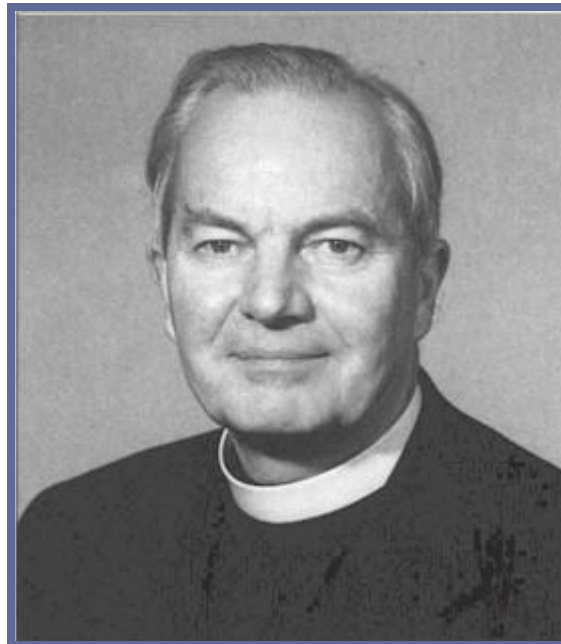


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Participatio

Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship



Volume 1 (2009)

Participatio is the journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship (www.tftorrance.org), a research fellowship within the Christian Church and tradition based on the theology of Thomas F. Torrance. The journal's mission is two-fold: to apprehend the significance of Torrance's work and to advance the evangelical and scientific theology he articulated for the benefit of the Church, academy, and society.



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CONTENTS

VOLUME 1: "The Theological Significance and Legacy of Thomas F. Torrance"
(narrative accounts and theological reflections by living relatives, colleagues,
students, and friends that assess his significance and legacy for the future of
an evangelical and scientific theology).

Eulogies

ALASDAIR HERON.	6
GEORGE HUNSINGER.....	11

Recollections and Reflections

GEOFFREY W. BROMILEY.....	13
ELMER M. COLYER	15
JOCK STEIN.....	20
HOWARD TAYLOR	21
DAVID TORRANCE.	26
KENNETH WALKER.....	35
ROBERT T. WALKER.....	39

Essays

RAY S. ANDERSON—THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE	49
ALISTER E. MCGRATH—THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE SEARCH FOR A VIABLE NATURAL THEOLOGY: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS.....	66
PAUL D. MOLNAR—THE CENTRALITY OF THE TRINITY IN THE THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE	82

IN MEMORIAM THOMAS FORSYTH TORRANCE (1913-2007)¹

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On the first Sunday in Advent, 2nd December 2007 The Very Reverend Thomas F. Torrance passed away in Edinburgh at the age of 94 years. He had been president of the Académie des Sciences Religieuses from 1972 to 1981, Professor of Christian Dogmatics in the University of Edinburgh from 1952 until his retirement in 1979, and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1976-77.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century he was a major figure in the Reformed Church and in ecumenical theology; the patriarch of a theological dynasty (his younger brother James, his son Iain and his nephew Alan all became theological professors in Scotland); a teacher who inspired generations of students to engage in theological learning and research; and, the honoured friend of many of his colleagues and pupils.

Torrance was born in China – his parents were missionaries – on August 30, 1913. He graduated M.A. in philosophy and B.D. in divinity in Edinburgh, then undertook postgraduate studies, particularly in Basle, where he obtained his doctorate for a dissertation published some years later as *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (1948). Patristic theology, above all that of Athanasius and the Nicene Fathers, remained central for his work throughout his career, as is reflected in two later works, *The Trinitarian Faith. The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (1988) and *Divine Meaning. Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (1995).

¹ This memoir is reprinted from *Jesus Christ Today. Studies of Christology in Various Contexts (Proceedings of the Académie Internationale des Sciences Religieuses, Oxford 25-29 August 2006 and Princeton 25-30 August 2007)*, Theologische Bibliothek Töpelmann 146, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009, by courtesy of the Académie and the publisher.

Equally central was the formative influence of Karl Barth (although the Basle dissertation was mentored by Oscar Cullman), whose monumental *Church Dogmatics* in the English/American edition (1956-1977) was edited by Torrance with Geoffrey Bromiley. Torrance wrote much and most appreciatively of Barth – e.g. *Karl Barth. An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (1962), and many later papers – though in one especially important respect, the matter of theology and science, he consciously sought to move beyond the boundaries at which Barth had drawn to a halt. On the more philosophical and epistemological side he was much influenced by Michael Polanyi, the author of *Personal Knowledge* (1958) and *The Tacit Dimension* (1966), and following Polanyi's death in 1976 acted as his literary executor, also editing *Belief in Science and in Christian Life. The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (1980).

Apart from his own numerous publications he was, with J.K.S. Reid, a founding editor of *The Scottish Journal of Theology* (established in 1947 and still going strong under the editorship of his son Iain, now President of Princeton Theological Seminary, and Professor Bryan Spinks of Yale). He also played a role in bringing distinguished guest lecturers to Edinburgh. Two in particular may be mentioned because of their importance for his own area of special interest: the 1969 Gunning Lectures of R. Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (1972) and the 1974-1975 and 1975-1976 Gifford Lectures of Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (1978; 1981).

Torrance's first academic appointment was as professor of theology at Auburn Seminary, New York (1938-1939). This was followed by two parish ministries in Scotland and two years as an army chaplain during the Second World War. In 1950 he was appointed to the chair of church history at Edinburgh, moving on to the chair of dogmatics in 1952. He possessed enormous (and for some of his debating partners rather too overwhelming) erudition in the field of historical theology and the history of philosophy, but there can be no doubt that his great strength and chief interest was in constructive systematic theology in the style of dogmatics pioneered by Barth. This led him to engage both in intensive critical study of his own Reformed tradition – for example, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (1959); *Kingdom*

and Church. *A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (1956); *The School of Faith. The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (1959); or, from the busy years after his retirement, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (1988) and *Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (1996); in theological ecumenical dialogue, particularly with Roman Catholic thinking before, during and after Vatican II, reflected in the two volumes of *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (I. *Order and Disorder*, 1959; II. *The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel*, 1960) and in *Theology in Reconstruction* (1965), and with the Orthodox Churches, chiefly on the basis of a patristically informed Trinitarian hermeneutics, as in *Theology in Reconciliation. Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (1975). Our Académie was of particular value and importance to him as part of this ecumenical dimension.

Another crucial interest of Torrance undoubtedly lay in the twin fields of *theology and science* and *theology as science*. Unlike many theologians he had no fear of facing the challenge of the natural sciences to theology and no interest in the dualistic strategies which would try to defend theology from that challenge by stressing its difference (for example, as a symbolic, metaphorical language-game) from anything that could be called "hard" science. Torrance was, by contrast, fascinated by the history, logic and achievements of science (less, perhaps, by what many feel to be the ambiguities of the impact of science and technology) and traced time and again not differences but similarities between science and a hermeneutically aware theology. In both we have to deal with reality (hence Torrance's stress on objectivity and his lampooning of subjectivism, e.g. Bultmannian existentialism); with the subtle intellectual instruments developed to explore that reality (he frequently pointed out the theological pre-history of concepts that in time became scientifically fruitful); with the tracing of the "inner logic" revealing itself to sensitive enquiry; and, with the ultimately astounding fact of the affinity between the reality explored and the mind exploring.

These structural resemblances between the scientific and the theological undertaking impressed themselves early on his mind and led to a long series of notable books, for example *Theological Science* (1969); *Space, Time and Incarnation* (1969); *God and Rationality* (1971); *Space, Time and*

Resurrection (1976); *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (1980); *Juridical Law and Physical Law* (1982); *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 1985. This last was the first in a series of studies he initiated under the characteristic title, *Theology and Science at the Frontiers of Knowledge*. He also edited and republished James Clerk Maxwell's classic contribution to the development of physics between Newton and Einstein, *A Dynamical Theory of the Electromagnetic Field* (1982).

Torrance's vision was clearly and succinctly expressed at the end of his speech upon receiving the Templeton Prize in 1978. After listing recent changes in the approach of natural science – (1) the move away from abstractive observationalism; (2) the transition from an analytical science to a unitary integration of form; (3) the application of the laws of thermodynamics to open systems; (4) the change from a flat understanding of nature to one characterised by a hierarchy of levels or dimensions – he concluded:

It is more and more clear to me that, under the providence of God, owing to these changes in the very foundations of knowledge in which natural and theological science alike have been sharing, the damaging cultural splits between the sciences and the humanities and between both and theology are in process of being overcome, the destructive and divisive forces too long rampant in world-wide human life and thought are being undermined, and that a massive new synthesis will emerge in which man, humbled and awed by the mysterious intelligibility of the universe, which reaches far beyond his powers, will learn to fulfill his destined role as the servant of divine love and the priest of creation.²

It may well be doubted whether, thirty years on, that vision has yet come much closer to realization. Thinkers on his scale are rare in theology (of whatever denomination), and they are not always appreciated by those whose view is narrower or shallower or simply fuelled by other interests and concerns. Torrance was such a powerful and energetic personality and so massively convinced of his discoveries in the field of theology and science that he could, though personally gracious and frequently charming, provoke uninterest or active resistance on the part of those who felt themselves overrun by the sheer weight and impetus of his ideas and assertions or by his

² The Addresses at the Sixth Presentation of The Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion at Guildhall, London, Tuesday 21st March, 1978. Deans Grange, Co. Dublin: Lismore Press, 1978.

trenchant criticism of what he believed to be destructive approaches to theology. (I say this as a former student and junior colleague of his who did not feel provoked to such a reaction – but could observe others who did.) Within a few years of his retirement this tradition of interest and research had faded away in Torrance’s own faculty in Edinburgh, though the field of theology and science is still being energetically cultivated elsewhere. It remains, however, a fascinating challenge and it may well be that the full fruit of Torrance’s vision - and now his legacy - has yet to be seen.

THOMAS F. TORRANCE: A EULOGY¹

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Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913-2007), who died of a heart attack in Edinburgh on December 2, was arguably the greatest Reformed theologian since Karl Barth, with whom he studied, and an eminent 20th century ecumenist. Having served for 27 years as Professor of Christian Dogmatics at New College, he was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1976; and in 1978, he was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion for his contributions to the emerging field of theology and science.

In theology, he generally placed himself somewhere between Calvin and Barth, though also moving well beyond them. An accomplished patristics scholar, he devoted himself to Eastern Orthodox-Reformed dialogue, being highly esteemed among the Orthodox for his ecumenical spirit and his grasp of primary sources in the original languages. He once surprised me by saying that his favorite theologian was Athanasius, whom he placed in illuminating relationship with Barth. An icon of the great Alexandrian appears as the frontispiece to his *The Trinitarian Faith* (1988), an exposition of the Nicene Creed, which remains perhaps the most accessible of his numerous learned works.

Besides the theologian, the ecumenist, and the church leader, there were at least three other Torrances: the translator, the interdisciplinary theologian, and the historian of doctrine. English-speaking theology stands greatly in his debt for his monumental efforts in editing and translating not only Calvin's New Testament commentaries but also Barth's voluminous dogmatics. His interest in Einstein and modern physics from the standpoint of Nicene Christianity has yet to be adequately assessed. Least well known,

¹ This eulogy was first posted online at the blog, *Faith and Theology*: <http://faith-theology.blogspot.com/> (Dec. 3, 2007).

perhaps, is his work as an intellectual historian. Scattered throughout many journals are essays on virtually every major figure in the history of doctrine, though alongside Athanasius he had a special fondness for Gregory Nazianzen and Hilary of Poitiers.

