

THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE THEOLOGY OF T. F. TORRANCE¹

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It has sometimes been remarked that the two most formidable personalities of British theology in the twentieth century were Donald MacKinnon and Tom Torrance. In an obituary notice, John Webster spoke of the theological intensity of Torrance being matched only by the bleak genius of MacKinnon.² They displayed many similarities — the rigor of their scholarship, wide-ranging erudition, a commitment to the traditions of the church, and theological seriousness. In other respects, however, MacKinnon and Torrance functioned quite differently. MacKinnon's influence was probably most keenly felt through the example of his teaching. He shaped a generation of theologians, especially during his Cambridge years, through the questions he tackled, the commitments he displayed, and a searching interrogative method that resisted any easy or bland closure to intractable problems. Torrance was no less demanding, but I would judge that his longer-term influence on the discipline has been facilitated more by his publications than his teaching. Having been somewhat eclipsed in the years after his retirement, his work in the last decade has attracted renewed attention from a younger generation of scholars, particularly in North America and Asia. The success of the T. F. Torrance Theological Fellowship and its electronic journal are indicators of the growth of interest. This has been further facilitated by the posthumous publication of two large volumes

1 Lecture delivered to the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship at the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, November, 2010.

2 John Webster, "Editorial," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 4 (2008): 369–71 (371).



of his New College lectures at a surprisingly affordable price, and for this we are heavily indebted to the years of labor invested by Bob Walker, Torrance's nephew. In the meantime, the Torrance archive has now been cataloged and opened for study in Princeton, a substantial resource that future students of his work will no doubt wish to explore.

My subject is Torrance's theology of the ascension. It is one to which he returned in various places and about which he had more to say than most modern theologians. His devotion to this topic is indicative of several features of his theology: it registers the impact of both local and ecumenical influences on his work; it expresses his commitment both to Christian dogmatics and theological science; and finally it enables us to identify not only his indebtedness to Karl Barth but also one of his two most critical departures from Barth's theology.

The ascension has been a minor if persistent note in the church's Christology, often closely linked with the theology of the resurrection. In modern times, it has suffered neglect owing to several factors. The assimilation of earlier accounts of the ascension to a Ptolemaic worldview led to some skepticism in a post-Copernican age. The heaven of Scripture could no longer be understood as spatially related to this world by virtue of its position at the outer reaches of the cosmos. This generated a problem for any notion of the body of Jesus going somewhere along a spatial trajectory at a time subsequent to the resurrection. For Schleiermacher, to cite one example, this required a deflated account of the ascension as adding nothing significant to the doctrines of the person and work of Jesus. His disciples experienced his significance independently of their awareness of the ascension.³ Later, in the nineteenth century, this skeptical reading of the ascension would be compounded by historical criticism of the New Testament with a recognition that resurrection, ascension, and exaltation are generally conflated in the New Testament, except for the later formulaic history of Luke-Acts with its more stylized forty-day interval between the two events (at least in those narratives that link the Gospel and its sequel). Only here is the ascended event foregrounded and with a reticence and sobriety that make this quite unlike later apocryphal descriptions and artistic depictions of Christ's rising from the dead and soaring through the air. Rudolf Bultmann had

3 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 2:417–18.

little hesitation in assigning New Testament accounts of the ascension to his capacious category of "myth."¹

Other writers, however, adopt a more cautious and positive approach, recognizing both that we are here at the very limits of human speech and knowledge but that nevertheless substantive claims about the identity of the risen Christ in relation to God and the church are at stake in the creedal affirmation that "he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." Most recently, Robert Jenson has posed the question, "What happened to the body?" If we affirm that the tomb was empty and that an embodied Christ appeared to his followers, we have the residual problem of what we should say about where that body went. Jenson's subtle but recognizably Lutheran response is that the risen Christ as God had the capacity to be available everywhere and that it is in the body of the church and especially its eucharistic elements that his bodily presence is now to be found.² The ascension, therefore, although closed to speculative enquiry, is vital to the shape of Christian faith and to the role of Christ as an active subject in the life of the church and the world. We will return to this account later.

