

# INTERVIEWS

## Interview of DAVID W. TORRANCE

*by Todd Speidell*

David W. Torrance is the youngest brother of Thomas F. Torrance. They, James, and their three sisters were all born in China to missionary parents. The order of their ages was Mary (wife of the Rev. Prof. R. S. Wallace), Tom, Grace (wife of the Rev. Dr. R. W. Walker), Margaret (wife of the Rev. Kenneth MacKenzie), James, and David. David is almost eleven years younger than Tom and fifteen months younger than James.

All three brothers studied classics as undergraduates, philosophy for their M.A. degrees, and then theology, specializing in systematics. Each gained a B.D. degree with distinction, was dux of New College, Edinburgh, and was awarded a senior scholarship for further study in theology, which each in turn pursued under Karl Barth in Basel. Both Tom and James went on to teach after ministering in a parish: Tom as professor of theology at Edinburgh, and James, after lecturing at Edinburgh, as professor of theology at Aberdeen. David continued in parish ministry.

The following interview between Todd Speidell (hereafter cited as TS) and David Torrance (hereafter cited as DT) offers personal and theological reflections and recollections of Tom Torrance as a person, pastor, and theologian. On behalf of the journal board, we are grateful for David Torrance's willingness to share his memories and impressions of his oldest brother and other family members. David has also made many invaluable contributions to the journal since its inception.

TS: I recall Tom or James saying that all three of you studied under Karl Barth, and when you introduced yourself to him, he peered over his glasses at you and asked, "Are there others?" True?

DT: Yes, I studied under Barth with great profit. I well remember my arrival in Basel. Like both brothers before me, I stayed in the [Theologische Fakultät]



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Alumneum, where Oscar Cullmann and his sister were house parents. I also remember quite vividly my first visit to KB in his house. He was warm and friendly. He certainly remembered Tom and James, but I do not remember if he asked, "Are there others?" However, he may well have said so. With his warm, friendly approach in tutorials and discussions, and his physical build, I tended to look on him as a warm and friendly bear! He was very approachable, although as students we always looked on him with some awe.

TS: I also recall both Tom and James talking about visiting Barth's house for tutorials and being with him on other informal occasions. I vividly remember James saying that he sat next to Barth in his home and translated on demand from St. Thomas or whomever was deemed necessary for the evening discussion. Do you have other personal recollections, whether of your own or your brothers' experiences with KB outside of the university setting?

DT: Some of the interesting and amusing situations took place during the tutorials, which KB conducted in English. These were small and informal and comprised only five or six students. In my case, we read through volume I/1 of the *Church Dogmatics*. These tutorials were over and above his lectures and tutorials in German.

My brother James told me of an amusing situation, which took place in one of these tutorials. Sometimes people visiting Basel on holiday would drop into Barth's lectures and tutorials in order simply to see, hear, and hopefully meet him. Barth welcomed them in his kindly way and used to say with considerable amusement that he seemed to be one of the tourist attractions in Basel. Not all who dropped in were theologically literate. On one occasion an American dropped in. My brother James said it seemed clear that he did not understand anything of what Barth said. However, at the end of the lecture he said, "What they say in my country is, 'If your heart is all right, then put it there, brother.'" And he held out his hand across the table to Barth, whereon Barth with a great grin and much amusement shook his hand.

On another occasion, Barth recalled with great amusement an American student who came to ask if he could study under him for a doctoral degree on the subject of "Nothingness" — presumably because of Barth's belief that God created the world out of nothing. When KB learned that the student had originally planned to study in Holland, he asked him why he had changed his

mind and come to Basel to study under KB. The student's reply, to Barth's great amusement, was, "I wanted to come to the fountain of nothingness." Barth was a very human person and enjoyed a great sense of fun.

TS: Do you have other outstanding memories of Barth's English tutorials?

DT: As I have mentioned, in the English tutorial which I attended, we studied Volume I/1 of the *Church Dogmatics*. Barth asked each of us in turn to summarize fifty pages in our own words. That is to say, one student summarized pages one to fifty, the next student summarized pages fifty-one to one hundred, and so on. We were each in turn required to read our summary to the tutorial class and hear KB's comments, whereupon discussion began. I found this immensely helpful. It was a test as to whether we really understood Barth and his theology.