In breadth of learning, depth of scholarship, quality of output, ecumenical conviction, and devotion to the Nicene faith, theology and church will not soon see another like him.

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During my Ph.D. years in Edinburgh I knew Tom's brothers and sister very well as we all joined in Inter-Varsity Fellowship activities. From them and others I heard of Tom's learned essays during his B.D. work, his return with a doctorate from Basle, and his ministry in a Scottish parish. In fact we met at times when he came to give lectures in Edinburgh. One such address was given to the Christian Union which contained some rather obscure references to Schelling. On another occasion he met me in the New College library and began to speak of some significant new work of which, immersed at the time in Herder, I had not yet heard.

My real acquaintance with Tom developed when I came back to Edinburgh and was asked by him to be joint-editor of the English version of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, which led to many meetings and phone discussions. One great crisis arose when Tom found one translator way behind in his work when it was needed almost at once. I wrote to him asking for a plain response and he told me that he had not even begun. Three of us split up his portion and prepared the text very rapidly for the printer. Later came the attempts to associate more closely the Churches of England and Scotland, and work in the European section of the Faith and Order movement. In all these areas I could only admire Tom's wealth of information, his skill in dissection and construction, and the far- and future-reaching spirit that he always displayed.

Tom began to write those books whose content, if studied and followed more closely, would help to set theology on a wiser, more fruitful, and more biblically-oriented course. To be sure some students have found his style as well as his thinking very hard to understand. Tom smilingly told me once that he went along with the German dictum: one of the greatest enemies of *Wahrheit* ("truth") is *Klarheit* ("clarity")! But it is well worthwhile

to dig more deeply into his works. In his radio addresses, by the way, he could speak much more simply if no less profoundly.

In the words of Barth, Tom grasped firmly the "unique opportunity" that the divine calling had given him. God in his sovereign overruling will surely use his contribution and legacy to do great things on His behalf. Nor should we forget that, as Tom saw it, theological reflection on the gracious ways and works of God should constantly lead to prayers of gratitude and praise.

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During the spring of my senior year in high school I had a fairly classic and dramatic conversion experience that radically changed my life. A year and a half later, while in college studying natural science, I sensed a call to ministry. This was a bit of a shock since I had absolutely no desire to be a pastor. It created no small amount of struggle in my life until I reached the point of saying "yes" to God's call.

After answering this call to pastoral ministry, I switched my major to psychology, thinking that it would provide a more beneficial preparation for seminary study and for ministry. However, in the fall of my third year of college I took a philosophy course in which we read Plato, Aristotle and other great thinkers in the history of that discipline. I was so fascinated and even a bit disoriented by the course that I switched my major yet again to philosophy. So I had a very wide undergraduate education spanning all three of these fields: natural science, psychology and philosophy.

However, it was philosophy at a secular university. One professor in particular seemed to take perverse pleasure in exposing all the weaknesses of the rationalist evangelical expression of the Christian faith within which I had been nurtured in the evangelical sub-culture I inhabited in college. Especially troubling to me was the modern intellectual history from Descartes and Newton through Hume and Kant to Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and Heidegger. I was also exposed to the reactionary intellectual history in critical biblical studies and modern theology that tried, unsuccessfully, to come to terms with the problems posed for Christian faith by modern science, philosophy and critical historiography.

Needless to say all of this created something of an intellectual crisis for me. I found no viable answers within my rationalist evangelical sub-culture. It was a painful time, since I had begun serving as a pastor to three small

churches my final year in college while still in the midst of an intense intellectual and personal struggle to sort out the content of my faith.

It was at this point that I encountered the theology of Donald G. Bloesch. After reading *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* in a two-day marathon after Christmas in 1980, I decided to attend the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (where I now teach) to study under Bloesch, who became my mentor and close friend.

I benefitted greatly from studying with Don. He exposed me to the Great Tradition of the Church and the evangelical impulses throughout Christian history. He provided me with an alternative way to be evangelical in contrast to the defensive rationalism that infected so much of American Evangelicalism and proved to be a rather weak and inadequate response to the problems I had encountered in the intellectual history of modern science, philosophy and critical historiography. Yet I always sensed there was something not quite right in Bloesch's own theological method and doctrine of God. I knew that the two had to be connected, but as a seminarian I did not have the intellectual horsepower to figure it.

It was at precisely this point that I first encountered the evangelical, doxological, Trinitarian and scientific theology of Thomas F. Torrance in the most unusual of places: a course on pastoral care. The professor, James Fishbaugh, a former student of Torrance, had us read, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, a book on theological method and hermeneutics that has virtually nothing in it about pastoral care. This dense little book exasperated me to no end, especially since I had to write a précis of it! It was really my first attempt at interpreting Torrance's theology, and a most unpleasant one at that!

Nevertheless, Torrance's work contained the most profound analysis of and answers to the methodological and hermeneutical problems posed by modern science, philosophy and critical historiography I had ever encountered, questions that had gnawed at my mind and my soul since my undergraduate studies. Torrance was the first evangelical I read who was intellectually up to the task of engaging these problems at such a sophisticated level while remaining faithful to the Gospel.

It was really hard work getting my mind around Torrance's thought; yet every so often the fog would lift for a moment and I would glimpse an astonishing theological and spiritual panorama that I had not encountered elsewhere, and that illumined what I had always believed as a Christian, while at the same time putting an end to so many of the questions concerning my Christian faith from my undergraduate studies.

I was initially attracted to Torrance's work in the area of theological method and hermeneutics. The crucial books that impacted me at that time were *Reality and Evangelical Theology*; *Reality and Scientific Theology*; *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*; and, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*, along with a number of significant articles on related topics. Torrance provides a holistic, critical-realist epistemology that avoids foundationalism without tumbling over into so much of the post-modern non-sense prevalent these days. Torrance's holism, critical realism, critique of dualism, notion of indwelling, personal knowledge, and participation all helped me sort out the problems I encountered in modern science, philosophy and critical historiography.

However, it was only later in my Ph.D. studies that I came to grasp fully the interconnections between content and method in Torrance's theology. That is when all the pieces of the puzzle came together for me. As I worked through *The Mediation of Christ*, *The Trinitarian Faith* and later, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, in relation to the methodological works noted above, I came to see the interrelations between method and content that, quite frankly, many interpreters of Torrance's theology miss.

The difficulty here is that Torrance tended to write on content or on method and did not always bring out the interconnections between the two, though the first four chapters of *The Christian Doctrine of God* are a remarkable exception to this. Torrance's theology is extremely complex and integrated, but his publications are rather unsystematic. I remember so often thinking to myself as another piece of the puzzle fell into place, "This man is absolutely brilliant in pulling all of this together. How unfortunate that one has to spend so much time reading and rereading so many books and essays in order to figure out how it all fits together!" That was the main reason for writing my book on *How To Read T. F. Torrance*.

Often in my study of Torrance's work I have found myself on my knees *coram deo* lost in wonder, praise and thanksgiving to the glorious Triune God, overwhelmed by the power and grandeur of the Gospel. I find myself personally, spiritually and theologically transformed, yet in a way that is in keeping with—really an unpacking of—the faith I had come to know in my senior year of high school when I first “heard” the Gospel.

I spent twenty years carefully reading, digesting, and then writing about Torrance's theology. I in no way regret the amount of my time, energy and career I have devoted to mastering his theology. It has been an immensely helpful and often exhilarating experience.

As a Methodist, many people are surprised that I find Torrance's theology rather more congenial to that of John Wesley. There are, in fact, many parallels between them, including a love for the Greek fathers, a fully Trinitarian perspective, a strong emphasis on participation, and a high Christo-centric understanding of the sacraments, just to mention a few. Indeed, the American Wesleyan/Methodist tradition could greatly benefit from a reading of Torrance's work because it would help that tradition read and understand Wesley's theology better than it often does. I am simply astonished by how many American Methodists miss the Trinitarian character of Wesley's theology. I am currently working on a book on Wesley's Trinitarian understanding of Christian faith that I hope will rectify this problem.

I have found three aspects of Torrance's work especially beneficial as a Methodist. First, his understanding of the vicarious humanity of Christ is especially crucial because it deepens the Wesleyan *ordo salutis* and provides an element that is singularly missing in Wesley's theology.

Second, Torrance's conceptualization of grace provides a viable alternative to the tiresome debate between monergism and synergism with reference to the relation between divine and human agency at every point in the *ordo salutis*. I think Wesley would have liked Torrance's alternative. Indeed, I think Wesley was struggling to articulate a position like it, but without the adequate intellectual categories to do so.

Finally, Torrance's doctrine of the Trinity is a significant corrective to much of American Methodist theology which, quite frankly, has substituted

some philosophical panentheism for the true Trinitarian deep-structure of the Gospel. Torrance's perspective is interactionist: the Triune God personally interacts with the world of nature and history while remaining distinct from and free in relation to the created order, unlike in panentheism which posits an inner identity between God and the world that often conditions both.

From Borden Parker Bowne right up through John Cobb and the other process thinkers, many of the top-flight Methodist theologians have taken the regrettable panentheist turn. While some theologians will passionately disagree, I think that Trinitarian and panentheist deep-structures are in the end incompatible, despite some attempts to synthesize the two. The Wesley brothers were both thoroughly Trinitarian theologians, and their Trinitarian theologies are remarkably similar to that of T. F. Torrance, even if they do not develop their Trinitarian theology all that deeply. Much of American Methodism has been rather *un-trinitarian*, though that is changing these days.

On a personal note, I might add that Tom Torrance was gracious, kind, and most encouraging to me in all of my contacts with him about his theology over the fifteen or so years that I knew him personally. He answered many questions about his work and provided numerous articles that I could not easily obtain here in the United States. Our e-mail correspondence fills a rather fat folder. He also read my book on how to read his theology in manuscript form and offered helpful suggestions. One of the most amusing has to do with his reformulated "natural theology." In a note, I stated that I believed Torrance regretted ever calling what he was up to, "natural theology." In the margin of the manuscript, next to the comment, Torrance drew a huge exclamation point.

My deepest regret is that I did not take time to go over to Scotland and visit Torrance in his later years. David Torrance, Tom's younger brother, kept me in ongoing contact with Tom until his death last December. I also corresponded with James Torrance, the middle brother, and had a long phone conversation with him a few weeks before he died. I owe all three of the Torrances, especially Tom, a profound debt of gratitude. Their impact upon my personal life, faith, and theology are immense.

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To visit one's former teacher in his last few years, and pray with him in his infirmity, was a very moving experience. He would always welcome me and, when he was able, ask after other former students. On those occasions I was sharply aware of the significance of what Tom Torrance had always taught, that the Lord Jesus picked up humanity from its lowest point, and at enormous cost restored the image of God and brought our frail human nature safely through death and into the glorious freedom of God's children.

Tom was gracious enough to preach at our wedding. My wife Margaret had come to study theology at Edinburgh University because of the way Tom had spoken at her Art College Christian Union. Our time at New College overlapped, and it fascinated us how often people intellectually more able than us would dismiss Tom's lectures as impossible to understand, whereas we thrived on them. I recall fellow-students who said they were converted through listening to Tom.

He was sometimes criticised because he never suffered theological fools gladly, and his robust rejoinders in class were hard for some who were emotionally fragile, but to any who went to him for help and advice he was invariably kind and gentle and (like several other members of staff in those days) he did much good work behind the scenes.

