

**THE CENTRALITY OF THE TRINITY  
IN THE THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE**

Paul D. Molnar, Ph.D.

Professor of Systematic Theology

Department of Theology and Religious Studies

St. John's University

Queens, New York

molnarp@stjohns.edu

**Abstract:** This article illustrates why, for Thomas F. Torrance, the doctrine of the Trinity was the central doctrine that shaped all of his dogmatic thinking. What makes Torrance's trinitarian theology especially compelling is that it is patristically grounded and consistently bears the mark of his belief that the doctrine of the Trinity is the basic ground and grammar of theological discourse. As such the doctrine informs our understanding of creation, incarnation, reconciliation and redemption in ways that illuminate the deep meaning of those doctrines. Interestingly, it is Torrance's understanding of the resurrection that allows him to argue consistently and effectively that we human beings not only cannot, but must not, attempt to leave the sphere of space, time and conceptuality to know the transcendent God. Although for Torrance there is nothing within our concepts themselves that enables us to know the triune God, we can really know God in and through our limited concepts and within the space and time of his creation only because God himself has become incarnate and reconciled us to himself; thus it is in his incarnate Word and through his Spirit that God includes us in his own self-knowledge and love through his Word and Spirit and thereby enables a true knowledge of the transcendent God that not only respects our limited human being, nature and freedom but enables us to be the creatures God intended us to be.

Thomas F. Torrance is a man for whom I have the highest respect not only as one of the truly great theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but also as a humble Christian who once told me just before a lecture he was about to give at St. John's University in 1997 that he only wanted to be introduced as a minister of the gospel. Of course I used a copy of the lengthy *C.V.* he sent me to introduce him with some further details anyway. Notwithstanding, T. F. Torrance surely was a humble minister of the gospel and that is why his thinking is so important to us all. In addition to dedicating this article to the memory of T. F. Torrance, I would also like to express my gratitude to his son Iain for helping to arrange his father's appearance at St. John's that year and for thus enabling me to have the pleasure and privilege of meeting his father and getting to know him personally.



### *Centrality of the Doctrine*

Although he did not formally teach the doctrine of the Trinity at the University of Edinburgh,<sup>1</sup> T. F. Torrance did write three extremely important books on the subject.<sup>2</sup> Those three books reveal a deep understanding of the doctrine with its implications for all other doctrines, for ecumenical relations and its function as the very grammar of theology itself. In fact, the doctrine was so central for Torrance that he could say:

It is not just that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity must be accorded primacy over all the other doctrines, but that properly understood it is the nerve and centre of them all, configures them all, and is so deeply integrated with them that when they are held apart from the doctrine of the Trinity they are seriously defective in truth and become malformed.<sup>3</sup>

Following Athanasius, Torrance insisted that we do not know God in “disjunction” from the world by distinguishing natural and supernatural, nor do we know God by way of some logical inference “from the world.” Rather, we know God as Creator who transcends the world in and through the world

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), when Torrance transferred from his position as Chair of Church History at the University of Edinburgh to Chair of Christian Dogmatics, he was “denied the possibility of lecturing at Edinburgh on the doctrine of God, and especially the doctrine of the Trinity” and this was a “severe disappointment to Torrance” (91). The reason for this situation was because John Baillie, Principal of New College and Dean of the Faculty of Divinity at the time, lectured on “Divinity” which included the doctrine of God and the doctrine of the Trinity, while Torrance lectured on “Christian Dogmatics” which included Christology and Soteriology as well as Church, Ministry and Sacraments. Nonetheless, in later years even though there still was a division of labor so that John McIntyre, who succeeded John Baillie in the Chair of Divinity, taught the course on the doctrine of the Trinity, Torrance was able to emphasize both Christology and the Trinity in his honors courses in Dogmatics, teaching that the Trinity was the “ground and grammar of theology.” I am grateful to Professor Alasdair I. C. Heron of the University of Erlangen, Germany for providing me with this information regarding Torrance’s teaching about the Trinity while at Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, [hereafter, *The Christian Doctrine of God*], (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, [hereafter, *The Trinitarian Faith*], (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988); and Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 31. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*, [hereafter, *Divine Meaning*], (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 186.

as the medium of his self-communication in the Incarnation and outpouring of his Spirit. We thus know God in his internal trinitarian relations through the Incarnation; that is what "makes the doctrine of the Holy Trinity absolutely basic and essential in the Christian understanding of God."<sup>4</sup>