TS: By the time you studied under Barth, Tom had started his academic career. Are you aware of how Barth assessed his former student's building upon the theology of his mentor in his own creative way?

DT: It was clear from an early stage that Barth had a tremendous respect for Tom. At a later stage he said to Tom that he regarded him as his best interpreter in the English-speaking world and the one who best understood his theology. Barth recognized and respected the fact that Tom went beyond him in the interrelationship between theology and science. They discussed that fact both when Tom had occasion to visit Basel and when KB visited Tom in Edinburgh. Long before KB retired, both KB and Oscar Cullmann wanted Tom to succeed Barth upon his retirement from the chair of theology in Basel. Cullmann wrote to Tom urging him to come to Basel. However, Tom felt that he was called to remain in Scotland.

TS: Aside from Tom's university post in New College, he was also a parish minister, founding editor of the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, and moderator of the Church of Scotland. By his calling, do you mean not only his academic career but also his theological vision for the ministry, service, and renewal of the church in Scotland?

DT: From his early days in China, Tom understood that his calling by God was to be a minister of the gospel and a missionary. Originally, he wanted to be a missionary evangelist in China like his father. At university, as he studied

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for the ministry, he felt his missionary and evangelistic call being refocused and deepened. His great concern became the call to evangelize ministers and, through them, the church. He was passionately concerned that ministers should understand the Word of God and be faithful in proclaiming and teaching it. That is clear from a letter called "An Urgent Call to the Kirk," which he wrote to every minister of the Church of Scotland following his year as moderator. Although he wrote it, he invited two other ex-moderators of the Church of Scotland and an elder to sign it along with him. With them he initiated various meetings throughout the church to discuss the letter and its contents. Despite his heavy teaching load and academic study, he was always ready to support visiting evangelists and on occasion to associate with them on their preaching platforms. He initiated and was the prime mover of an invitation extended by the Church of Scotland to Dr. Billy Graham, the well-known evangelist, to visit Scotland in 1990. After the crusade, Tom helped to set up a follow-up school in evangelism. He was a friend of Billy Graham's, and Billy Graham kindly sent a telegram of sympathy following Tom's death, which was read at Tom's funeral service. Tom always wished to be known not primarily as an academic theologian but as a preacher of the gospel. That is the way that he described himself.

TS: You three brothers were all pastorally oriented theologians in different contexts. Your joint work, *A Passion for Christ*, shows the unity and center of your theology. Tom also contributed an essay to your edited book, *The Witness of the Jews to God*. Did you, James, and Tom differ in any key areas?

DT: No! We never, ever differed theologically or in our evangelistic and missionary concerns. We were each different in the way that we expressed the gospel. We sometimes differed in our political views and perhaps on other minor issues, but never theologically or evangelistically. Tom was more reserved than James and myself in his approach to the charismatic movement in the church, and sometimes a little critical. All three of us agreed with Rev. Tom Smail, a theological leader in the charismatic movement and a friend of ours, that the Holy Spirit makes us more aware of Jesus Christ and leads us to participate more fully in Christ's death and resurrection.

We were all three greatly influenced by our missionary parents, their dependence on the Word of God and prayer. They imparted to us their missionary

concerns. Tom always called our father the evangelist of the family and our mother the theologian. They encouraged us from an early age to read the Bible through for ourselves once a year, which we continued to do. They never gave us any theory of what the Bible is. They simply taught us to pray and ask God to speak to us each time before reading the Bible. They said that when we heard God speaking to us then we would know that the Bible is God's Word, and nothing would ever shake that conviction. That we found to be true. Later, as we studied theology, that assurance of the Bible as God's Word never left us, nor did the missionary concern which they imparted. Their approach to the Word of God laid for each of us a foundation such that none of us ever felt a tension between our faith in the Lord and our theology, nor between our theology and our ministerial and evangelistic work. Theology became for us simply a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of God's Word. Theology is the servant of ministry. If it does not lead us to personal faith in Jesus Christ in the unity of his person and work, then, as Tom often said, "our theology is only a paper theology." In that case, it should be discarded. Belonging to the same family, remaining close to each other, and frequently discussing theology together, it is perhaps not surprising that we held the same theology.

TS: What theological sources did your mother have you read? Would you say that she was a formative personal influence that contributed to Tom's embrace of women in ordained ministry?