Handsel Press had the privilege of publishing his *Space, Time and Resurrection* (now to be re-issued by Wipf and Stock), and Tom served for many years with us on the board. He asked me personally if his New College lectures could be published, and it is a great joy that this year (2008, jointly published by Paternoster Press and Inter-Varsity Press) the project comes to fruition with *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* as volume one, edited by his nephew Robert Walker.

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One of my first memories of T. F. Torrance was his radiant face, which greeted me at New College in the 1960s. Similarly, when my wife had given birth to our new baby, our first visitor was Tom Torrance! Later in life it was he, together with his oldest son Thomas, who phoned me and suggested to me that I apply for my current post at Heriot-Watt University. As a teacher, he was deeply personal and pastoral. What were my recollections of his teaching?

My first impression was of a man who made a profound analysis of the needs of our culture and he spoke prophetically to Church and society, including the worlds of natural science and modern culture. In those early days I didn't understand much of what he was teaching, but recognised that what he was saying was very important. Due to his inspiration I taught myself quantum theory, relativity theory and Gödel's Theorem, concepts he often referred to in his teaching. Suddenly everything fell into place and I saw the relevance of the unitary relationship of natural and theological science.

Tom's theology was no mere dry scholasticism cut off from a warm-hearted knowledge and love of God. One of his great burdens was to show that there can be no knowledge of God, and therefore no true theology, unless we approach Him with a humble, earnest, worshipping heart open to the deeply personal revelation of Himself that He has made in the person of Jesus Christ. This indeed is the "scientific" way to know God, for it is the way appropriate to the subject matter of theology – God Himself. His message challenged us to liberate our minds from preconceived logical structures which might unconsciously impose themselves upon the subject matter of enquiry, but which are inappropriate to the object of inquiry and therefore are likely to distort the results of inquiry into its true nature.

He believed that there is only one way of knowing, whatever the object of knowledge. By that he did not mean that there is only one method of enquiry – very far from it. What he did mean was that all methods of knowing must be appropriate to the subject of enquiry, so that (contra Aristotle and Kant) enquirers must not approach the object of study with a fixed logical system into which they seek to fit the answers to their questions. Rather the subject matter itself will contain its own, at first, hidden logic or rationality, so that natural or theological scientists must seek to uncover a rationality that is inherent in the object of their enquiry.

It took Einstein to discover a deeper logic in nature in which light, space, time, matter and energy are bound together in relationships – relationships that come from the very being of their existence. That is to say, they are relationships that are not dependent on independent external and eternal laws, not unlike the covenant of love that binds two human beings together and is part of the inner rationality of theology that we so easily miss if we impose our legalistic ways of thinking upon the data of theological enquiry. Tom believed that many of the problems associated with the discipline of biblical studies could be traced back to impositions of this kind, where the nature and function of the Bible were discerned solely from the processes and phenomena that went into composing it. This false phenomenistic dualism between reality and our perception of it has bedevilled the field of biblical studies.

The dualism that he disliked most was that of a detached God and a mechanistic universe. Instead, he believed that through the pages of the Bible we meet a God who, though He created the universe out of nothing, is – through His Word and Spirit – personally and deeply related to it. This is seen especially and uniquely in the Incarnation and atonement, through which He has made Himself known to us as one among us and for us by redeeming the world from sin.

The appropriate way to respond to God's Word is by listening and answering. As we listen we find that the Word challenges us deeply, so that we cannot do theology in a detached way but must allow ourselves to be challenged and changed in our inmost being, just as natural scientists must be open to the object they seek to know, so that its hidden logic might

engage their minds and foster growth in understanding. Our problem, though, is that we cannot answer and respond to that Word from God because, as sinners, we are alienated from it. One of Tom's most central convictions was that Christ is not only God's Word but also our human response to that Word. I have personally found his emphasis on the vicarious humanity of Christ most liberating. He often tried to discourage us from examining our own faith, repentance and worship, encouraging us instead to look away from ourselves to Christ.

Tom's emphasis upon the vicarious response of Christ got him into trouble with some Evangelicals who imagined that he was saying that we don't need to repent and believe because Christ has done it all for us in our place. Of course this is not what Tom Torrance was saying. He was instead developing one of the major emphases of the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Christ makes our response for us as Great High Priest, taking our prayers to the heaven of heavens. So when we fix our eyes upon Jesus as the originator and completer of faith, we are set free from the assurance-destroying worries so evident in both seventeenth century Calvinism and Arminianism.

Since this way of salvation is the same as the way of knowing God, it was Tom Torrance's missionary endeavour to theologians to persuade us to think in Christ so that we do not cut off our theological or biblical statements from Christ himself. He used as an example the statement: "God is love." We see the meaning of that in Christ; however, if we use it as an independent, free-standing statement from which we deduce other propositions apart from Christ, then we will reach false conclusions. Language must not be cut off from that to which it refers. This was his quarrel with what he called "rationalistic fundamentalists."

Rationalistic fundamentalists are those who think they can treat biblical statements as independent from the ultimate Being to whom they refer. Once this move is made they can then apply preconceived rational structures to fit biblical statements (such as "God is love") into a dogmatic system. But this would be to commit the error that is referred to elsewhere in this article, namely to impose our own systems of logic on the subject matter of enquiry rather than letting it teach us its own inherent logic. Such systems of doctrine tend to be legalistic constructs of our own minds where we may

seem to put grace at the center of a theological system but instead end up with a new legalistic system that does not really set people free in Christ.

A neglected but important theme in Tom Torrance's lectures and books was his emphasis on Israel. God fully and personally addressed and engaged humanity through Israel's long and painful history. Fulfilment of this relationship between God and humanity was the Incarnation and the death of Christ. Therefore, Tom Torrance's teaching about such subjects as Incarnation and ecclesiology should take into account what he says about Israel. He often said that the deepest division in the Church's life was the division between Jews and Christians, who need one another to understand God's revelation and reconciliation in our history. Tom believed that the Bible taught that Christ fulfils Israel's unique destiny from Abraham to the end of time, even if Israel itself does not recognize it.

The content of creation and redemption has always been God, people and nature, so, just as there is a chosen people - in "peculiar intensity" (Tom's often repeated phrase) - to represent all peoples, so there is a promised land to represent all lands. Therefore, a rejection of Israel is a rejection of God's way of saving the world in Christ. Some may respond to this by saying that Israel rejected Christ and, as a consequence, cut themselves off from God's purposes. Tom would respond by pointing out that much of humanity has rejected Christ but God nevertheless still includes all in his purposes of creation and redemption in Christ.

If we believe that God's relationship with his creation is purely spiritual (i.e., He does not interact with the physical space-time of this world), then we will find it difficult to believe that He is active in history so as to give the Jews a unique history among the nations - a history which now has resulted in their re-gathering. If we do hold this view (a form of deism) we must still come to terms with the remarkable uniqueness of Jewish history (this uniqueness is widely acknowledged even by the non-religious). If, however, we believe that God can, and does, act in space and time, then we will not have this theological problem with the uniqueness of Jewish history and God's continued commitment to the promised land.

If we believe that the temple and OT sacrifices (a temporary sign of the covenant) are equivalent to the "land," then we will believe (see, for

example, Hebrews 8:13) that "land" has lost its significance. If, however, we distinguish between "sign" (e.g., the temple and its sacrifices) and "content" (God, people, and land – which were the content of Creation), then we will see the continuing significance of land as part of God's ongoing redemption of creation.

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Those whose knowledge of Tom is solely through his many publications may tend to think of him solely as a theologian and academic. I wish to focus on his life as a minister and pastor and particularly on the background of his early life, student days and war years because most people will not be aware of these formative influences on him and his theology. Inevitably I will be writing from the perspective of a brother and sharing some more personal reminiscences.

Of the six children born to our parents, Tom was the second oldest, and I was the youngest. As such, Tom was over eleven years older than I. Our family was closely knit: there was always a strong bond of love and trust among us. Despite the age gap, I always felt close to Tom, more particularly as I grew up and entered the ministry. We inevitably had much in common, not least in our theological outlook. Tom, James and I continued to discuss and share each other's theological concerns throughout our adult lives.

As a family we were blessed with godly parents. Father was born into a farming family in Scotland. He was a minister and for forty years a missionary in China. Mother also had felt the call to missionary work. They met and married in China. All six children, three sons and three daughters, were born in China.

Every day our parents gathered the family together for worship and study of the Word of God. God's presence and the need for prayer were very real in our home. It is not surprising therefore that Tom from his earliest years believed in the Lord as his personal saviour. He believed profoundly what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "no one can see (or enter) the Kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3.3). Nonetheless, he knew of no time in his life when he did not believe or trust Christ as his saviour. Likewise from his earliest years he felt God was calling him to serve Christ for the advancement of the Gospel. For many years he hoped to become a missionary like our father and take the Gospel to the Chinese. In his early

teen years during the summer vacations from school he accompanied our father in journeys through the mountain valleys of West China and shared in the distribution of portions of Scripture to the peasant Buddhist farmers. This helped to confirm his desire to become a missionary.

It was later when Tom was at University and began studying theology and learned the importance and need for a theology that was truly biblical and grounded in the person and work of Christ that he felt a call to study and teach theology. He never, however, lost concern and support for missionary work and for evangelism, and he integrated his call for evangelistic work with a vocation to preach, first and foremost, to theologians!

China, in the years when our parents were missionaries, was a turbulent country. West China, where they worked, was ruled by warlords, who had their own armies. They fought, killed, and plundered at will. Some were not so bad as others. Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, communist atheistic literature and military weapons were pouring into China and fell all too readily into the hands of the different warlords, increasing unrest and making the country dangerous.

Despite the civic unrest, however, China was a good and exciting place for children to grow up and enjoy experiences and a freedom generally denied to children in the West. Father, for his work, kept a horse, Prince, and a mule, Billy, which were much loved by the family. Each day Tom and my three sisters rode or galloped three miles to school. One missionary friend expressed concern to our mother about Margaret, the youngest of the three sisters, having to hold on at the back of the mule when it was galloping. However, they never fell off! Father complained that after Tom started to ride the mule, it would no longer walk and preferred to gallop! Tom became an accomplished rider and years later, when he was minister in Alyth, and when James, three others, and I were camping with him, I can remember him riding a horse bare back, with our luggage, four miles up the glen where we camped.

Our Chinese summers, spent in the valleys of the high mountains with their wild beauty, treacherous mountain paths, often beset with bandits and robbers, were likewise exciting. The constant sense of danger made the family rely continually on God. Prayer was a very important part of our life

and there was always joy and thanksgiving over answered prayer. Prayer meant much to each member of the family.

In 1927 West China was in a state of civil war with many riots and killings. The family saw people have their heads whipped off by swords in the streets. A missionary friend of our mother was beheaded in the street near our home in Chengdu. There were riots outside our house, with agitators threatening to break in and kill the family. The British Consul ordered all British subjects to leave the country, as he could not guarantee their safety. Hence, in 1927, the family returned to Scotland. The family's journey by boat down the Yangste to Shanghai was eventful and dangerous. Sailing through the gorges of the upper Yangste bullets were hitting the steel balustrade behind which the family were sheltering on deck. God, however, in answer to prayer wonderfully preserved the family. They reached Shanghai safely and, later, Scotland.

After a short period Father returned to China alone for his last missionary tour as he felt that his largely pioneering work in the mountains was not over. Mother remained in Scotland in order to provide a Christian home for the family and to try and ensure that the family grew up within the Christian Church, each with a strong personal faith in Christ.