Of course for Torrance this meant that knowledge of God could only take place in faith as we allow our concepts to be shaped by the reality of God himself as he meets us in his Word and Spirit as attested in scripture. Torrance assiduously followed Hilary's dictum that words are subjected to realities, not realities to words. In this he was also following his mentor Karl Barth who maintained that anyone who does not accept that axiom is no theologian and never will be!<sup>5</sup> Thus Torrance also could say:

I myself like to think of the doctrine of the Trinity as the *ultimate ground* of theological knowledge of God, the *basic grammar* of theology, for it is there that we find our knowledge of God reposing upon the final Reality of God himself, grounded in the ultimate relations intrinsic to God's own Being, which govern and control all true knowledge of him from beginning to end.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Scripture, Resurrection and the Trinity*

As can be seen from these brief remarks, Torrance's understanding of the Trinity was steeped in the patristic literature, especially the thinking of Athanasius; but also the thinking of Hilary, Epiphanius, Cyril and others. Perhaps it would be best to begin by noting Torrance's view of the biblical basis of the doctrine of the Trinity. Like all theologians Torrance recognized that there was no developed doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament but that the doctrine was a product of Christian reflection on God's self-revelation attested in the Bible. This meant that the New Testament had to be approached in a "holistic" manner which would hold together the "empirical and conceptual" as well as the "historical and theological" because a merely

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 222.

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts. [hereafter, *CD*]. Vol. I, part 1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, trans. by G. W. Bromiley, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 354. See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988), 36; *Theology in Reconstruction*, (London: SCM Press, Ltd, 1965), 92; *God and Rationality*, (London: Oxford, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 37; and, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 188.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 158f.

historical study of the scriptures would miss the very factor that gives the scriptures their deep meaning, namely, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. What Torrance wanted to affirm at all costs was that if we read the New Testament for what it says we may understand that “what God is for us” cannot under any circumstances be separated from “what God is in himself.”<sup>7</sup> That is why he very consistently argued that we must think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves—thinking from a center in God meant thinking within faith by acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the divinity of his Holy Spirit as the power enabling theology in the first place.<sup>8</sup> This, for Torrance, is the power of God’s self-revelation attested in the scriptures; and it is precisely as the risen and ascended Lord that Jesus continues to speak his Word through these same scriptures even now as the Lord who is coming again.

That is why, deep in his volume on the resurrection, Torrance insisted that Christ’s bodily resurrection was exactly that point in history where God revealed himself in such a way that our very concept of God had to be completely reconstructed. And so he could say: “Here [with the resurrection] we are at the very root of the doctrine of the Trinity, for through Christ we have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:18).”<sup>9</sup> There is a great deal at stake here. On the one hand Torrance insists that Jesus is unique because “he is God the Son in the unity of the Holy Trinity.” Therefore “the resurrection of our human nature in him implies a reconciliation or oneness with God which is not identity, yet a real sharing in the union of the incarnate Son with the Father, through a sharing not only in his human nature but in the life and love of God embodied in him.” Torrance not only emphasized that

---

<sup>7</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 35.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 88, 101; *The Trinitarian Faith*, 19, 51, 69-70, 78; *Theology in Reconstruction*, 48; and, *God and Rationality*, 32, 54, 174.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, [hereafter, *STR*], (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1976; reissued Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 43. See also Torrance, *STR*, 172. It is significant that Torrance also maintains that a number of early church fathers, especially Athanasius, believed that the real starting point even for the doctrine of creation “was the mighty act of God in raising Jesus Christ from the dead,” Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 97. This was not meant to undercut the Incarnation, of course, since it is the incarnate Word who rose from the dead manifesting God’s creative power over life and death. Thus, Torrance repeatedly insists upon the importance of the Incarnation as the center from which our knowledge of God as triune and as creator develops.

because the Godhead dwelt bodily in Jesus we receive this relationship by grace, but that there is a threefold union and distinction implied here: 1) "the *consubstantial communion* between the Father and Son *in the Holy Spirit* who is Love, the Love that God is"; 2) "the *hypostatic union* between the divine and human natures in the one Person of Christ which takes place through the operation of the Holy Spirit who is the love of God"; and 3) "the *communion* or *koinonia* of the Spirit who is mediated to us from the Father through the Son, and who is the Love of God poured into our hearts."<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, because it is in the resurrection that we must understand that Jesus is the truth (Jn. 14:6), Torrance insists both that God addresses us in Jesus Christ, and that in Jesus Christ we have the "answering word of man addressed to God in the unity of his one Person." Therefore Torrance can claim:

He is thus the center in our midst where the Reality and Word of God are translated into human reality and word and where we human beings may know and speak of God without having to transcend our creaturely forms of thought and speech. It is in and through Jesus Christ therefore that we creatures of space and time may know God the Father, in such a way as to think and speak truly and validly of him, even in such a way that the forms of our thought and speech really terminate objectively on God himself in his own ultimate Being and Reality. Apart from the resurrection we could not say this.<sup>11</sup>

This is the place where all Arian dualism is overcome once and for all. The resurrection disclosed that God was "directly present and personally active in the resurrection of Jesus."<sup>12</sup> But that the crucified Jesus should now share the prerogatives of God was the "great stone of stumbling, which gave such offence to recalcitrant Judaism, for it was unwilling to go forward with the

---

<sup>10</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 71. It is precisely by holding together the doctrines of Incarnation, resurrection, atonement and creation that Torrance presents a view of our knowing God that not only does not require us to move beyond the human into some angelic sphere in order to know God in truth, as some have suggested, but demands that we know God the Father *humanly* with our limited views and concepts by allowing the Holy Spirit to enable this through union with Christ, the incarnate, risen and ascended Lord. Thus Torrance writes: "If we are enabled to apprehend God in His own divine nature, it is without having to take our feet off the ground, so to speak, or without having to transcend our human nature in its setting in space and time," *God and Rationality*, 168. It is the Spirit who miraculously enables this. See also T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 37.

<sup>12</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 42.

Christian Church in accepting the full implication of the resurrection of Christ."<sup>13</sup> What was that implication? For Torrance it was that the fundamental concept of God that had "more and more assumed a fixed pattern in later Judaism" needed to undergo a radical reconstruction away from the idea of a namelessly transcendent and detached deity operating through intermediaries to a new understanding "of the living God whose very being and life are accessible to human knowing and participating."<sup>14</sup> That is why Torrance insists that the Fourth Gospel

stresses that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and there is no other way into knowledge of God except through him (Jn. 14:6), and why the doctrine of the Trinity is built round the fact that it is through Christ that we have access by one Spirit to the Father (Eph. 2:16).<sup>15</sup>

For Torrance any depreciation of Jesus' full humanity as the humanity of the Word or any attenuation of his bodily resurrection would end the possibility of knowing God in history; it would allow "the Christian message to become detached from [the historical Jesus] in some sort of transcendentalized 'Easter faith'" and would thus "disrupt the very foundations of Christianity."<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, it is just here that one may understand why Torrance places so much emphasis on Athanasius' statement that "It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works and call him Unoriginate."<sup>17</sup> Here also one can easily see why Torrance repeatedly stressed that there is no God behind the back of Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> Without reducing the immanent to the economic Trinity, Torrance consistently held that God is not other than he is in the history of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 43. See also Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 23ff.

<sup>15</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Torrance, *STR*, 172.

<sup>17</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Ar.* 1.34, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church Second Series*, trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987), 326. See also, e.g., Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 6 and 49; and, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 117.

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 199, 243.

<sup>19</sup> While Torrance insists that there is no God behind the back of Jesus Christ, he is equally insistent that God "does not draw his being from without, but possesses it from himself and in himself" so that "God is transcendentally free and in need of

It is just here that Torrance avoids a particularly difficult problem that afflicts contemporary trinitarian theology. Torrance was no Origenist. Origen confused God's internal and external relations and so understood God and the world as co-eternal. Consequently, he was unable to think of God as almighty except "in a necessary eternal conjunction with all things."<sup>20</sup> In Torrance's view, Arius' teaching actually ran back to this Origenist confusion. The basic difficulty concerned Origen's inability to "give clear-cut ontological priority to the Father/Son relation in God over the Creator/cosmos relation," and the further difficulty that he understands the Son's generation as "due to the will of the Father."<sup>21</sup> Following Athanasius, Torrance insisted that God was always Father but not always Creator and that God was always Son but not always incarnate. This is an extremely important insight because with it Torrance could distinguish but not separate God's internal relations from his relations with us without ever seeking a God behind the back of Jesus Christ. Yet Torrance always respected God's mystery emphasizing that we could not explain *how* God exists as triune or even as the incarnate Word because this remains a mystery grounded in God and made known to us only in faith. Torrance therefore followed Barth in maintaining that "we can no more offer an account of the 'how' of these divine relations [Fatherhood, Sonship and Procession] and actions than we can define the Father, the Son and the Holy