Karl Barth of course stands at the forefront of this recent constructive reception of the ascension. It is a necessary article, which brings to completion the movement of Christ's earthly ministry while also providing a proper account of its relationship to the life of the church. This is particularly apparent in the language of Ephesians. The work of Christ having been perfected, he is exalted to the heavenly places. Yet this is not merely the conclusion to a story and the signaling of the absence of his bodily presence in its previous form. His ascension is also the enabling condition for his presence to his followers across time and space. He ascended on high that he might fill all things.

Although one cannot specify the event of the ascension or the position of the ascended subject without recourse to highly symbolic language, it occupies a vital place in thinking about the eternal location of the risen Christ and his

1 Rudolf Bultmann, "The New Testament and Mythology," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2.

2 Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1:205.

significance for the life of the church in the world until the parousia. In this respect, the ascension connects Christology with ecclesiology, the Christian life and eschatology, although the manner in which this connection is understood varies. Barth notes that while the resurrection as a narrated event draws us backward and downward into the story of Jesus, so the ascension directs us upward and forward. Like the empty tomb, the ascension is a sign, albeit one that is contested and ambiguous, perhaps even more than the empty grave. However, by this sign we apprehend something of what it mysteriously signifies. Jesus does not embark on a journey into outer space but enters a side of the created world that is for the moment inaccessible to us. From there, he lives and acts in the mode of God, so that the side of created reality that we call heaven is not forever closed to us.³

In what follows, I shall argue that Torrance's theology of the ascension is one of the richest treatments of the subject in modern theology and that while it shares much with Barth, Torrance develops it in ways that take his theology decisively beyond and away from some convictions of his Basel teacher. Here more than anywhere else, we are faced with significant adjustments to Barth's theology, despite the many similarities. While Torrance ventured the hope that Barth might just have approved of his reintegration of natural theology within the parameters set by divine self-revelation, he seems to harbor no such illusion about a final rapprochement on the doctrines of church, sacraments, and ministry, all of which are crucially related to his account of the ascension.

The doctrine of the ascension has featured prominently in the Scottish Reformed tradition. Torrance notes its significance in the theology of John Knox, particularly in a eucharistic context, and in Robert Bruce's sermons on the Lord's Supper, which he edited. One effect of this stress on the ascension is to provide a strong sense of the work of Christ and its eucharistic reception as a bright rather than a dark mystery. The work of Christ neither begins nor ends on the cross; rather, it is a function of his person as the living and active Word of God. In his ascended existence, therefore, it continues, although his relative absence from our midst requires a constant reference to the Gospel record and the eternal significance of that once-for-all work. Torrance particularly stresses the liturgical

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, ed. and trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 453–54.

and sacramental significance of the ascension, a view that is adumbrated in William Milligan's late-nineteenth-century study on the priestly ministry of the exalted Christ.

Torrance was a longstanding member of the Scottish Church Society, founded in the late Victorian period by leading figures such as Milligan, John McLeod, and James Cooper.⁴ The goals of the society included a more Catholic reading of the Reformed tradition that sought liturgical renewal, frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper, and a Calvinist (as opposed to a Zwinglian) account of sacramental grace and the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements. It is this configuration of influences that enabled Torrance to move beyond Karl Barth in some important respects. In particular, his commitment to the ministry of the ascended Christ made present by the Holy Spirit led to a stronger ecclesiology, sacramentalism, and eschatology than we find in Barth himself. This is apparent in works such as *Royal Priesthood* and also in those mild criticisms he ventures of Barth. In recalling their last conversation, he wrote,

I then ventured to express my qualms about his account of the ascended Jesus Christ in CD IV/3, in which Christ seemed to be swallowed up in the transcendent Light and Spirit of God, so that the humanity of the risen Jesus appeared to be displaced by what he had called "the humanity of God" in his turning toward us. I had confessed to being astonished not to find at that point in Barth's exposition a careful account of the priestly ministry of the ascended Jesus in accordance with the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews about the heavenly intercession of the ascended Christ.⁵