Our parents were to find that as God had wonderfully protected the family in China, so he was to continue to preserve and guide them all, Tom not least, throughout the years ahead.

For Tom, life was more eventful than for most of his contemporaries. He greatly enjoyed his studies in Edinburgh University, first in classics and philosophy for the M.A. degree and then in theology for the B.D. degree. He worked extremely hard and was a wide and prolific reader. The university librarian apparently had never met a student who borrowed so many books. He often returned home with an entire rucksack full. He read far beyond the books prescribed for his particular study. Some years later, shortly after Tom had entered the parish ministry, a university professor, not knowing that I was Tom's brother, said to me, "Tom Torrance is a mine of learning."

In sport he joined "the Hare and Hounds" at University and took part in cross-country running. He also played hockey at University. At the same time he found time for evangelistic outreach and led and engaged in various

missions. Evangelism was then and throughout his ministry of deep interest and concern. He was a friend of the American evangelist Dr. Billy Graham and was instrumental in inviting him to lead his last mission in Scotland in 1990.

In 1936, while still a student in New College, Edinburgh, he competed successfully for the John Stuart Blackie Fellowship in Greek (classical, Septuagint, and Hellenistic), which was designed to send students to study biblical languages and archaeology in the Middle East, and for which he had spent a year studying Arabic for use in Middle East countries. When he was awarded the Fellowship, he travelled to the Holy Land with another twelve students. They were allowed to go for two months and had to return in time for the B.D. examinations in May. The John Stuart Blackie Fellowship was designed for a year's study, although Tom was given leave of absence from New College only until September when he was required to return to sit the September B.D. exams. So followed an exciting and momentous period of travel and adventure sometimes in company but more often alone through Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and then Turkey and Greece. With our father's restless, enquiring mind and his own adventurous and courageous spirit and the determination to see and discover as much as possible that was of historical and archaeological interest, he went to many places where others would not have ventured. The Middle East was then as now a troubled area of the world. On occasion, as on the visit to Petra, he had to hire an armed guard. Travelling alone with a donkey and an Arab guide through the mountains of Moab to visit Herod's castle at Machaerus, he was suddenly surrounded by Bedouins armed with rifles. It took some time for his Arab guide to persuade them that he was not a Jew but a Scot. When he returned to Jerusalem after several weeks he found that his friends at St Andrew's Hospice had become alarmed for his safety as they had not heard from him for sometime.

He was not long back in Jerusalem before troubles broke out. The Grand Mufti Hussein had just come back from visiting Hitler and was spreading around his poisonous anti-Jewish propaganda provoking an Arab revolt. The great bulk of our British troops, about 120,000, were in Egypt with only small detachments in Palestine and not enough to quell an anticipated Arab revolt. Accordingly, Tom and some seventy others were asked temporarily to join the Palestine Police. They were duly sworn in, given

a rifle and a police armband, declaring that they were Palestinian police. They were told that if they had to fire they should fire at the knees to disable and not to kill. After several weeks of continuous duty he asked to be relieved of his duties so that he could continue his studies in Syria and Lebanon as well as Palestine. His request was granted and with a police escort he travelled to North Palestine. He was determined not to let the troubles prevent him from seeing and exploring as much of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria as he could. However the flames of anti-Semitism were spreading and he kept running into hostility as he kept being mistaken for a Jew. On one occasion an attempt was made on his life when someone flung a knife that flashed over his left shoulder and clattered on the road. In Jordan while travelling in a taxi with two nuns, the taxi stopped to pick up a Bedouin, who sat next to Tom. Suddenly the Bedouin turned to Tom pointing a revolver and shouting "Jew." Tom shouted in Arabic, "Not Jewish! Scottish!" As the Bedouin hesitated Tom and the driver were able to throw him out of the taxi and drive on. At times he wondered if there were attempts to poison him. In Iraq, however, in an attempt to visit Basra his troubles began in earnest. He travelled by train. An Arab revolt was taking place in southern Iraq between Ur and Samawa, although Tom did not know about it at the time. Iraqi Air Force planes were dropping bombs on both sides of the railroad, attacking the dissident Arabs inhabiting that part of Iraq (the Marsh Arabs). Tom was arrested on suspicion of being a Jewish spy. After questioning he tried to escape and find his way to the British Consulate. He was caught, taken back to police Headquarters. Questioned again, he was refused permission to see the British Consulate and sentenced to death. Mercifully, when one of the "judges" was tempted to believe that he was not Jewish but British, he was released and ejected from Iraq, and put on a train for Damascus. Authorities there were astonished that he was travelling alone.

After Syria, he visited Turkey and Greece, where troubles continued to follow him although not of such a dangerous character as he had to-date experienced. He returned in time to sit the B.D. examinations in September in New College. God was surely protecting him for a purpose.

After post-graduate studies in Switzerland under Dr. Karl Barth he was called to teach in Auburn in the U.S.A. At twenty-six he was the youngest

professor in the faculty. Opportunity arose to teach in Princeton but war was breaking out with Germany and being unwilling to be out of the country in a time of war he returned to the UK. His first desire was to offer to be an army chaplain. Regulations at that time did not allow a minister, without ordination and parish experience, to be a chaplain, so he went to Oxford seeking to complete his studies for a doctorate under Karl Barth in Basle. Called to the parish of Alyth in Perthshire in the spring of 1940, he planned, some time later, to volunteer to be a chaplain in the army. His plans were delayed because of the need for an appendix operation and so it was in 1943 that he joined the army under the auspices of "The Church of Scotland Committee for Huts and Canteens." In the months that followed God protected him again and again in a remarkable way through many dangers.

His first appointment was as padre in a Combined Operations Unit with an invasion force sent by Churchill on an ill-fated operation to capture the Greek islands of Cos and Leros and establish a base from which to strike at the Germans occupying Greece. The British discovered in time that the Germans had got wind of the impending invasion and mercifully the operation was called off, for otherwise casualties would have been horrific.

His next appointment was as chaplain to the 10th Indian Division, which included a British Brigade. He was with them for the next two years in Italy until the end of the war. Tom always felt that his best work was at the front line, where soldiers were under the greatest pressure and were more open to the Gospel. With his insistence of endeavouring to be with them, whenever possible, in the most forward positions, his life was miraculously spared many times when others with him were killed or wounded. On one occasion they entered a set of farm buildings behind the German lines. When their presence was discovered, one by one the soldiers with him tried to escape and were killed. Tom waited until dark and returned safely. On another occasion when they were being shelled by enemy fire, they sheltered in a ditch. Tom's helmet was touching the boots of one soldier in front while his boots touched the helmet of the soldier behind. Both the soldier in front and the soldier behind were killed. He was unscathed. As chaplain, Tom was given his own army truck. Normally he slept in it. One night he chose to sleep outside behind a wall. That night a German shell passed through his

truck penetrating where normally his head would have been. Time and again he felt his life was spared as if a higher hand was protecting him. To his own surprise, he was never wounded, when so many around him were either killed or wounded. He escaped, with a few small shrapnel pieces, which in time worked their way out through the skin.

With Tom, at the end of the war, as with so many others, there arose the question, "Why am I alive? Why was my life spared when so many good people, and many Christians, perished?" He believed that God had wonderfully protected him and that God had a purpose for his life. At the end of the war in Europe I received a letter from him when I was in India serving with the 14th Indian Division. In it he expressed the thought that God had preserved his life for a purpose. Following the end of the war a chaplains' conference had been arranged to take place in Assisi in Italy. Tom was invited to participate as a speaker. He travelled there a few days early in order not simply to spend time in preparing his address but in order to spend time in prayer and thanksgiving to God and in order to re-dedicate his life to God for the furtherance of the Gospel.

Tom had a vivid sense that God had some purpose in sparing him through so many successive dangers. The Lord said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I chose you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1.5). Paul, the aged Apostle looking back over his life, said, "God . . . set me apart from birth and called me by his grace" (Gal 1.15). Tom felt there were echoes in his own life of what Jeremiah and Paul had said and that was why God had spared him.

His pastoral work as a chaplain at the front line, talking and ministering to soldiers who were wounded and dying, had strengthened his conviction, if it needed strengthening, of the need to preach Christ and the message of the cross. It persuaded him, more than ever, of the weakness and futility of a liberal theology, which he felt had nothing or little to offer to men who were dying. They wanted to hear that God is what we see in Jesus, a God who loves, is present with us in our suffering, and forgives and redeems us. Often in his lectures to students he mentioned the lessons that he had learned as a chaplain on the battlefield.

He felt that God's hand had been upon him in the way that he directed his studies at Edinburgh University, first in his studies for an M.A. degree particularly in philosophy under Kemp Smith and A. E. Taylor and then in theology for his B.D. degree. Certain professors, particularly at New College, had an immense influence in directing his academic interests. Professor Daniel Lamont, an evangelical and former mathematician and scientist, deepened his interest in the relationship of theology and science. Professor H. R. Macintosh, in the chair of systematic theology, helped to give him a solid biblical and Christological foundation. Both our parents also had a deep influence upon him, spiritually and theologically, introducing him and each of us while still at school to well known works of some of the great Reformers, such as, Luther's commentary on *Galatians* and his *Bondage of the Will*, Calvin's *Institutes* and a great favorite, particularly of our mother, Robert Bruce's *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper: Sermons on the Sacraments* (ed. T. F. Torrance). Tom always called our mother "the theologian of the family" and our father the "evangelist." Mother gave Tom *Credo* by Karl Barth. That was Tom's first book by a theologian who came to have a great influence on his life and theology. H. R. Macintosh encouraged him in reading Karl Barth's theology.

Looking back over his life Tom was very conscious of the hand of God, sparing his life over early adventurous years, guiding the direction of his life and helping and blessing his work as minister of the Gospel as pastor and teacher.

Following his death, several ministers, who were his former students, contacted me to express their sympathy. What they remembered most about Tom, even more than his theological learning, was his pastoral care. They said that whereas they were very grateful for all that Tom had taught them, they were especially grateful for what he had done for them and for their families as a pastor, friend and spiritual guide.

Tom also had a rich sense of humor, although he could be confrontational when arguing points of doctrine, which he passionately believed. As his brother, I will always look on him first and foremost not as an academic but as a loving, caring, pastor, friend, and brother. When I had occasion to telephone him, we sometimes talked for an hour. On these

occasions, or when visiting him, he almost invariably asked at length about each member of my family and grandchildren and assured me that he was praying for them. I, with members of his family and others, give thanks to God for him, not only for all that we learnt from him but also for the many rich memories of his life.

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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.

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Memories of 'TF' are many, varied and vivid - his energy, learning, memory, intellect and above all his warmth, profound theological vision and personal faith. My earliest memories of him were of someone exciting whom my parents looked forward to seeing and who always asked about each of us. It was when I came to study theology under him in New College that I came to appreciate the unique intellectual and theological abilities of the person I had known as 'Uncle Tom.' Then again, it was only in the frequent visits to him at the end of his life that I had the privilege of coming to know him in a much more personal way.