---

nothing beyond himself, for he is the Creator and Lord of all other being," *The Trinitarian Faith*, 90. Thus, unlike those who claim that God's trinity is somehow constituted by his decision to be God for us, Torrance rightly asserts that God "is truly known by us within the creation only in accordance with what he is eternally, intrinsically and antecedently in himself as Father, and indeed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, apart from the creation," *The Trinitarian Faith*, 90. Torrance also explicitly rejects any idea that God's "external relations" are "constitutive of what he is as God" because "God is always Father, but he is not always Creator," *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 208.

<sup>20</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 85.

<sup>21</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 85. Ambrose in the West also rejected the idea that God's being is the result of his will: "to beget depends not upon possibility as determined by will . . . For just as the Father is not God because he wills to be so, or is compelled to be so, but is above these conditions . . . even so, the putting forth of his generative power is neither of will nor of necessity;" Ambrose quoted in Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264. Importantly, Ayres notes that for Ambrose "if we thought of the Father as having lacked the presence of the Son at some stage then we would be saying that there was 'a time when God lacked the fullness of divine perfection.'"

Spirit and delimit them from one another."<sup>22</sup> Origen's mistake is replicated today in the thinking of those who espouse a purely economic doctrine of the Trinity. Torrance avoids this by allowing the knowledge that God was always Father and Son to shape what he has to say about all other doctrines. That is why Torrance insisted that both creation and Incarnation are new even for God. Thus,

If God was not always Creator, the creation of the universe as reality 'external to God' was something new in the eternal Life of God. If the Son or Word of God by whom he created all things was not always incarnate, but became man in the fullness of time, then God's communication of *himself* to us in Jesus Christ who is of one and the same being and nature as the Father, is something new to the eternal being of God. Thus the incarnation and creation together . . . tell us that he [God] is free to do what he had never done before, and free to be other than he was eternally: to be the Almighty Creator, and even to become incarnate as a creature within his creation, while remaining eternally the God that he is.<sup>23</sup>

Torrance was adamant in maintaining the importance of not imposing upon the New Testament witness any sort of dualist framework of thought that could undermine the fact that in the resurrection of Jesus, God meets us in a way that is utterly inconceivable and yet becomes conceivable only because in faith one hears the Word of the risen Lord himself through the

---

<sup>22</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 193. See also Karl Barth, *CD I/1*, 475f. For Torrance, when we speak of the begetting of the Son or the proceeding of the Spirit "we have to suspend our thought before the altogether inexpressible, incomprehensible Nature of God and the onto-relations of the Communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, which the Holy Spirit eternally is. To cite Athanasius once again, 'Thus far human knowledge goes. Here the cherubim spread the covering of their wings,'" Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 193. That is why, while Torrance insists that we cannot remain agnostic when it comes to knowing the triune God, still we must use the concepts we have "with apophatic reserve and reverence," Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 194. On this point see also Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 202, and *Theology in Reconciliation*, 224. Torrance rejects false forms of apophaticism, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 221. One of the ways Torrance accomplished this was to assert that we cannot read our sensual images back into God but instead must think from a center in God provided in the Incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Torrance also spoke of thinking of God imagelessly in order to advance this same idea. By this he meant that we could only think rightly about God by allowing God to disclose himself to us *through* our views and concepts and without allowing us to mimic God or directly describe him or project our own experiences or views into God as the Arians had done. See Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 71ff., and *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed. Alvin F. Kimel, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), "The Christian Apprehension of God the Father," 125-29.