Torrance's theology of the ascension is set out in chapter 9 of *Atonement* and chapters 5–6 of *Space, Time and Resurrection*. These texts are almost identical,

4 See William Milligan, *The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1894).

5 T.F. Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 62. Torrance's theology of the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ informs his treatment of ordination in *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955). The book is dedicated "To the Church of England, the church of my mother and my wife, and to the Church of Scotland, the church of my father, in the earnest prayer that they may soon be one." A second edition was published in 1993.

save for the more extensive footnoting in the latter. We can conclude from this that the latter volume, published in 1976, was based on New College lectures that he had developed over many years. Here the ascension is treated as a discrete event to be distinguished from the resurrection, although closely related to it. Torrance speaks of “the ascension event” — this is the title of chapter 6 in *Space, Time and Resurrection*, although elsewhere he refers to “the fusion of resurrection with the ascension in one indivisible exaltation.”⁶ The ascension is not the conclusion of Christ’s ministry, a resting place from which his completed work can be viewed passively. While the ascent completes a pattern or movement that began with the descent of the Son of God, it does not signal the ending of the work of Christ. Instead, we should view the ascension as the commencement of his kingly ministry, which now moves forward in anticipation of his parousia. This kingly ministry does not exclude priestly and prophetic elements, but in setting the context in which these are exercised it consequently assumes a priority in the order of exposition.⁷

The one who ascends is not the disincarnate Son of God but the one who is also called Son of Man and Lamb of God.⁸ So the ascension, for all that we must speak of its mystery in language heavily laden with symbolism, is not the ascension of one whose humanity is shed like an outworn garment. The spiritualizing of the event that we find in Origen is to be avoided at all costs. The exalted Christ is one who has a human identity that continues to be determined by his saving work. Expounding the Epistle to the Hebrews, Torrance argues that Christ exercises a priesthood that transcends Old Testament types both in offering his life as a perfect sacrifice to God and in becoming as true God a priest for us. This dual aspect of his priesthood is “hypostatically united in his own person.”⁹

It is of course quite difficult to present this notion of heavenly priesthood without appearing to lapse into an anthropomorphic or even Arian account of the

6 T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 270.

7 *Ibid.*, 265.

8 *Ibid.*, 270.

9 *Ibid.*, 273.

Father-Son relationship, as if the ascended Christ were a unique member of the heavenly council, a kind of chief executive whose function was to plead celestially on our behalf with the chairman of the board.¹⁰ The imagery is risky here, but Torrance is quite adamant that if we properly integrate the person and work of Christ, then we have to commit to expressing such notions, hazardous though they are and prone to misinterpretation. His point is that the ascended Christ is the same acting subject who is with us and for us in all that he does. He does not cease to be our advocate upon his ascension, but he must be understood as exercising this function in a different mode. His work is never detachable from descriptions of his person, and therefore with the ascension of his person we must continue to think of his action as continuing, albeit in the enactment of the eternal significance of his once-for-all work in history. Elsewhere Torrance speaks more elusively about there now being space and time within the life of God for our human condition. In God's eternal life, God is always and only for us, as we have found God to be revealed in the life of Jesus. The human face of God is real and eternal — there is no God behind God, nothing inscrutable, passive and remote in the divine life.

In a similar manner, just as Christ's priestly ministry must be presented as a continuing ministry enabled by his ascension and royal enthronement, so too his prophetic ministry continues in a different mode. Now, as Christ is absent from his disciples, they proclaim him as Lord. This proclamation, however, is one in which Christ is not only object but also subject. The church speaks of him, but in this action *he* speaks through the church to the world. In other words, through the Spirit, Christ himself is present and active in the church's kerygma. In the ministry of proclamation, Christ, as the true Word of God, is again heard. Similarly, in the Eucharist, Christ as our incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord becomes sacramentally visible and tangible. Torrance speaks of those "pledges of his body and blood which he puts into our hands that with them we might appear before the Father."¹¹

Torrance presents the ascension both as an event subsequent to the resurrection and also as a state of the exalted Christ. In describing this, Torrance

