

## JAMES TORRANCE: AN APPRECIATION

Alasdair Heron<sup>1</sup>

**Emeritus Professor of Theology, University of Erlangen**

Some twenty years ago a Divinity student in New College, Edinburgh, was driven close to distraction by the complexities of Christian Dogmatics. Another student brought her to James Torrance. He calmed her fears, answered her questions and showed her how to cope with the demands of the Dogmatics syllabus. That may appear nothing out of the ordinary — but I know what it meant for that student, for she is my wife and still today remembers with gratitude the trouble James Torrance was prepared to take to listen to her difficulties and to help her find a way through them. In our family James counts even today as something close to a saint for this reason alone!

These days are long past. My wife is no longer terrified of Dogmatics, has indeed learned from our daughters to treat the pretensions of theological professors with affectionate disrespect. The said daughters had a head-start not vouchsafed to their mother: they grew up in the home of a theological teacher and learned from infancy not to regard theologians as repositories of all wisdom and knowledge. Here too James played a part in the days when he and I were colleagues in New College in the seventies, not least by his willingness to take time off from serious academic work to entertain them, notably by drawing pictures of rabbits in patched trousers and chewing carrots in order to distract the rising generation from such creative pursuits as dismantling their father's bookcases, tearing up his papers or scribbling with crayons on the walls of his office.

Have such personal, even trivial reminiscences any place in an academic *Festschrift*? Not, perhaps, according to the normal pattern of this literary *genre*. That pattern would demand strict concentration on the properly academic

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1 Alasdair Heron had planned to write an essay for this special tribute volume to James Torrance, his professor, colleague and friend, but he died on May 7th 2014. We thank Jim Tedrick, managing editor of Wipf and Stock Publishers, for permission to reprint Heron's tribute in the James Torrance *Festschrift* (*Christ in our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, eds. Trevor Hart & Daniel Thimell, Pickwick Publications, 1-8).



— e.g. on the scientific character of James' work, the logic of his theological method, his contributions to the advancement of the logical thinking. Just such a concentration would, however, risk missing the real heart and core of his character and widespread influence. James Torrance is not and never was a cloistered academic, but a pastor, a guide for the perplexed, a man of faith whose goal and interest was above all the nurturing and guiding of others in the way of that same faith. Theological reflection, theological writing and theological teaching was for him firmly anchored in (and related to) the community of faith, a community far wider and broader than the purely academic. Theology as he understands and practices it is both existential and ecclesiastical. It is not merely a matter of dusty books or rarified ideas or brilliant theories; it is a personal quest and responsibility in the service of the church, and as such involves not only the mind but also the heart of the theological teacher. It requires and demands *integrity* of the sort portrayed in the metrical version of Psalm 15:

The man that walketh uprightly,  
And worketh righteousness,  
And as he thinketh in his heart,  
So doth he truth express.

James Torrance is a highly qualified and experienced academic theologian, but he is more than that. He is an honest man, an honourable man, and a Christian man. These are not merely academic qualities; they are of even greater worth. "A king can mak' a belted knight . . . An honest man's abune his might" (Burns). We do not need the warnings of McDiarmid's drunkard regarding the thistle to appreciate beyond all couthy Scots sentimentality, the value of an honest man in a Chair of Theology. That is what King's College in Aberdeen has been privileged to have in these last years — not a time-server, not a self-advertiser, not a crafty manipulator of university or ecclesiastical politics, but an honest, honourable Christian man who cares for the Church and for the students who flocked to him from all over the world, and whose academic work is pursued in order to take up and deal with the issues presenting themselves in that setting as requiring attention.

Where, then, do the roots of James Torrance's theology lie? What has made him such a valued, appreciated and beloved colleague and teacher? The answer lies first of all in the man himself. He is a man so mastered by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that he lives from the evangelical message of forgiveness and reconciliation. That is his daily bread, the air he breathes, the substance and

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tenor of his teaching. He has not, so far as I am aware, written any hymns;<sup>2</sup> but had he done so, they would have been similar to George Matheson's or George Herbert's:

Teach me, my God and King  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for thee.

O love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;  
I give thee back the life I owe,  
That in thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

James Torrance has the rare gift of enabling the simplest parishioners, the most perplexed theological students to sense that they are fledglings destined and called to fly in the atmosphere of the eternal grace of God. The warm humanity of his personality is not only a natural gift; it is the radiation of conviction, the conviction of one who knows himself to be constrained by the love of Christ and can therefore do none other than express and convey this witness to others as both claim and liberation.