<sup>23</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 88-9.



power of his Spirit. Torrance rejected what he called phenomenalist and observationalist thinking that tended to cut the ground out from under a serious in-depth reading of the scriptures. Whenever that happened the Bible was actually mishandled because then biblical scholars and theologians went in search of a historical Jesus who did not exist—a historical Jesus who was detached from his being as the Word who was the eternal Son of the Father and was sent by his Father into the world for us and for our salvation. Torrance therefore opposed what he called a kind of “Q fundamentalism” or the attempt to find an earliest layer of tradition from which to think and then claim, for instance, that the risen Lord’s command in Matt. 28:19 cannot have come from him but only could have come from the church.<sup>24</sup> Such thinking, he believed, would pull the ground out from under the fact that it is God himself in the history of Jesus who alone gives the church its meaning and existence and thus shapes it as his body on earth. The church in other words is not self-grounded. Torrance therefore claimed that the gospels and epistles were “dyed in the grain with trinitarian meaning.” That meaning “arose under the creative impact of our crucified and risen Lord’s revelation of the Father and his gift of the Holy Spirit” and “calls for a correspondingly new way of interpreting the New Testament *in depth*.”<sup>25</sup>

For Torrance this meant that we must not stop at the “literary surface of the Scriptures.” Instead, “without divorcing them from their historical actuality,” we must “penetrate” to “the truth content of their contents” which is identical with the “dynamic objective reality of the living Word of God the Father, the Son and the Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> We need to indwell the scriptures and allow ourselves to be drawn into “the circle of God’s revelation of himself through himself.” This entails both a spiritual and theological indwelling of “Christ and

---

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Torrance, *STR*, 7 and 10. Elsewhere, referring to baptism, Torrance notes that the “textual authorities” for this verse are “overwhelmingly strong” so that one could doubt its authenticity “only on purely *a priori* grounds, in a refusal to believe that the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could be brought together like that on the lips of Jesus. But hesitation in that way must arise from a myopic reading of the Gospels . . . for all through them we have to do with the relation of the Son to the Father and with the presence and power of the Spirit,” *Conflict and Agreement in the Church Vol. II, The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 115-16.

<sup>25</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 37.

his Word" that involves "faith, devotion, meditation, prayer and worship in and through which we are given discerning access to God in his inner Communion as Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Unless we are actually drawn into the very movement of God's self-revealing love that gave rise to the Scriptures themselves we will not understand their deep meaning or their "essential truth content."<sup>27</sup>

For Torrance our thinking is grounded in the Old Testament emphasis on God's naming himself without resigning his transcendence or glory as the covenant partner of Israel so that in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness he holds on to them with "unswerving fidelity . . . in order to heal them of their unfaithfulness and restore them to true fellowship with him in his love."<sup>28</sup> When God revealed himself as *Yahweh* or *I am who I am/ I will be who I will be*, he revealed himself as at once the Lord of the covenant and the one who renews and maintains the covenant in face of sin. This understanding of God is quite different from the static metaphysical notion of essence or substance offered in Greek philosophy. Torrance explicitly connected his understanding of the Old Testament *I am* with the New Testament *I am* articulated by Jesus as recounted in John's Gospel: "'I am the Light of the World', 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the Resurrection and the life', 'I am the Vine', 'I am the Way, the Truth and the Life', 'I am with you', etc."<sup>29</sup> in order to stress that Jesus' *I am* is "grounded in the indwelling of the Father and the Son in one another, in the eternal Communion which belongs to the inner Life of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit" as echoed in Jn. 14:10 in the statement that "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."<sup>30</sup>

It is worth mentioning in this context Torrance's repeated stress upon Matt. 11:27 and Luke 10:22 to which the Nicene Fathers often appealed: "'All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father; and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.'"<sup>31</sup> This mutual knowing

---

<sup>27</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 123.

<sup>29</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

<sup>30</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 58. See also Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 77-8; Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 111; Thomas F. Torrance,

itself involved “a mutual relation of *being* between them as well,” Torrance insisted. And this relation of being applies not only to the immanent trinitarian relation of the Father and Son but also to the incarnate Son’s relation to the Father in such a way that

we are given access to the closed circle of divine knowing between the Father and the Son only through cognitive union with Christ, that is only through an interrelation of knowing and being between us and the incarnate Son, although in our case this union is one of participation through grace and not one of nature.<sup>32</sup>

Here Christocentrism and Theocentrism coincide and are properly understood in and through the activity of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and through him to the Father. Torrance was adamant that any prior knowledge must be completely reconstructed through our “sharing in the mutual knowing of the Father and the Son.”<sup>33</sup> Torrance’s trinitarian perspective is here determined by the fact that our knowledge of and relationship with God the Father almighty takes place only in and through the Spirit uniting us conceptually and existentially to the Son and thus to the Father.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Trinity and Atonement*

Above all, Torrance’s understanding of the Trinity shaped his view of the atonement. He maintained that God in Jesus Christ not only suffered our own alienation and death vicariously for us, but also that unless Jesus who died on the cross was the very Son of the Father, then his death could easily be construed as immoral. While clearly rejecting patipassianism, Torrance nonetheless said:

What Christ did and suffered for us God himself did and suffers as the Father of the Son . . . only God can bear the wrath of God, and if the Atonement really means anything at all it must mean that it is God who suffers there in Jesus Christ—if the divinity of Christ is denied the Christian doctrine of atonement becomes immoral—that is why

---

*The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 44; Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 223; Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 187; and Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 214.