10 Torrance himself uses this image of the chief executive. *Ibid.*, 273.

11 *Ibid.*, 276.

is insistent that we cannot think of an immaterial or disembodied subject. The ascension is not an exercise in learning to think of Christ apart from his incarnate condition, although in avoiding this we are taken into difficult conceptual territory. Here he commits himself to the *extra Calvinisticum*, arguing that it is the settled view of patristic and Reformed theology that the Word of God through whom all things were created became a human creature while never ceasing to be the Creator Word by whom all things continue to have their being. The Lutheran view, despite its legitimate intention to safeguard the incarnation, is committed to a receptacle view of space as a container of bodies. This led both to a kenotic view of the self-emptying of divine omnipresence on the part of the incarnate Word, or else in the case of the risen Christ, to an extension of the receptacle containing his body to include all space. Hence there emerges the idea of the ubiquity of Christ's body with its attendant danger of monophysitism. In modern Lutheranism, these metaphysical problems are resolved by recourse to a strategy of demythologizing. Here Torrance appears to draw a dotted line from Luther to Bultmann.

In order to think adequately of the person of Jesus Christ, we have to hold together his identity as the eternal Son of God and as a human creature of space and time. This twinning of eternal transcendence and particular location becomes especially difficult with respect to thinking of the ascended Christ. It is the converse of the problem of the incarnation. Instead of thinking of how the human Jesus of Nazareth could simultaneously have been the eternal Son, we must now conceive of this Jesus primarily as the transcendent Son but without ceasing to regard him as a human being. This can best be achieved, Torrance suggests, by a relational view of space and time. Here he draws on relativity theory, although he uses this only analogically to describe the relation of God to space-time. Time and space are not absolute containers, independent of the objects they happen to contain. Instead, they are functions of those principles or forces that by their actions define their form. Although space-time in a four-dimensional continuum does not determine the identity and activity of God, nevertheless we should speak of "the 'place' and 'time' of God in terms of his own eternal life and his eternal purpose in the divine love, where he wills his life and love to overflow to us whom he has made to share with him his life and love."¹² The divine life itself provides

12 *Ibid.*, 290.

the coordinates or framework that can situate God's actions in eternity, just as the space-time continuum of the created world is a framework relative to creaturely events and forces. In the latter, we can assign a historical date and place to the life of Jesus. In the former, we must think of the place and activity of the ascended Christ. (Torrance also distinguishes here between fallen and unfallen space-time, although it is not clear how far this really takes us.)

This has two important theological consequences, which lie at the heart of Torrance's doctrine of the ascension and which are vital to the Christian life. On the one side, we must think of there always being room for humanity in the life of God. This is one important way of understanding the symbolism of the ascended Christ seated at the right hand of the Father. Our humanity is accommodated in the life of God — it is neither too remote nor mysterious nor self-sufficient to lack a place there. This space for humanity in the life of God is accomplished and announced by the work of Jesus. An interesting feature of this is the way in which Torrance handles the concept of heaven. For Torrance, heaven is not an empty or partially inhabited space into which the ascended Jesus is admitted. Instead, the shape or form that heaven takes is itself determined by the action of the ascended Lord. Again the language is apocalyptic and baffling, but it signals the intention to think of heaven as Christ-shaped, as ensuring a place in the eternal life of God for creatures. Torrance commends the article on the ascension of Christ in *Sacramentum Mundi* written by Joseph Ratzinger. "What the 'Ascension' tells us about heaven is that it is the dimension of divine and human fellowship which is based on the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. Henceforth it designates the 'place' (in the strictly ontological sense) in which man can have eternal life."¹³ Torrance cites Ratzinger with approval perhaps also because of his criticism of Bultmann's demythologizing of the ascension.