Had James Torrance done nothing more than impressed this message on successive generations of theological students, he would have made an abiding contribution. But he has done more. He has fostered and encouraged pioneering research in the history of Scottish theology, not least with the aim of uncovering and disposing of the clouds of melancholic fatalism, of resignation and determinism, which even today shadow our Scottish Reformed heritage. A whole series of doctoral dissertations undertaken under his supervision witness to his activity in this field, as do his own published writings, which are very largely concerned with reviewing and correcting aspects of the traditional Scottish Reformed theology and showing the difference between the teaching of Calvin and what later developed as "Calvinism." That he has more than once been publicly attacked by would-be "Calvinists" of a conservative sort is an indication of what sensitive nerves he has struck — though his aim in striking them was never to wound but to heal; to allow the power of the Gospel to shatter the fetters

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<sup>2</sup> *Editor's Note:* James Torrance did indeed write a hymn, *I know not how to pray*, which is referred to elsewhere in this volume and can be found in full in *A Passion for Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry* by the brothers Thomas, James and David Torrance (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1999, p.53).

of rigorism and legalism which the deeply religious are particularly inclined to fasten on themselves and on others.

The nerve of his teaching is perhaps best caught in a series of antitheses which he has constantly reiterated and impressed on his students through nigh on thirty years: *Gospel* rather than *Law*; *evangelical* rather than *legal* repentance; the *indicative* of grace as prior to the *imperative* of obedience; the primacy of the question "who is Jesus Christ?" over the question "what has Jesus Christ done for us?" The combined impact of these antitheses was accurately grasped by a group of students in New College, Edinburgh, in the mid-seventies in a mildly satirical "Prayer for JBT" which ended: "Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is in column one as well as column three." The hidden reference for the initiate is to James' well-known diagram — a diagram which he not only laid out on the blackboard in many a class, but was also ever-ready to sketch out afresh ("have you seen my diagram?") on the back of an envelope drawn from his filing-cabinet in the inside breast-pocket of his jacket. The point of this diagram, reduced to its simplest essential terms, is that the primary and all-determining reality with which we have to reckon is God's good favour towards us, signed and sealed in Jesus Christ as the love with which we are loved from before the foundation of the world (column one). The imperative of God Law, God's demands upon us — column two — depends on the primary indicative; and the message of reconciliation — column three — does not introduce Jesus Christ for the *first* time simply as the answer to our failure to fulfill the Law, but returns to him as the Alpha and Omega on whom indicative and imperative alike depend, for in his incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection all the purposes and promises of God are once and for all gathered up and put into effect, "for us and our salvation."

In this emphasis and this shaping of the horizons of rising generations of theological students, James Torrance made no claim to be "original" or to break fresh ground in academic theology. He was concerned far more to bear witness to the abiding foundation of all Christian faith as the promise leading us forward to the Kingdom of God. In this, he belongs firmly in the main-line tradition of Scottish academic theology — a tradition which has by and large concentrated more on the paedagogical responsibility of university teacher than on demanding academic originality from him, much less making original research achievements the primary criterion for university appointments. This tradition can be and has been criticized as failing to encourage in Scotland the kind of untrammelled interest in pure thought which has been the glory of modern German theology. The criticism may not be entirely unjustified, but the warning of H. R. Mackintosh in a famous and much quoted remark more than a half century ago also deserves to

be heeded: "Theology is created in Germany, corrupted in America and corrected in Scotland." The remark of the Czech theologian Josef Hromadka also comes to mind: after he had studied in more than one German faculty of theology, it was when he came to study in Aberdeen with the elder Professor David Cairns that he "found the solid ground of the Church under his feet." Theological work needs its outriders and pioneers; it will in any case find numerous misinterpreters and distorters, in America and elsewhere; Scotland's contribution may well still be that of a solid common-sense, of a reorientation towards what really matters. It is no disgrace if Scottish theology is primarily concerned with the *corrective* and *stabilizing* task, with helping students to find the solid ground of the Gospel and the Church under their feet.

