

KENNETH WALKER, Ph.D.

Minister of Athelstaneford with Whitekirk and Tynninghame

East Lothian, Scotland

kenverwalker@btinternet.com

It was during my early teenage years as a manse offspring that I first became aware of the name of Tom Torrance. This was long before I had even the most meagre thoughts of entering the ministry – let alone finding myself Tom’s parish minister many years later. Within our family circle, in church meetings and private conversations with ecclesiastical friends and ministerial colleagues, my parents would refer frequently to what for them was clearly almost a household name and certainly one that, even in those days, was attaining universal recognition. In the case of our family (and many others), the name of Torrance was automatically associated with the mission field in China. The 1920’s had become part of that great age of mission. The urge “to preach the Gospel to all nations” had taken a fervent hold of many young minds to whom the call of God had come with powerful influence. My parents served in China with the China Inland Mission (C.I.M.), working in the province of Honan at around the same time as Tom’s parents were also playing their part in proclaiming the Gospel. They also served with the C.I.M. but in Szechwan.¹

For this missionary son, born in Chengdu, the missionary exploits and zeal of his parents were to leave a profound effect upon the future T.F.T. (as well as other members of the emerging Torrance family). The gospel of God’s grace became one of the central tenets of Tom’s faith and life, both as a parish minister and as an academic.

It is always fascinating to ponder the extraordinary manner in which God’s grace and purposes can be seen in the ways in which life often works out. After those early years in China, Tom would eventually return to Scotland. During his Arts studies at Edinburgh University he came in contact

¹ For fuller details, the reader is directed to Alister E. McGrath’s exceptional work, *T.F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999), 6f.



with both my father and my wife's father, who also served in the mission field, this time in South Africa.

Like Tom, both were in the initial stages of study for the ministry. My first meeting with Tom Torrance was as unusual as it was unexpected. It illustrates something of the humanity in Tom and the level of his keenness to encourage future divinity students. During the late 1960's, I shared a small house in Edinburgh with my elder brother (who was born in China!). My father had written to Tom to tell him that there might be a potential divinity student in the offing. Tom kindly wrote back to say that he was delighted to hear of this. One dark and wild November night the doorbell rang. Who should be standing in the doorway but Tom Torrance. He had come right across Edinburgh to meet us and offer me his fullest support and encouragement on the path that would lead to the giddy heights of New College. It was one of those unforgettable moments. In time that bastion of theological study would indeed beckon and open its portals to increasing numbers of us who came under Tom's kindly and powerful influence as a person, as a minister of the gospel, as a theologian, and as an ongoing pastor.

Sadly, for some divinity students who had taken courses in Christian Dogmatics under Tom, the experience was not a happy one. They came away disgruntled and unhappy. To them Tom seemed far too erudite, excessive in words and to others perhaps even arrogant. Certainly Tom did not stand fools gladly – and that was true in relation to any student who pretended that they knew more theology than he did! Given that, any student knew to tread carefully. But to those who were humble enough to listen and learn and broaden their knowledge – and, more so, willing to question their preconceptions – the Torrance influence became all embracing. Perhaps it is worthy of note that, under Tom Torrance, the Department of Christian Dogmatics was one of the six departments in those days where every lecture began with prayer. In those far away days at New College, the study of theology through the lens of Christian Dogmatics was not simply an academic exercise: everything was seen to be centered in the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ. Theology, Christology, Pneumatology, the Trinity, science and

theology and so much more were understood as being simply and profoundly related in and to the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Tom the learned but understanding academic was also Tom the churchman. Tucked away in a desk drawer is a telegram. It was sent on the date of my induction and ordination, *inter alia*: ". . . prayerful good wishes for the new ministry. Margaret and Tom Torrance." Soon, as someone dramatically put it, Tom Torrance will be sitting at your feet – rather than the other way round! But what a prospect. People used to ask what it must be like to have one's former theological professor as a member of the congregation at Whitekirk. Here again shone out the depth of his own grace and humility. Tom was never critical of my ministry or of my sermons, as far as I was aware. I do remember a few occasions when we shook hands at the church door as the congregation left after the service. "Look up the Greek," he would smile as he underscored a subtle theological point. Tom was always gracious, always helpful, always encouraging. He never failed to offer a word of appreciation. "Thank you for preaching the gospel," he would beam. Or, "It was so good to hear the doctrine of unconditional grace." Or, "Wonderful to hear the Trinity expounded today. It's not done often enough these days."

Tom never lost the call of the true pastor either in academia or in parish life which he also served so well. In his role as Professor of Christian Dogmatics Tom attracted numerous students to come to New College. He influenced large numbers of future ministers in Scotland and other countries. T.F., as we affectionately referred to him, was one of those special men who, in those days, had come out of parish ministry and been appointed to an academic post where they were able to impart their years of parish experience to students keen to enter the Ministry. His pastoral and theological influence within the Church of Scotland also became legendary: his many Reports to General Assemblies; his year as Moderator of the General Assembly (1976-77); and, the magnetism in the content and manner in which he addressed the Kirk on a range of profound topics.

More recently, during Tom's last years on this earth, visits were made to the nursing home where he received such fond care. We would share in scriptural readings (Authorized Version – usually!) and prayer. I once took along a young divinity student to meet with Tom. We prayed together and

immediately afterwards Tom revealed his keen powers of observation as he spoke kindly to the younger man: "Do you always pray with your hands in your pockets?" On each visit we read from his well-thumbed *Daily Light*. His copies of scripture once read by his own mother and father were particularly special to him. We shared also in Holy Communion which he always appreciated. Tom's was a sacramental ministry and a sacramental faith. Sometimes the great man would sit in a chair. Sometimes he would lie on his bed. On these latter occasions with his eyes closed he looked to be asleep. But as the prayers and words of response continued, Tom would join in freely and gladly: two pastors sharing in the blessed Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood.

During those last days Tom's humanity, grace and gospel-centred faith never abated. So much so that, by God's grace, Tom was being cared for by a Chinese nurse whom he sought to impart something of that same gospel his parents had proclaimed many years before! Tom rejoiced in the profound truth of the resurrection. He looked forward to the time when he would leave this world and go to the Father. His wish was granted early in the morning of Advent Sunday 2007. He now rejoices with all the saints in glory.