On the other side, we must also think of God's activity toward the world as that of the ascended Christ. This is a ubiquitous action (even though we cannot think of the ubiquity of a body) since Christ is now the presence of God for the world. The ascension represents the withdrawal of one mode of presence for the enabling of another one. It is now a differentiated sign of absence and presence. And since this is the action of the incarnate Son of God now ascended,

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 1, 110, cited in Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 130.

we are referred always to his once-for-all historical work as the enactment of his identity and mission. This is a further implication of the refusal to immaterialize the ascension of Christ. The Son of God is not now detached from a rootedness in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, the ongoing action of the ascended Christ carries a constant reference to the Gospels. "All contact with the majesty of God as of the glorified Lord is in and through the crucified one."¹⁴ To speak further of this, we have recourse to the language of Word and Spirit. It is the outpouring of the Spirit that links the ascended Christ to his people and also binds us to the Word, by which his presence is ever thereafter mediated.¹⁵ The ascended Christ is thus indispensably related to history by virtue of his person and work. His eternal humanity prevents any abstracting of his identity from that of the Gospel record of his earthly life, death, and resurrection. We cannot, in other words, think of God without reference to Jesus.

Together the resurrection and ascension also have an eschatological reference. This is clear from the New Testament, in which the appearance of the risen Jesus is an eschatological sign, foretaste, and down payment of the general resurrection of the dead. His exaltation is part of a movement that will culminate in his final reign over all things in heaven and on earth. Jesus' resurrection is not a private event for himself alone. It has a corporate character that heralds a new age in which his kingship will be universally acknowledged and accomplished. However, the ascension not only signifies this coming reign of Christ with the parousia, but it also generates a kind of hiatus in which Christ's full reign is deferred for the time being. Torrance speaks about the ascension's introducing "an eschatological pause,"¹⁶ a prolonged time of waiting and hoping in anticipation of the fully manifested reign of Christ. In the meantime, the mission of the church in history is to be carried out. The space in which this is to be undertaken is made possible by the ascension, in particular with the interruption that it introduces between the first and the second advents of Christ.

Nevertheless, this "space" created by the eschatological pause in our time is not a vacuum. It is not that Christ has emptied the world of his presence, leaving

14 Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 293.

15 *Ibid.*, 294.

16 *Ibid.*, 303.

us alone for the time being, as if creating a hollow in the landscape that is to be filled instead by the action of the church. The ministry of Christ continues in ascended mode, particularly in the set of relations that are established in church, sacraments, and ministry. So we now have three set of relations that are established by the ascension: the historical relation to Jesus of Nazareth as he is attested in Scripture; the eschatological relation to the final, perfected reality of Christ; and the sacramental relation of the church to the crucified and risen Christ in the time between the ascension and the parousia.

Torrance's treatment of the ascension is replete with doxological and sacramental references. Indeed, a theology of church, sacraments, and ministry emerges from this rendition of the ascension that might fairly be described as both Reformed and catholic, affirming a sacramental relation between the church as the body of Christ and Christ as the head of that body. "As king and head of the church, Christ has instituted the ministry of word and sacrament within history, whereby he continually nourishes, sustains, orders and governs his people on earth."¹⁷ Within the royal priesthood of the whole church, some are set apart for a distinctive ministry of word and sacrament. They are ministers, not priests, but the office they hold is necessary to the life and well-being of Christ's church. It is here that Christ's own ministry continues. In this respect, the church is a divine institution always pointing not to its own significance but to that of Christ. The ascension is not a resting place for the Son of God but is rather the locus of God's continuing and unceasing activity.

As we have already noted, Torrance makes extensive reference in this context to the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This is vital to an understanding of the doxological and sacramental life of the church, which is continuous with the work of Christ, yet in a relationship that is marked both by distinction and dependence. Here Torrance treads a careful path between those views that detach the work of Christ from the life of the church (attributed to sectarian traditions on the evangelical wing of the church) and other views that fail to distinguish with sufficient clarity between the work of Christ and that of his church. Roman Catholicism is here his main target with its notion of the church as the extension of the incarnation or as part of the *totus Christus*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