Several characteristics of his life and personality stand out at once:

a) *his energy* - 'TF' (as he was popularly known at New College to distinguish him from his brother 'JB') never let the grass grow under his feet and always seemed to get things done at breakneck speed. The energy of his character and mind found vivid expression in his lectures and left his students exhilarated and enthused by the way he connected theological ideas and by the new vistas and horizons he opened up. Although known as an academic, in many ways he was primarily not so and only became such out of necessity, as part of his Christian calling. When, for example, he returned from war service, sleeping in tents and traveling with his division, he said to his mother, "I'm not cut out to be an academic, mother. I'm a man of action!"

b) *his learning* - he read voluminously and would absorb and retain ideas. In both church and university he soon became recognized as something of a polymath, at home in several fields, not only in theology itself but in philosophy and science, particularly in the field of science and theology for which he later became so well known.

c) *his warmth and pastoral concern* - TF was a man of great personal warmth and pastoral concern who notwithstanding a demanding schedule would invariably find time for students in difficulties or in need of pastoral

care and who listened intently to them and their questions. I remember being struck by the comment of the wife of a senior Scottish churchman that unlike her husband's peers, Tom Torrance always treated her as an equal. Personally I too invariably found him to be quick and helpful in responding to questions or in sending me books or articles he thought I would find useful.

d) *the centeredness of his thought* – TF would naturally focus on what he felt to be the central questions, the critical points in theological disputes. In debates, be they in the Church of Scotland's General Assembly or at academic conferences, he could be relied upon to enliven the discussion by focusing on the defining issues and providing a theological assessment of these and their ramifications, always directing us to the dogmatic center of the Christian faith in a fresh and fruitful way.

e) *his commitment to the church* – TF was committed to serving the parish ministry (his own years in the parish were among the happiest of his life) and to the renewal of the church through theology and evangelism. One of the aims of his lectures was to seek to provide students with a theology that would aid their teaching and preaching in the ministry and he would often illustrate a point he was making from his own parish experience. In *Preaching Christ Today* (dedicated to Billy Graham whose missions in Scotland he had always supported) he speaks of 'the renewal of theology in the teaching and preaching of the church in Scotland' and adds 'That is the end to which my own life has been dedicated'. This commitment was recognized by the Church of Scotland's election of him as Moderator 1976-77.

f) *his forthrightness* – the combination of his own drive, insight and focus on the central issues of theology, together perhaps with his Scottish Presbyterian background and upbringing, meant that TF spoke directly and to the point. He could therefore be rather blunt, on occasion unnecessarily so, but he always spoke the truth as he saw it. In his desire to get to the truth of the matter, he could unintentionally leave people behind and fail to carry them with him. With more patience for those who did not share his insights, and a willingness to play a longer game, he could perhaps have achieved even greater influence. The very energy, academic brilliance and theological passion which made him what he was and enabled him to achieve the output

he did also made him less patient at times and too forthright. Theological treasures in earthen vessels.

Among my own many memories, two sets in particular stand out. The first set was his second year dogmatics lectures at New College, Edinburgh which I attended in 1967-8. The second was my weekly visits to him in the nursing home during the last few years of his life when he had been incapacitated by a stroke. Both are indelibly etched into my memory. In the first he is in full theological flight – his dogmatics lectures remain by far the most exhilarating and indeed formative intellectual influence in my life. To find myself editing the same lectures was not only a privilege but also an opportunity to repay in gratitude some of the debt for all I had learnt from him.

The second vivid set of memories, of TF in the nursing home, is of him in a much more personal capacity, when, unable to walk without support and needing increasing care, he remained alert and gracious to the end. While it was immensely sad to see him so incapacitated and bereft of so many of his usual stimuli, he retained a keen interest in family and friends or other concerns, such as the editing of the lectures. It was always a privilege to visit him, to listen to his reminiscences and often to read a psalm (Psalm 103 was a common request – it had been his father's favorite) or other portion of scripture and pray with him. His reminiscences, often in response to a question, were many and various, about China, student days, experiences in the war, Princeton and numerous friends and colleagues.

I learned several details I had not known before, for example that in China he had been widely known by the locals as *Tao chee* or 'Torrance mischief,' a fact which made him chuckle when reminded of it. I also learnt of some of his sporting interests. Apart from horse riding which he had learnt in China and skiing in Scotland and Switzerland, he had as a student been a member of the Hare and Hounds, the Edinburgh University Cross-country Running Society, until the incapacitating effects of a severe bout of flu led him to take up hockey instead. One of my favorite reminiscences of his was the story of his being issued with badly fitting skis in the army for patrol during the war in Italy. When one of the skis came off and clattered down the

hillside alerting the Germans, he had to ski down on one ski avoiding enemy fire!

Throughout his time in the nursing home, I was constantly struck by his interest in others and his Christian patience and graciousness, and I always came away humbled. It is rather appropriate not only that he should die on Advent Sunday but that having been born and brought up in a missionary family in China, where he had always hoped to be a missionary himself, he should find himself at the end of his life in Edinburgh being attended by a Chinese nurse. She informed us that he had been trying to convert her when he died!

It remains to try to sum up my deepest memories of TF, my own assessment of his contribution to the church and what he meant to me personally. In the attempt to estimate his contribution to the church in general and the theological world in particular, it seems to me that the following features of his life and thought are central, the first two laying the basis for the following three, which together with them are summed in the final feature:

i) *Scripture and prayer* – at the root of TF as a man, a minister, theologian and author, is an intimate knowledge of scripture and a daily reading of it and prayer. Brought up to read the Bible three chapters a day and five on Sundays and therefore right through it once a year, TF continued to do so all his life and indeed read it two or three times a year. His daily study of scripture went hand in hand with daily devotions and intercession for others. This for him was the ‘arcane discipline’, as he called it, which lies at the heart of all ministry and of participation in the royal priesthood of Christ. Difficult and abstract as some of his writings appear, his theology is grounded in and flows out of daily reading of the word of God in worship and prayer.

ii) *following the goal* – in his reading of scripture and in the structure of his thought TF is centered around following the ‘scopus’ or goal of scripture, Jesus Christ. That for him is the nature and purpose of Christian dogmatics, orientated and structured, as it is, around Jesus Christ and his further disclosure. TF is concerned in his theology to further a deeper and more faithful grasp of this ‘scopus’ of scripture, the once for all revelation of God in Christ. The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of Christ who

reveals the Father in the Spirit are the heart of his thought. Essentially doxological and heuristic, his theology is at once deeply biblical and deeply theological, concerned to penetrate into what he called the 'inner logic' of the Bible, to grasp the Word behind the words and in the words and therefore to understand the scriptures in their relation of depth.

TF's theology therefore operates with what might be called an 'open center,' open that is for Jesus Christ to make himself further known. In that sense, TF's theology is systematic but is not a system. In the nature of the case for him, theology cannot be a system, for it points to and is held together in the person of Jesus Christ in the Trinity and not in any logical system of human devising. His theological method is the Anselmian 'faith seeking understanding,' faith looking for a deeper grounding in and apprehension of God in Christ. Understanding his theology means following it in its goal orientated direction, which means that it cannot itself be neatly systematized since its unity is to be found in God and knowledge of him in the Spirit and not in itself.

iii) *originality and the making of connections* – TF's theology is highly original, which does not mean first and foremost that he developed new concepts, although he did, but that he made new connections between known theological ideas and concepts. For him, originality was not necessarily thinking new thoughts but making new connections.

On the basis of the first two features of his thought outlined above (his intimate dwelling upon scripture and his interpretation of it in terms of its center in Jesus Christ), TF was able to take his knowledge of the history of classical theology, in particular of Athanasius, Calvin and Barth, not to mention Anselm, Kierkegaard and H.R. Mackintosh (to name just a few of the seminal influences on him), and reshape it around Jesus Christ as the dogmatic centre of theology. It is, it seems to me, precisely because his own theology is not a system but is open to its center in Christ, that the dogmatic material of historical theology can, in his theology, be reshaped, knit together and structured in a new and dynamic order around Christ. The openness of theology and of all its concepts to its transcendent Object, or Subject, means that the primary connection of theological concepts is not to themselves or to other theological concepts as such but to their object or referent.

When theological concepts are realigned with their referent they are naturally realigned among themselves. Theological concepts are in any case aligned naturally together in certain groupings, since it is only together, structured in human language around certain leading metaphors, that they act as disclosure models. Through structuring the various concepts and doctrines of Christian theology around the center in Jesus Christ, TF realigns them in relation to him as their centre but also to one another. It is their transcendent reference that enables them to be connected together in new ways.

Interpreting scripture and theology in terms of their ontological ground in God in Christ also involves seeing them as a whole. The transcendent focus facilitates a wider vision and means that rather than dwelling and thinking within certain fixed theological concepts, or even exclusively within certain theological traditions, theological concepts are interpreted in terms of the one reality they refer to, namely, God in Christ. Interpreted not simply out of themselves, but regrouped and re-schematized in interrelation with other theological concepts, they find themselves given a new and enriched meaning by and in the unique reality to which they jointly refer.

The structure of TF's theology and of his theological mind, therefore, is such that in endeavoring to allow Christ (in the Father through the Spirit) to be the open focus of theology, he sees everything else, all scripture and doctrine, in a wide and comprehensive theological vision. The logic of theology here can be thought of as following the pattern of Christ and as having analogies to his ascending that he might fill all things. If he had remained on earth, he would have been in one place at one time, but by ascending Jesus Christ is through the Spirit present to all everywhere. Similarly, if Christ is not fixed on earth as it were within certain doctrines, he becomes related to the whole of doctrine. Rather than endeavoring to encapsulate him in its formulations, theology allows Jesus Christ to be their ascended terminus, so allowing its concepts and doctrines to be seen much more as a comprehensive whole in their pointing together to him as their one and only true referent. The more theology cuts loose from thinking in theological concepts and doctrines to thinking *through* them (necessarily *through* but *not apart from* them), to the risen ascended Christ, the more

theological concepts and doctrines become part of a wider and deeper whole held together in God in Christ.

The result of this openness to Christ in the Trinity is that while TF's theology does find its basic shape early on in his career, it is continually making new connections and putting theological concepts and doctrines together in a new enriched whole.

iv) *balanced vision* – a further consequence of TF's method and theology, it seems to me, is that like Calvin, whose method seems in many ways very similar (if lacking in Barth's and TF's attempt to present the whole truth of Christ more dynamically and in spiral fashion), his theology succeeds in having a comprehensive and balanced vision. The attempt to relate all of scripture and doctrine to Jesus Christ has the effect of ironing out under-emphases and over-emphases in Christian doctrine. There is of course no such thing as a totally balanced theology – all theology suffers from the limitations of its time – nevertheless a method such as that of Calvin or TF does, it seems to me, provide more of a balanced vision to a theology than would otherwise be the case.

v) *fruitfulness* – in its heuristic nature, in looking to Jesus Christ as the 'scopus' and in connecting biblical and theological concepts and doctrines together as refined windows for Christ's further disclosure, TF's theology is fruitful. The range and depth of his knowledge, not just in theology particularly but in philosophy and science also, the wideness of his vision and the connections of thought which he forged all make his thought exceptionally fruitful and fertile. Even if he is not always right (and which theologian or thinker is?), his thought is richly stimulating, illuminating and suggestive of new avenues. And even if following up his thought does not always lead to the same conclusions it is almost always very fruitful.

The fertility and fruitfulness of TF's theology at the same time leaves it open to a certain weakness. TF's habit of seeing things as a whole, of seeing scripture and doctrine in terms of their 'scopus' in Christ, of interpreting theological statements not just in terms of their syntactical and historical setting but in terms of the reality they refer to, means that his focus on the ultimate reference of statements can lead him sometimes to jump to conclusions in interpreting historical theologians. He can interpret their

theological statements in terms of the reality as he sees it, in a way which seems to go beyond their author's own immediate thought and setting. TF is sometimes accused here of being 'a-historical' and of making other theologians appear too much to have the same theology as he has.