DT: Because Tom was over ten years older than I, I am not aware of what mother advised him to read, apart from her giving Tom his first book by Barth, *Credo*, thereby introducing him to a theologian who had a great influence on him. James was only fifteen months older than I and, in regard to him and me, I am able to answer your question more easily. Mother often guided us in our reading by encouraging us, in addition to missionary books, to read works like *A Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* by Martin Luther, Robert Bruce's *Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacrament Preached in the Kirk of Edinburgh*, Samuel Rutherford's *Sermons*, and particularly his *Letters*. While still at school we read Luther's *Bondage of the Will* and were introduced to Calvin's *Institutes*. We also read John Howie's *The Scots Worthies* and several books on the Scottish Covenanters, and so on.

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Books were much treasured in our home. Our parents had a wide selection of missionary and religious books together with books on theology and church history. On Sundays, we never read secular books nor studied for exams. As a family we never worked on a Sunday. Sunday was a holiday and the happiest day of the week. Therefore on Sundays we read missionary and religious books and spoke about what we read. We had time for one another.

In regard to the ordination of women, Tom at an early period changed his mind and strongly supported the ordination of women on biblical grounds. For example, in Romans 16:7, Paul speaks of Junias (a woman) as "outstanding among the Apostles." And women like Philip's four daughters prophesied (Acts 21:9 and see 1 Cor. 11:5). As for our mother, on missionary deputation (long before the church accepted the ordination of women), she often spoke from a pulpit and at many meetings led prayer meetings and helped in church work. At least on one occasion she conducted a funeral service. I imagine this influenced Tom, although mother was not overly attracted to women ministers. She was not in the modern sense a "feminist."

TS: Did the three brothers discuss theology as youngsters and later read each other's sermons, articles, and books? How would you describe your political differences and the manner in which you expressed them to each other?

DT: The simple answer to your first question is yes. We often discussed together and learned from each other. I learned a great deal from both brothers, in discussion and through reading their sermons, articles, and books.

We did not discuss politics very much or in any depth, although I know that we tended to differ. In our general elections, Tom would generally vote Conservative and James and I would generally vote Labour. James had a strong social conscience, which I shared. He felt keenly the issues arising from apartheid in South Africa, a country that he visited. He felt strongly that our theology should influence our political decisions. In regard to Israel, on the one hand, Tom and I were in full agreement regarding God's continuing covenant and purpose for Israel and their restoration by God to the land. We often worked together and spoke in support of each other on this matter in the Church of Scotland's General Assembly. James, on the other hand, was always more reserved on this matter. He believed that Israel was still the people of the covenant and that God had a continuing purpose for them. However, it is not always easy or

possible to separate theological and political issues concerning Israel and the land. With his strong social consciousness, James was always deeply concerned, and rightly so, about the conflict over human rights and the suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians. I doubt whether he ever read the history of the Jewish-Arab conflict. I think this contributed to his uncertainty or silence concerning the land and Middle East issues. However, having myself spoken many times and published on the subject, James never, ever criticized my views. In fact, he often asked me for my views when certain political or military issues arose concerning the Middle East. Tom, however, was fairly knowledgeable about the history of the Middle East. I read more widely than Tom about the Middle East and its history, and often recommended to him certain books concerning the background of the Middle East conflict or Arab speeches and pronouncements. He quoted from some of these in our General Assembly.

TS: Tom wrote booklets on women in ministry, marriage, the presbyterate, and abortion. What do you think led him, whom some would see as an academic theologian, to be so concerned about practical issues of pastoral ministry — to which all three of you dedicated your lives and ministries?

DT: Tom was never primarily an academic theologian. He was primarily a churchman and pastor with a pastor's concern for the spiritual renewal of the church. It was out of his pastoral concern for the renewal of the church that he felt led — or compelled — into the academic world in order to try and forward that concern. His theology as a biblical theologian was centered on the saving, Triune grace of God centered in the person and work of Christ, that grace which in Christ changes and transforms lives. Because he was first and foremost a pastor, he always had concern for practical issues confronting the church. It was therefore quite natural for him to write on ministry, marriage, the office of elder, and abortion. He also wrote on preaching Christ and called the church to be faithful to the Word of God.