Torrance's commitment to a strong christological view of worship and the sacraments determines his doctrine of the ascension. Worship is an action in which the ascended Christ is not only the object but also the subject. It is a performative event in which the exalted Lord is present in and with our glorifying of God. Writing in *Scottish Theology*, he observes that the ascension and advent of Christ is a distinctive feature of John Knox's thought in the sixteenth century and that Knox restored them to a central place in the eucharistic liturgy. "Ascension introduced the 'distance' between the symbols of bread and wine on earth and the ascended Christ, but nevertheless a 'distance' bridged by the real presence of the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit. Hence the place of the *sursum corda* in the heart of the Reformed Eucharistic Rite — the ascension with Christ became of primary importance again: we are made to sit with Christ in the heavenly places."¹⁸

This high sacramental theology is a pervasive theme in Torrance's writings, and it is generally associated with his doctrine of the ascension. Baptism is the sacrament of our once-for-all participation in Christ, whereas the Lord's Supper is that of our continuous participation, these two corresponding to our justification and sanctification and expressing our relationship with the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord.¹⁹ In maintaining the sacramental nature of our participation in Christ, Torrance typically appeals not so much to early church tradition, although he is able to draw on this, but to the ministry of Jesus and the practice of ancient Israel. In his revision of Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick's *Manual of Church Doctrine*, he introduces a new section on the sacraments of the Old Testament, in which he characterizes the "sacraments" of circumcision and Passover as marking out the "covenanted sphere of union and communion with God," and as constituting divinely appointed ordinances that extend to the people of God a promise of blessing and salvation for all nations.²⁰ Within the ministry of Jesus, table fellowship, the eschatological

18 T.F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From Knox to McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 40.

19 *Ibid.*, 307–8.

20 H.J. Wotherspoon and J.M. Kirkpatrick, *A Manual of Church Doctrine* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 13.

imagery of the banquet, the feeding of the multitude, the Last Supper, and the breaking of bread at Emmaus all point to a sacramental continuation of his ministry in the life of the church. Hence that historical work of Christ, to which the ascension refers us, also carries the promise of the ongoing presence and action of Jesus among his people.²¹

Torrance here carefully maps the relations between the actions of Christ and those of the church. While positioning himself within the Reformed tradition, Torrance is at pains to stress the ecumenical and catholic dimension of that tradition. This is evident, for example, in *Royal Priesthood*, where, in relating the ministry of the church to that of Christ, he sets down two governing principles.²² (1) There can be no relation of identity between the actions of Christ and the church. A distinction has to be maintained that prioritizes the once-for-all work of Christ. (2) The ministry of the Church is not another ministry different from that of Christ and separable from it. The church engages in the ministry of Christ in a manner that is appropriate to its derivative status as his body. Conversely, Christ continues his ministry in the church but in a manner that is appropriate to his identity as its head and Lord, as the one who was baptized in the Jordan for us and who gave his life as a ransom for many. The ascension thus signifies an ongoing ministry, but one that has a constant reference to the historical *eph hapax*.

George Hunsinger has helpfully written about Torrance's mapping of these relations in his recent study of the Eucharist. There is one priestly sacrifice of Christ in two temporal forms. He writes that the "Eucharistic form here and now participates in, manifests, and attests the incarnational form of the sacrifice there and then."²³ What takes place is neither a repetition nor a wholly different type of activity, but something that must be understood in terms of participation, manifestation, and witness to that upon which it is dependent and to which it constantly returns.

21 See T.F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 2:135.

22 T.F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955), 38.

23 George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151–52.

From what has been set out here, it is clear that Torrance's theology of the ascension is somewhat different from that of Barth, even though much of the thrust of his teacher's theology is apparent — for example, the positive appropriation of ascension language over against strategies of demythologizing, the prioritizing of the once-for-all work of Christ, the integration of his person and work, and the enabling condition of the ascension for church proclamation. Where the difference resides is in the stress on the doxological and sacramental significance of the eternal ministry of the ascended Christ. It is evident that Torrance sees himself as filling a lacuna in Barth's thought or perhaps adjusting its trajectory in some significant ways. In a short essay in the *Expository Times* in 1955, Torrance offers a very positive appropriation of Barth's theology but concludes with some interesting comments.²⁴ He states that if he were asked to venture his main criticism of Barth he would say that he requires a more adequate doctrine of the Spirit alongside a clearer exposition of our living union with Jesus Christ. This weakness informs his "strange view of Baptism"²⁵ and reflects a gap in much Continental thought between scientific theology and worship. What we are offered in Torrance's doctrine of the ascension is therefore an important work of repair. While maintaining a characteristically Reformed stress on the once-for-all work of Christ, he seeks to offer an account of worship, church, and sacraments that recovers the best insights of the ecumenical traditions of the church.