TF's search for a comprehensive theological vision, his habit of working very fast and his sheer volume of work and research does leave him vulnerable on occasion to jumping to inadequate or wrong interpretations and failing to be as historically precise as he might have been. But his principle of interpreting the statements of historical theology in terms of the eternal realities of God (which we know only in the historical but which at the same time transcend it) is valid. The scale of what TF is attempting to do is such that his theology and research is inevitably fragmentary and inadequate at points. Its value is not in its completeness as such but in the extent of its basic adequacy and heuristic capability and fruitfulness.

vi) *integration* – TF's chief legacy to the church and to theology is the personal theological integration he forged and expressed in his lectures and writings. While there were significant portions of that integration still awaiting final writing up and publication (for example, his great three volume manuscript on the history of hermeneutics, only part of which ever appeared in print), and while much of it is, in Polanyian terms, tacit and lost with his passing, a great deal of it is bequeathed in his many books. In his theology, TF has left a unique integration quarried from the classical doctrine of Christ from the fathers to the Reformation and Barth. His thought represents a unique interpretative tool that is biblically informed, evangelically centered on Christ in the Trinity and richly balanced and fruitful.

The uniqueness of TF's theological integration lies not simply in his integrated understanding of Christian doctrine around Christ in the Trinity, but in the breadth of its historical range. In his doctrine of the knowledge of God, for example, or of the nature of theological truth and statement, TF incorporates elements from all eras, patristic, mediaeval, Reformation and modern, and has in mind such thinkers as Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Hilary, Anselm, Richard of St. Victor, Scotus, Reuchlin, John Major, Calvin, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Barth. His own understanding is deeply shaped

by what has gone before in the history of theology as well as by the contemporary influences on him.

The uniqueness of TF's integration lies also in its rational depth. He had naturally an inquiring mind, but there is no doubt that his theological understanding owed much to the Scottish intellectual tradition in philosophy and theology. His grounding in Scottish philosophy gave him a conceptual and epistemological awareness that significantly deepened his theology and his understanding of other theologians. He was able to appreciate the meaning and significance of their thought as he would not otherwise have done. This was reinforced by his linguistic training, in Latin, Greek, German and Hebrew, which meant that he was better equipped to appreciate nuances of meaning and thereby make his distinctive contribution to the field of biblical and theological hermeneutics. Though philosophical training may be a considerable assistance, the rational depth of faith and of theology for TF stems from the nature of knowledge of God. It is the deep intelligibility of God in his Word that creates in us an answering or correspondent rationality. Through the Spirit we participate in the mind of Christ and are opened up in a profound way to the inherent intelligibility of God. Faith here has both a rationality and a depth: a rationality of the 'converted reason' through being 'transformed by the renewal of our mind' and a depth through sharing in Christ in the very rationality of God. TF always endeavored to hold the two together. Even if his thinking at times seems to become too complex as he struggles to express his thoughts, his theology is characterized not only by a profound rationality but also by a depth of understanding which comes from faith. The two belong together. It is precisely the combination of the two that enabled him to make such a contribution in so many fields of theology, not least in the fields of patristics, hermeneutics, Calvin studies, ecumenical dialogue, Barth studies and, of course, dogmatics.

His 'main love' remained Christian dogmatics, the positive ordering of doctrine around Christ and the proclamation of him. But he felt that a key ancillary part of that for him personally was evangelizing the foundations of scientific culture, as he put it, so that the gospel might not be unnecessarily hindered by the deep rooted presuppositions which, in spite of being superceded by modern science, still bedeviled popular and even academic

thought. There is no doubt that his work here in science and theology, recognized by his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh and of the British Academy, is one of his most original and important contributions to theology and its wider relations.

His most important legacy, however, in my estimate, is his Christian dogmatics, his balanced integration around Jesus Christ of the whole spectrum of doctrine, including Christology, Soteriology and the Trinity. His is a carefully articulated biblical dogmatics, utilizing the best insights, as he sees them, from the early church, the Reformation and modern scholarship. His insight and grasp, scholarship and knowledge of key periods and figures in theology, such as the early fathers (Athanasius in particular), Calvin and Barth, is seminal and outstanding. He writes with passion, concerned to present the truth of the gospel in Christ and to 'clear the ground' for its faithful articulation in the modern era. While he did not live to produce his own dogmatics as such, his New College dogmatics lectures, now in process of publication, provide a full expression of his dogmatics. In their lucid, oral style, the lectures complement his two great dogmatic monographs and provide the best entry into his dogmatic understanding. *The Trinitarian Faith* and *The Christian Doctrine of God* provide the careful scholarly articulation of the whole doctrine of the Trinity as Father, Son become flesh, and Spirit, with particular reference to its development from its patristic roots. The lectures focus on Christology and Soteriology, and articulate a Trinitarian theological understanding of Christ in the scriptures and so function more as a dogmatic key to scripture. Together, the lectures and the monographs provide the fullest account of Torrance's dogmatics and are an enduring legacy to the church.

It is impossible to sum up adequately what T.F. was to me personally, or his influence and impact - uncle (mother's elder brother), father's close friend at university, brilliant and inspiring professor, tutor and theological mentor, father in the faith and dear friend.

THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF THOMAS F. TORRANCE

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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.

**THOMAS F. TORRANCE AND THE SEARCH FOR A VIABLE NATURAL
THEOLOGY: SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers the importance of T. F. Torrance for a contemporary natural theology. Of especial importance here is Torrance's relocation of *theologia naturalis* within the context of *theologia revelata*, which leads to a natural theology being informed and nourished by a rich trinitarian ontology. The author explains his own development of Torrance's position, emphasising both its intellectual robustness and its theological utility.

We all have to start our theological careers somewhere. As it happens, I was something of a latecomer to the field of Christian theology, having begun my academic career at Oxford University by studying the natural sciences. I had initially no interest in things theological, taking the view that belief in God was an outmoded notion, best left to little old ladies and impressionable fools. My early atheism was as aggressive as it was intellectually ungrounded. Richard Dawkins had yet to make his name in 1971, when I began my scientific studies at Oxford. Yet as I now read Dawkins, I find my own earlier views reflected back at me, generating a sense of nostalgia and acute embarrassment in about equal measure. Did I really have such naive views about the natural sciences, and especially their relation to religion?

Doubts had earlier been sown in my rather dogmatic atheist mind by studying the history and philosophy of science during the months before going up to Oxford. Issues such as the under-determination of theory by data, radical theory change in the history of science, the difficulties in devising a "crucial experiment," and the enormously complex issues associated with determining what was the "best explanation" of a given set of observations muddied what I had taken to be the clear, still water of scientific truth. Things were rather more complicated than I had appreciated.

While studying the natural sciences at Oxford, I was forced to reconsider my rather dogmatic and unreflective atheism, and confront the

awkward fact that it was evidentially and argumentatively deficient. It was not an easy conclusion for me, but it had to be confronted in the name of intellectual integrity. By the end of my first term at Oxford, I came to the conclusion that Christianity was far more intellectually robust and spiritually relevant than I had given it credit for. So, in what I now appreciate to be a purely intellectual conversion, I changed faiths, setting my atheism to one side, and adopting Christianity in its place. And, having embraced Christianity, I began to long to explore its intellectual depths.

My natural instinct was to abandon my studies of the natural sciences, and begin the detailed study of Christian theology. However, I was dissuaded from this, and in the end completed my first degree in chemistry and went on to gain a doctorate from Oxford in molecular biophysics, working under the supervision of Professor Sir George Radda. I was awarded a European Molecular Biology Organization fellowship in 1976, which allowed me to study at the University of Utrecht. It was during this period that I began to plan a serious intellectual engagement between Christianity and the natural sciences. As I reflected on this, I came to the conclusion that this would necessitate a serious engagement with Christian theology. There was nothing, it seemed to me, to be gained from a superficial theological reflection on scientific matters. I would have to immerse myself in the Christian theological tradition, no matter how long this would take.

On my return to Oxford from Utrecht in August 1976, I began to plan how this might be realized. I had just been awarded a Senior Scholarship at Merton College, Oxford, for the period 1976-8. The scholarship in question allowed its holder to either undertake research work for an advanced degree from the University of Oxford, or to study for a second first degree, without limit of subject. I therefore asked the college authorities if it might be possible to fulfill both these possibilities, by continuing my research in molecular biophysics, while at the same time studying for the Final Honours School of Theology. In November 1976, the college agreed to this request. At this stage, I was very much an amateur in matters of theology. I suspect that my interest in theology might well have proved to be short-lived, if not stillborn, had I begun my theological studies by reading some of the works which were typical of English-language theology of this time. I continue to

wonder what might have happened to me had I been introduced to theology by reading Maurice Wiles' *What is Theology?*, a work which generally conveys the impression (despite, I am sure, the best intentions of its most worthy author) that theology is a dull and derivative discipline, dependent upon the social sciences and philosophy for its few insights, which has nothing distinctive, original, persuasive or – dare I say it? – *interesting* to say.

However, redemption was at hand. I had been an undergraduate at Wadham College, Oxford, during the years 1971-5, and remained in touch with its chaplain Tim Gorringe (now Professor of Theology at Exeter University). Gorringe was working on aspects of the theology of Karl Barth, and suggested that I could do far worse than immerse myself in the *Church Dogmatics*. By the end of the first half-volume – which had just appeared in a new English translation, replacing the unsatisfactory translation originally published in 1936 – I knew that I was going to be excited by the study of theology. Barth's vision of theology might well have been controversial, and caused eyebrows to be raised within the English theological establishment of the time. But the vision was exciting, challenging and inspirational. Above all, I found myself impressed by the intellectual coherence of Barth's vision of "theological science," and thrilled by the vision Barth offered of a sustained theological engagement with the past:

We cannot be in the church without taking responsibility for the theology of the past as much as for the theology of the present. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Schleiermacher and all the rest are not dead but living. They still speak and demand a hearing as living voices, as surely as we know that they and we belong together in the church.¹

With this in mind, I set out to ensure that I immersed myself in historical theology, as well as systematic theology, realizing that the latter could not be undertaken without the former, and that the former was incomplete without the latter. While I now have misgivings about many aspects of Barth's theology, he had a very positive impact on my estimation of, and enthusiasm for, theology as a serious intellectual discipline.

¹ Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*. 2nd ed. (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952), 3.

In 1978, I moved from Oxford to Cambridge, and began my theological research. I had been elected to the Naden Theological Studentship at St. John's College, an endowed college research position established in the 1780s. This offered me an ideal platform from which to begin my theological research. My initial thoughts had been to study the Copernican controversy, to allow me to focus on the science and religion debate. However, my supervisor was Professor E. Gordon Rupp (1910-86), one of England's leading Luther experts at that time. He had just retired from the Dixie chair of Ecclesiastical History at Cambridge, and was very happy to help me explore the intellectual complexities of the sixteenth century. He persuaded me that it would be much better if I were to familiarize myself with Luther's theology, and its broader intellectual context. After some reflection, I realized that he was right, and immersed myself in the field. This eventually led to three major historical works: *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Blackwell, 1985); *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge University Press, 1986; third edition, 2005); and *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Blackwell, 1987; second edition, 2003).