To draw this out a little further; there are at least three distinct tasks which present themselves to a teacher of Systematic Theology today. The first is that of *edification*, the straight-forward education of students who need to be informed, challenged and strengthened in their Christian theological commitment. This demands a high degree of personal engagement on the part of their teachers, of contact and exchange between teachers and students. It involves an intensive *pastoral* responsibility of the teacher. Our Scottish tradition of theological education has rightly placed this as the first priority on the agenda of our Divinity Faculties. The Divinity Faculty is first and foremost a "school of faith," not merely a talking-shop for the batting-around of ideas good, bad or indifferent. The tenant of a Chair of Systematic Theology in a Scottish Divinity Faculty has a special opportunity and responsibility to influence the ideas, the self-understanding and the professional goals of his students. This pastoral and paedagogical task has its own special evangelical and missionary importance, not least because of its essentially *personal* nature.

I have been privileged to see at first hand and from various sides how splendidly James Torrance has filled this role over a good quarter of a century, first in Edinburgh, then in Aberdeen. First as a student, later as a colleague in Edinburgh, later still as an external examiner in Aberdeen I could never fail to notice his genuine care for his students and his paedagogical concern that they grasp the fundamentals of the matter. In teaching he is visibly concerned to *communicate* — which is by no means always the case with University teachers who sometimes can seem to be conducting a private dialogue with their material, a dialogue for which the presence of hearers is quite incidental. But then — and there is a direct connection — James Torrance was a preacher before he became a lecturer or professor, and he approaches his teaching with the same seriousness with which he approaches his sermons. It can often enough happen

that theological students in the course of their classes suddenly begin to wonder what the material they are studying really has to do with their future vocation as ministers; in James Torrance's classes the question generally does not need to be asked because the connections and implications are apparent. Those who do not recognize them for themselves will have them pointed out anyway!

The second task is that of encouraging *theological research* in the form of independent study, especially at honours and postgraduate level. This research is by its nature generally historical in character, inquiring into the shaping and articulation of theological themes in the more or less recent past on the principle that cutting one's teeth on such history is the appropriate continuation of what has been learned at undergraduate level and the best preparation for theological work in the future. At this level, the teacher is less an *edifier* than a *supervisor*, responsible for guiding the work by advice and criticism whose intention is to bring the student to the point where he can engage independently in his own constructive work, where indeed he can discern for himself what questions arise out of the material and find ways of resolving them. The special character of such research work, properly undertaken, lies in the fact that it cannot simply be programmed in advance; the methods and results have to emerge through genuine first-hand engagement with the material on the part of the student. The supervisor has the role of *critical enabler* who accompanies the work without seeking to dominate it or to determine in advance what conclusions ought to be reached.

A glance at the statistics of the Aberdeen Divinity Faculty over the last decade can show how popular it has become as a centre for postgraduate study, not least for students from overseas. These postgraduate students, so important for the life of a faculty, are not all working in Systematic Theology — but a goodly number of them are. Nor can there be any doubt that James Torrance's own travels and contacts through the years have been responsible for many of those students coming to Aberdeen.

The third task is that of *critical and constructive theological rethinking*. James Torrance's main concern and interest here has been in the history of Scottish theology, especially in the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition of Federal Calvinism. While he has published less than many of us would wish — and hope that he yet will do — his articles in this field deserve to be required reading in any course on the history of Scottish theology, covering as they do such central themes as the teaching of the *Westminster Confession*, the controversy around 1720 concerning *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, the notion of the Covenant and the work of John McLeod Campbell. Not that this is his only field of interest

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— he has, if I see aright, published on those topics because of his awareness of the issues arising are of direct contemporary relevance as well, especially in the Scottish context — for his teaching ranges much more widely with special emphasis on the lessons of the development of modern theology since the Enlightenment for fundamental principles of theological method, and on the interface between theology on the one hand and philosophy, ethics and politics on the other.

Yet another aspect of James' work deserves to be highlighted: he is not merely a theological teacher but also an active and committed Churchman contributing at many levels to the theological work of the Church as well as the University. The Church of Scotland's Panel on Doctrine, the Scottish Church Society and the Church Service Society have all drawn on his time and talents, as have the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the British Council of Churches. The value and demands of such contributions are often not widely known or recognized; all the more reason to emphasize them here.

But to return to the point where we began: in James Torrance we do not seek to honour simply the professor or the member of Church committees or the far-travelled ambassador for his faculty in Aberdeen. We honour the man who in such fair fashion integrates all these capacities and qualities, activities and achievements. For myself, I wish to pay tribute to a respected teacher to whom I myself owe so much, a colleague with whom it has always been a delight to work, and a friend. It is hard to believe that one so youthful and energetic is now approaching retirement age; I am certainly not alone in hoping that a certain increase of leisure will give him occasion and opportunity to distill the fruits of his experience and studies in future publications.