Recent critics such as Nicholas Healy and Reinhard Hütter have complained that Barth's ecclesiology creates too much of a disjunction between the completed work of Christ and the actual life of the church. Torrance's work, it seems to me, is not vulnerable to this criticism yet prevents any dissolution or spiritualizing of the risen identity of Jesus, or a blurring of the lines between Christ and the church. Here his dogmatic instincts remain essentially correct. A Lutheran critic might see his relational account of space and time as obscuring rather than resolving the fundamental problem of what we can say happened to the body of Jesus. In this respect, Jenson's proposal is cleaner and neater in some respects. Nevertheless, while positioning himself in territory that is difficult to describe

24 T.F. Torrance, "Karl Barth," *Expository Times* 66 (1955): 205–9.

25 *Ibid.*, 209.

satisfactorily, Torrance is right to resist any assimilation of the body of Christ to that of the church or the Eucharist. Such a view generates further (Hegelian) problems at the expense of resolving a metaphysical conundrum. Better perhaps to admit that our language and imagination break down at this juncture than to seek a premature closure on grounds of epistemological simplicity that will destabilize other elements of theological discourse.

Nevertheless, despite issuing occasional warnings, Torrance perhaps underplays the extent to which our discourse is inevitably tentative, broken, and provisional in this area of dogmatic thought. The apparent resolution of problems may be too premature in places. This may largely be a matter of style or temperament, or conversely the perception of someone who today occupies the less self-confident setting of Christian theology in a more plural context. Yet it is instructive to follow the more measured tone of Hans Frei when writing of the ascended humanity in a commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles. "It is well to understand this powerful assertion religiously rather than metaphysically, for metaphysical schemes, like myths, change but the Word of God abides. In his eternal rule Jesus Christ maintains that solidarity with us that he established in the days of his flesh. That is the point of this matter."²⁶ There is a simplicity and caution here that may not always be apparent in Torrance.

More troubling is the relative absence of the ethical and political significance of the ascension, not least given its greater prominence in Barth. For Torrance, the divine-human relation tends to be largely a private one, although his strong sense of the corporate nature of worship might have taken him in a different direction. Only occasionally does he give hints about the wider sociopolitical significance of the ascension — for example, we are told that we cannot be pessimistic about the world since it is loved by Christ. Yet the important relations and movements in Torrance are, as it were, vertical rather than horizontal. His occasional excursions into Christian ethics tend to be confined to areas of private rather than social morality — for example, marriage and abortion. There is little about social justice, human equality, or the peaceable kingdom. The focus is generally doxological rather than ethical, whereas the royal Psalms and Jesus' teaching of the kingdom point to ways in which these can be integrated. In this

²⁶ Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 205–6.

MAIN ARTICLES

respect, Nicholas Wolterstorff's writings on the ethical and political dimensions of the Reformed liturgy and Oliver O'Donovan's political theology provide an important complement to Torrance's doxological treatment of the ascension.

This last note is not intended to be carping — the final word should be one of appreciation. For all its semantic and technical detail, Torrance's theology of the ascension offers some significant existential and pastoral gains by offering a strong reading of a classical article from Scripture and the creeds. Here we are given the theological space within which to make sense of quite simple but powerful notions: God is with us; we are not left alone; our future is guaranteed by God's love; our surest proxy for the life to come is the risen Christ, who continues to be present and active in the church. These are secured by a theology of the ascension that is unrivaled in recent theology and that continues to repay our study. In this rich account, Torrance displays the ways in which church and academy, prayer and study, and the heart and the intellect are united in the vocation of the theologian.