It was then that I encountered Torrance. By that stage, I was beginning to have some misgivings about Barth. Although I continued to admire his theological rigor, and especially the depth of his analyses of core theological debates, I found myself saddened by his reluctance to make connections with other disciplines – above all, with the natural sciences.² Where, I wondered, could I find a theologically rigorous engagement with the natural sciences upon which I could base my own thinking? By the end of 1979, I was still not sure. I had read Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, and found it unsatisfying. It was not really Pannenberg's fault; the scope of the book was much broader than the English translation of the title indicated, being about *Wissenschaft* in general, rather

² A point that would later be emphasized by Harold P. Nebelsick, "Karl Barth's Understanding of Science." In *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth*, edited by John Thompson (Allison Park: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 165-214.

than *Naturwissenschaft* in particular.³ So who would help me think about these things?

Then I discovered Torrance's *Theological Science*. And I had my answer. I found in Torrance someone who was prepared to engage the natural sciences seriously, yet who insisted upon the intellectual distinctiveness and integrity of Christian theology. He offered a coherent and persuasive critique of the view that I had hitherto regarded as unassailable – namely, that there was one method, which was to be applied consistently across all disciplines. This view, characteristic of the Enlightenment, was still influential when I began to study theology in the 1970s. It was, of course, an approach urged on Karl Barth by Heinrich Scholz during 1930s.⁴ Barth asserted it was incorrect; Torrance argued for its deficiency, clinching his case through an appeal to the philosophy of the natural sciences. I knew I had found an intellectual dialogue partner who merited the most detailed of examination.

Torrance's approach opened doors that I had never realized existed, and gave me a whole new way of thinking about the relation of science and faith. As I continued to read and explore Torrance over the next few years, I began to appreciate more the strengths of his distinctive way of engaging the natural sciences from a theological perspective. Here was a leading interpreter of Barth who was able to make a move that Barth himself had seemed unable, or unwilling, to make. While Torrance restricted himself to the physical rather than the biological sciences, this seemed to be of minor importance to me: the general method he set out was easily capable of being extended more broadly. Torrance became the quarry from which I mined theological gold.

Now it is one thing to know people by their ideas; it is quite another to know them as individuals. Having admired Torrance for many years, and appreciated both the breadth and depth of his theological vision, I found myself increasingly interested in discovering how he came to develop these

³ Later in his career, Pannenberg turned his attention specifically to the natural sciences: see, for example, Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Toward a Theology of Nature: Essays on Science and Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

⁴ For comment, see Alister E. McGrath, "Theologie als Mathesis Universalis? Heinrich Scholz, Karl Barth, und der wissenschaftliche Status der christlichen Theologie." *Theologische Zeitschrift* 62 (2007): 44-57.

ideas. What was his background? How had he come to study theology? What was the connection between his theological ideas and his personal faith? The idea of writing an intellectual biography of Torrance began to take shape in my mind. To my delight, I discovered that Torrance was open to the idea. With immense generosity, he made his own personal archive of material available to me, allowing me access to family letters, to personal notes, to unpublished typescripts of lectures (including several series given at Auburn Theological Seminary in the late 1930s), and to sermons he delivered while he served as minister in the Church of Scotland. Geoffrey Green, director of the Edinburgh publishing company T. & T. Clark, which had published many of Torrance's writings, as well as the Barth translation that Torrance had championed, was enthusiastic about publishing the work. It just remained to research it.

It was a remarkable experience, which both helped me to understand Torrance, while at the same time deepening my appreciation for him. It allowed me to study the development of Torrance's theology over an extended period of time, making use of unpublished sources, such as the texts of his lectures on Christian Dogmatics given at Auburn Theological Seminary during the academic year 1938-9.⁵ One of those lecture courses concerned "science and religion" and showed in outline the basic themes which would become such a distinctive feature of his later thought. Writing this biography, which involved getting to know Torrance and visiting him at his Edinburgh home, also helped me to understand how his theology and personal life were so deeply interconnected.

So what did I find in Torrance that I so appreciated? And how did I develop this in my own work? Five themes stand out as being of especial importance:

1. Torrance's dogmatic relocation of natural theology, so that it came within the scope of Christian revelation, rather than being seen as an autonomous field of inquiry.

2. The recognition, based partly on the work of the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, that reality consists of many levels. The theological

⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 199-205.

and natural sciences exercise different methodologies, in accordance with their differing subject matters. The recognition of the stratification of reality legitimates a diversity of methodologies, precisely because methodology is ultimately and actually determined by ontology.

3. The insight that theology, like all scientific disciplines, adopts an *a posteriori*, not an *a priori*, approach to its subject. Any theory which lays down in advance how, or to what extent, God can be known predetermines that knowledge through a set of *a priori* assumptions which have been allowed to exercise a critical and controlling function in theological reflection. How God can be known constitutes a question that may only be answered in the light of the way in which God is known through revelation.

4. The basic notion that every level of reality demands to be engaged *kata physin*, according to its own distinct identity, which determines how it is to be known. Torrance's studies of the scientific method of the school of Alexandria persuaded him that the Greek fathers were perfectly aware of the general principle that knowledge depended upon the inherent structure or nature of the realities under investigation. A science can only investigate an object in accordance with its distinct nature.

5. A rigorously trinitarian theological framework, whose incarnational underpinnings ensured that talk of "God" never degenerated into abstract speculation, but was always firmly anchored in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall explore only the first of these points, assessing its importance, and showing how I developed it in my own thinking.⁶ Yet each of these five points merits detailed attention in its own right, in that they lay a robust intellectual foundation for a Christian theology that maintains its own distinct integrity, while at the same time opening the way to a rich and rewarding interdisciplinary engagement which was of especial relevance – yet not limited – to the natural sciences.

⁶ For the form of critical realism that I developed as a way of expressing Torrance's insight, see Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: 2 - Reality* (London: Continuum, 2002), 195-244. For an extended appropriation of Torrance's notion of theology as an *a posteriori* discipline which responds to reality *kata physin*, see 246-97.

The real problem faced by anyone concerned with the interplay of the natural sciences and Christian theology can be summarized like this. Is not the scientific engagement with nature diametrically opposed to the theological need to engage with God's self-revelation? To take this a little further, is not the theological equivalent of an engagement with nature little more than an invitation to reduce revelation to nature, and theology to anthropology? From a Barthian perspective, these are very serious matters. Torrance, as one of the leading British interpreters of Barth, was acutely aware of the force of these considerations. Barth held that the claim to a natural knowledge of God was a central aspect of the sinful human tendency towards self-affirmation in the face of God.⁷ If God could be known through nature, Barth argued, then his self-revelation could be disregarded and marginalized. "Natural theology, as such, arises out of man's natural existence and is part of the whole movement in which he develops his own autonomy and seeks a naturalistic explanation for himself within the universe."⁸ To concede the legitimacy of natural theology would thus be to compromise the entire principle of the priority and necessity of God's self-revelation. Yet some account of the manner in which Christian theology engages with the natural order is clearly essential if a meaningful dialogue with the natural sciences is to progress. So how can these apparently incompatible objectives be held together?

One of Torrance's most significant theological achievements concerns his careful relocation of the place of natural theology within the Reformed tradition in general and the Barthian heritage in particular. His understanding of the purpose and place of natural theology has not merely been of major importance in encouraging and fostering the dialogue between Christian theology and the natural sciences; it has also encouraged a new engagement with the doctrine of creation and its implications for this dialogue. One of Torrance's most significant achievements is his redevelopment or redirection of the Barthian critique of natural theology in such a manner that its

⁷ See the landmark study: Thomas F. Torrance, "The Problem of Natural Theology in the Thought of Karl Barth," *Religious Studies* 6 (1970): 121-35.

⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 141-3.

fundamental principle was retained, while its applicability and utility was enhanced.

So how did Torrance achieve this? In part, Torrance's approach reflects and develops hints within Barth's later writings that certain forms of natural theology were not beyond redemption. Thus in later sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth appears to understand the relation of knowledge of God in creation and knowledge of God through revelation in a way that seems close to that associated with John Calvin, who was able to integrate a natural theology into his overall scheme of the knowledge of God the creator and redeemer.⁹ For example, consider the following statement:

It is given quite irrespective of whether the man whom it addresses in its self-witness knows or does not know, confesses or denies, that it owes this speech no less than its persistence to the faithfulness of the Creator . . . However corrupt man may be, they illumine him, and even in the depths of his corruption he does not cease to see and understand them . . . they are not extinguished by this light, nor are their force and significance destroyed . . . As the divine work of reconciliation does not negate the divine work of creation, nor deprive it of meaning, so it does not take from its lights and language, nor tear asunder the original connection between creaturely *esse* and creaturely *nosse*.¹⁰

Similarly, in the lecture fragments of the *Church Dogmatics*, published posthumously, Barth sets out reasons for supposing that something of God can be known from creation, so that God "is objectively a very well known and not an unknown God." Nevertheless, he stresses that these impressions should not be "systematised in the form of a natural theology."¹¹ Yet Torrance believed that Barth's legitimate concerns could be safeguarded, while developing a revised and more positive approach to natural theology.

Torrance stresses that Barth does not reject natural theology on the grounds of rational skepticism or some form of *via negationis* that denies a positive knowledge of God. The issue concerns the human desire to conduct

⁹ See, for example, Michael L. Czapkay Sudduth, "The Prospects for 'Mediate' Natural Theology in John Calvin," *Religious Studies* 31 (1995): 53-68. For the anthropological aspects of Calvin's natural theology, see Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the *Sensus Divinitatis* and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 43 (1998): 87-107.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *CD IV/3.1*: 139.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/ 4 Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 120-2.

theology on anthropocentric foundations. Torrance affirms that one of Barth's most fundamental objections to natural theology concerns the innate human tendency to develop and assert its own autonomy.¹² Barth is not denying the possibility or even the actuality of natural theology. His point is that natural theology "is undermined, relativized and set aside by the actual knowledge of God mediated through Christ." For Torrance, Barth neither denies the existence of a natural knowledge of God, nor does he mount a metaphysical critique of its foundations. Rather, "what Barth objects to in natural theology is not its rational structure as such, but its *independent* character, i.e. the autonomous rational structure which it develops on the ground of "nature alone" in abstraction from the active self-disclosure of the living God."

As such, natural theology thus has a proper and significant place *within the context of revealed theology*. That is to say, Barth's objection to natural theology lies in a perceived danger – that such a natural theology will be seen as an independent and equally valid route to knowledge of God, which may be had under conditions of our choosing. Yet this danger is averted if natural theology is itself seen as a subordinate aspect of revealed theology, legitimated by that revealed theology rather than by natural presuppositions or insights. To put it another way, the authorization for natural theology lies not in its own intrinsic structures, but in divine revelation itself, which both legitimates it and defines its scope.¹³ One could thus argue that Torrance offers a new lease of intellectual life to natural theology through its subtle redefinition.

Barth can say that *theologia naturalis* is included and brought to light within *theologia revelata*, for in the reality of divine grace there is included the truth of the divine creation. In this sense Barth can interpret, and claim as true, the dictum of St. Thomas that grace does not destroy nature but perfects and fulfils it, and can go on to argue that the meaning of God's revelation becomes manifest to us as it brings into full light the buried and forgotten truth of the creation. In other words, while knowledge of God is grounded in his own intelligible revelation to us, it requires for its actualization an appropriate rational structure in our cognizing of it, but that

¹² Torrance, "Problem of Natural Theology," 125.

¹³ Torrance, "Problem of Natural Theology," 128-9.

rational structure does not arise unless we allow our minds to fall under the compulsion of God's being who he really is in the act of his self-revelation and grace, and as such cannot be derived from an analysis of our autonomous subjectivity.

