*, 87.

11 Torrance, *Worship*, 79.

12 Cf. Smedes' comments that "Being in Christ is not only the fundamental fact of the individual Christian's existence, it is the whole new reality. It is not a side issue of Christian

these passages, “justified in Christ,” “redeemed in Christ,” “beloved in Christ,” “sanctified in Christ,” “new creations in Christ” . . .

As students peruse the board, they gain a sense of awe at the implications of seeing their lives now “hidden in Christ” (Col. 3:3). They realize more deeply that they have been drawn into the loving communion of God and begin to see themselves cleansed, recreated, filled, and empowered to share in God’s purposes for the world. Rather than having to strain to create their identity, they see that it is a gift from God in Christ, some thing for which they can be thankful, joyful, and trusting in terms of its daily implications. In the words of one student,

We may approach worship and living as thankfulness towards God’s beautiful perichoretic communion and by doing that I think we will learn to love one another better, because we are able to take off the shackles of performance and instead recognize we all are invited to join in God’s loving communion.

Torrance expressed it this way:

What is the Christian answer? . . . to return to “the forgotten Trinity” — to an understanding of the Holy Spirit, who delivers us from a narcissistic preoccupation with the self to find our true being in loving communion with God and one another — to hear God’s call to us, in our day, to participate through the Spirit in Christ’s communion with the Father and his mission from the Father to the world — to create in our day a new humanity of persons who find true fulfilment in other-centered communion and service in the kingdom of God.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Like many of my students, my husband and I felt a desire to go deeper in our understanding of these profound truths and their implications for our lives. In less than two years after taking the class with James Torrance, we sold our house, Tim quit his job, and as a family of five, we moved to Banchory, Scotland to begin our work with Professor Torrance at the University of Aberdeen. Neither of us had a clear sense of where it would lead or how it would work. We felt a gracious invitation to leave our more human-centered and pragmatic approach to life and to steep ourselves more fully in the wonder of God’s triune communion. We entered into a community rich in prayer and relationships and the gift of having James Torrance as our guide into life lived more fully in communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Torrance’s insights have been integral to my teaching ever since.

---

life. It is the new life.” Lewis Smedes, *Union with Christ: A Biblical View of New Life in Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 59.

13 Torrance, *Worship*, 41