<sup>32</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 172-74 and 186-90.

spurious ideas of atonement go along with weak faith in the Deity of Christ . . .<sup>35</sup>

What Torrance means when he says that the doctrine of atonement would become immoral unless Jesus really is God with us, is that apart from his divinity, the cross could only represent a pagan human attempt to appease God through human sacrifice or self-justification. What makes Christ's forgiveness real is the fact that it is an act of God himself as the subject of Incarnation and atonement. With this in mind Torrance very carefully notes that it was not the Father who became incarnate and was crucified "for it was the Son in his distinction from the Father who died on the cross." Rather "the suffering of Christ on the cross was not just human, it was divine as well as human, and in fact is to be regarded as the suffering of God himself, that is, as the being of God in his redeeming act, and the passion of God in his very being as God."<sup>36</sup> This helps explain what Torrance meant when he asserted that "God loves us more than he loves himself."<sup>37</sup>

Here Torrance's trinitarian theology, which simultaneously emphasizes God's unity and trinity, enables him to maintain that *God* truly suffers our dereliction and sinfulness in order to overcome them on our behalf. He can say that both the Father and the Spirit, in virtue of the *perichoretic* unity of the three Persons of the Trinity also are involved in Christ's atoning death on the cross. But he can say it without collapsing the single activity of the Godhead in his reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ into a modalistic claim that it is part of God's nature to suffer and that he cannot love if he does not suffer. God loves eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and did so love before creating and would so love even without us. But in his merciful and holy love and in accordance with the "logic of grace" he seeks us

---

<sup>35</sup> Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, 146-7. And Torrance even offers some less well known patristic evidence for this same position when he refers to Melito of Sardis' "Homily on the Passion": "it was God himself in Christ who was condemned and judged in our place; and God himself who came down to us and acted for us and our salvation in this immediate way," Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 83. Here one may see why Torrance insisted that "The Deity of Christ is the supreme truth of the Gospel, the key to the bewildering enigma of Jesus," Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 46.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 113. See also Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 182 and *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 247-54.

<sup>37</sup> Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 209-10 and 215.

and reconciles us to himself at great cost to himself in his Son and through his Spirit.

It is in connection with the doctrine of the atonement not only in its unity with the doctrine of the Incarnation but also in its essential unity with the doctrine of the Trinity that Torrance sees the future of Israel and the Church. He argues that it is precisely the God of Israel, the one and only God, "the *I am who I am*, or *I shall be who I shall be*," revealed in the Old Testament who is revealed in the New Testament and has become incarnate in Jesus Christ.<sup>38</sup> Because true knowledge of God involves cognitive union with God it is clear that the doctrine of atonement is pivotal to any true conception of God. We are at enmity with God because of sin and need to be reconciled by God himself in order to have cognitive union with him. That is what happened in Christ. And that is why Torrance speaks of proper thinking about the Trinity in terms of repentant thinking, i.e., thinking that takes place on the basis of our atoning reconciliation in Christ and thus through faith and in the Spirit.<sup>39</sup>

### *Conclusion*

I hope that what I have written gives some sense of why the doctrine of the Trinity was so central to Thomas F. Torrance as an evangelical theologian. There is no space here to recount how the doctrine enabled Torrance to pursue doctrinal agreement with Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians; how he was able to offer his own innovative solution to the problem of the *Filioque* by returning to the thought of Athanasius; and how and why the Nicene *homoousion* played a pivotal role in every aspect of his theology. If I may, I might simply mention that all of this and more is treated in detail in my forthcoming volume entitled: *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 101ff.

<sup>39</sup> See, e.g., Torrance, *STR*, 18-19; *Theology in Reconstruction*, 73; and, *God and Rationality*, 190.

<sup>40</sup> This book will be published in Ashgate's Great Theologians Series late in 2009.