I found Torrance's reconceptualization of natural theology to be both persuasive and helpful. His analysis of the situation was of major importance in my argument, initially set out in the first volume of my *Scientific Theology* trilogy, that a renewed natural theology could play an epistemically decisive role in the dialogue between science and religion, as well as allowing a Christian theology to offer a credible account of the existence of alternative tradition-mediated rationalities.¹⁴ A trinitarian construal of natural theology offers an interpretative grid by which other traditions may be addressed on the common issues of existence, enabling the greater coherence and attractiveness of the Christian vision to be affirmed. So great was Torrance's influence upon me at this critical point that I dedicated the volume to him.

Realizing the key role that a renewed natural theology might play in enabling Christian theology to reconnect with broader scientific and cultural discourse and debate, I resolved to take these issues further. An opportunity arose in the form of an invitation to deliver the 2008 Riddell Lectures at the University of Newcastle, focusing on the interface of religion and culture. Knowing that C. S. Lewis had delivered these lectures in February 1942 (they were later published as *The Abolition of Man*), I was delighted to accept the invitation, and focus on natural theology as a means by which Christian theology could undertake a principled engagement with contemporary culture. The published version of these lectures – *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (2008) – sets out an approach to natural theology which extends Torrance's foundational vision. I argue that a Trinitarian vision of God – such as that set out in Torrance's great work *The Christian Doctrine of God*¹⁵ – offers an enriched and fulfilling engagement with the natural world, transcending the limits of merely making sense of things. The

¹⁴ Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Nature*, Vol. 1 (London: Continuum, 2001), 241-305, focuses particularly on Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of tradition-mediated and –constituted rationality.

¹⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996).

Christian tradition offers a rich conceptual resource for beholding, understanding, and appreciating nature, providing an intellectual framework that affirms and legitimates a heightened attentiveness to the world around us.

The most significant theological elements of this vision for a renewed natural theology are the following:

1. The concept of nature is recognized to be conceptually indeterminate.¹⁶ It is interpreted, not an autonomous, entity. This opens the way to "seeing" nature in a specifically Christian manner. This involves rejecting the Enlightenment idea of nature as an objective entity, capable of acting as a universal ground of judgment. Instead of holding that nature forces its own interpretation upon us, we are free to choose the manner in which we see nature, forcing us to identify the best way of beholding the natural world.

2. Natural theology is understood to be the action of "seeing" nature from a specifically Christian perspective.¹⁷ This involves rejecting the Enlightenment's version of natural theology as a generic attempt to demonstrate the existence and attributes of a putative God from an appeal to the natural world.¹⁸ Instead, nature is viewed from the perspective of the Christian tradition, with its distinct notions of God, nature, and human agency.

3. The specifically cognitive aspects of natural theology are affirmed, in that it clearly has to do with making sense of our experience of nature. Yet this is not to be understood as an attempt to deduce the existence of God from observing nature, but of the capacity of the Christian faith to make sense of what is observed. Natural theology emphasizes the resonance between the intellectual framework offered by the Christian faith and observation, and does not set out to prove any core element of that faith from an appeal to nature.¹⁹

¹⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 7-10, 147-56.

¹⁷ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 1-7, 12-14, 171-216.

¹⁸ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 141-7, 165-70.

¹⁹ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 15-18, 232-60.

4. In that natural theology involves “seeing” nature, the empirical question of how human perception takes place is identified as having considerable theological significance. Natural theology therefore demands an informed understanding of the psychology of human perception, especially its recognition that perception involves thinking about, affective responding to, and enactive interaction with the world.²⁰ Once more, it requires moving on from the Enlightenment’s inadequate and misleading understanding of how the process of perceiving nature takes place.²¹

5. The realization that the process of human perception involves thinking about, affective responding to, and enactive interaction with the world leads to the rejection of purely cognitive approaches to natural theology. The Enlightenment regarded natural theology fundamentally as a sense-making exercise. In place of this inadequate account of perception, I argue that the so-called “Platonic triad” of truth, beauty and goodness offers a helpful heuristic framework for natural theology.²² This takes account of the rational, aesthetic and moral dimensions of the human engagement with nature.

6. Natural theology is therefore to be recognized as representing an important point of contact between the Christian church and secular culture, including the natural sciences, law, the arts, and literature. It can play an important apologetic role, not least in providing a navigable channel from human interest in the beauty of nature or the notion of the “transcendent” to the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”²³

This approach holds that natural theology is the process of engagement with nature that has its origins from within the Christian tradition, and which is guided and nourished by a Trinitarian vision of God. This allows nature to be “seen” as God’s creation, which resonates with how empirical reality is observed. The Christian tradition holds that nature possesses a derivative capacity to disclose something of God’s wisdom, without undermining or displacing divine revelation itself. It both legitimates

²⁰ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 80-110.

²¹ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 156-8.

²² For the general principle, see McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 221-31. For a more detailed discussion of truth and natural theology, see pp. 232-60; for beauty, see pp. 261-90; for goodness, see pp. 291-312.

²³ McGrath, *The Open Secret*, 23-40, 255-60, 282-90.

and encourages such an engagement in the first place, and in the second offers an intellectual framework through which what is observed may be understood and appreciated.

Furthermore, the Christian vision of God is such that the possible existence of this God cannot be treated as if it were a purely speculative hypothesis. Rather, natural theology emerges, authorized and resourced, from within the matrix of the ideas and habits of the Christian tradition. Thus the discerning reader of Thomas Aquinas notes that his articulation of a natural theology rests on his belief that there exists a propensity for knowledge of God within human nature, as we would expect if we were indeed the creatures of God, created antecedently ignorant of our true origin and end, but with the appetite and capacity to know and to advance in knowledge to the source and goal of all things.²⁴ Aquinas's rationale for natural theology is thus grounded and nourished by his vision of the human desire for knowledge, which leads to reflection on the human situation and its implications.

Engaging with the natural world from a trinitarian perspective encourages an expectation that nature can, in certain ways and to a certain extent, echo its origins and goal. From a trinitarian perspective, it is not simply nature itself that is fine-tuned; the believer's perception of nature can also be said to be fine-tuned, in that the Christian tradition mandates a certain attentiveness to nature and a heightened anticipation of disclosure, which permits its noise to be heard as a tune.²⁵

The grand themes of the Christian faith provide an interpretative framework by which nature may be seen, allowing it to be viewed and read in profound and significant ways. Christian theology is the elixir, the philosopher's stone,²⁶ which turns the mundane into the epiphanic, the world of nature into the realm of God's creation. Like a lens bringing a vast

²⁴ See the analysis in Lawrence Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God According to St. Thomas and His Interpreters* (Rome: Apollinare Studi, 2001).

²⁵ Michael Polanyi, "Science and Reality," *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 18 (1967): 177-96, especially 190-1.

²⁶ For historical contextualization of the idea of the gospel as the "philosopher's stone" that transmutes life, see Stanton J. Linden, *Darke hieroglyphicks: alchemy in English literature from Chaucer to the Restoration* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 154-92.

landscape into sharp focus, or a map helping us grasp the features of the terrain around us, Christian doctrine offers a new way of understanding, imagining and behaving. It invites us to see the natural order, and ourselves within it, in a special way – a way that might be hinted at, but cannot be confirmed by, the natural order itself. Nature is “seen” as God’s creation; the “book of nature” is read as God’s story – and ours. It is as if a veil has been lifted, or a bright sun has illuminated a mental landscape. And above all, it allows us to avoid the fatal fundamental error that is so often the foundation or consequence of a natural theology – namely, that divine revelation is essentially reduced to an awareness of an order already present in creation.²⁷

This account of natural theology goes beyond Torrance’s, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of beauty and goodness in a full account of natural theology.²⁸ Yet its foundations lie firmly in his approach, which I found to offer a robust and fruitful way of reconceptualizing the purpose and place of natural theology. This brief account of my own reflections on natural theology can thus be seen as a case study in the relevance and fecundity of Torrance’s theological vision.

I, like many others, found Torrance’s theological vision to possess an internal coherence and a capacity to engage the world of science and culture which far exceeded those of its rivals. It was a foundation on which I could build. I began my theological career entranced by the power of Karl Barth’s theological vision; I now find its potential still further enhanced by one of Barth’s leading interpreters, given a fresh capacity to engage with the questions raised by the natural sciences.

Yet I have spoken of Torrance primarily as if he were an academic theologian of distinction and utility. He is both these things, but he is more. So let me end on a slightly different note, to bring out this point. In 2009, I shall travel to Scotland to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the ancient

²⁷ For an excellent study of this danger, with special reference to recent Jewish writings on natural theology, see David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), especially 142-8.

²⁸ Torrance integrates beauty into his account of theology elsewhere: see, for example, Thomas F. Torrance, “The Transfinite Significance of Beauty in Science and Theology.” In *L’art, la science et la métaphysique: Études offertes à André Mercier*, edited by Luz García Alonso, Evangelos Moutsopoulos and Gerhard Seel (Berne: Peter Lang, 1993), 393-418.

University of Aberdeen. My topic will be natural theology, and my mentor will be Torrance.²⁹ While there, I hope to find some time to visit Beechgrove Parish Church, where Torrance served as minister from 1947-50, just before accepting the call to New College, Edinburgh, as Professor of Church History. Why? Partly to remind myself that Torrance was, for many years, a pastor and preacher – someone who sought to marry theology and ministry, dogmatics and proclamation. The fame of the theologian means that Torrance the pastor and preacher is too often forgotten. My hunch, however, is that his early parish ministry was the crucible within which much of his theology was forged, and its reliability and applicability tested.

At a time when theology often seemed to have a tenuous link with the life of the church, Torrance affirmed their organic unity, both in theory and in practice. I cannot help but feel that he offers guidance and inspiration to others, such as myself, who struggle to relate theology and ministry. Can one be an intellectually fulfilled theologian, and at the same time serve the churches and the Christian community? Torrance could and did, and offers us a theological vision to enable us to do the same.

²⁹ These will be published as Alister E. McGrath, *A Fine-Tuned Universe: The Quest for God in Science and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

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

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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 20th 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,¹ T. F. Torrance did write three extremely important books on the subject.² 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.³

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

¹ 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.

² 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).

³ 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."⁴

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!⁵ 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.⁶

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

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.⁸ 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).”⁹ 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

⁷ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 35.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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."¹⁰

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.¹¹

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."¹² 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

¹⁰ Torrance, *STR*, 70.

¹¹ 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.

¹² Torrance, *STR*, 42.

Christian Church in accepting the full implication of the resurrection of Christ."¹³ 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."¹⁴ 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).¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ Here also one can easily see why Torrance repeatedly stressed that there is no God behind the back of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹³ Torrance, *STR*, 43.

¹⁴ Torrance, *STR*, 43. See also Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 23ff.

¹⁵ Torrance, *STR*, 172.

¹⁶ Torrance, *STR*, 172.

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 199, 243.

¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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."²¹ 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 triunity 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.

²⁰ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 85.

²¹ 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."²² 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.²³

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

²² 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.

²³ 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.²⁴ 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*.”²⁵

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.”²⁶ 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

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 37.

²⁶ 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."²⁷

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."²⁸ 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."²⁹ 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."³⁰

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."³¹ This mutual knowing

²⁷ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 38.

²⁸ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 123.

²⁹ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

³⁰ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

³¹ 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.³²

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.”³³ 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.³⁴

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.

³² Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 59.

³³ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 60.

³⁴ 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 . . .³⁵

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."³⁶ This helps explain what Torrance meant when he asserted that "God loves us more than he loves himself."³⁷

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

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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.³⁹

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*.⁴⁰

³⁸ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 101ff.

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

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