

WESLEY AND TORRANCE:

An Introductory Survey of Comparisons and Contrasts

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John Wesley (1703-1791) is one of the major figures of Christian history. Today the World Methodist Council includes denominations claiming over forty million members, while some estimates of members and adherents rise to seventy million and more. But while Wesley has been recognized as the originator of a major Christian tradition, as a great evangelist, and as a key figure in the eighteenth-century revival of evangelical Christianity, it is only comparatively recently that he has been regarded as a significant theologian. George Croft Cell was one of the first to do so,¹ but it was really only with Colin Williams' work that an attempt was made to lay out his thinking as a kind of systematic theology.² It was the Methodist patristics scholar, Albert Outler, who had the leading role in the rise of Wesley Studies,³ proposing that Wesley should be regarded as a "folk theologian." That description was perhaps appropriate in a day when Tillich was dominant in America, and theology was almost regarded as a subdivision of philosophy. Today, when theology is primarily related to the Church rather than the academy, it is more

¹ George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt), 1935.

² Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (London: Epworth Press, 1960).

³ Albert Outler, "Towards a Reappraisal of John Wesley as a Theologian," *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, 14 (1961), 5-14, reprinted in *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert Outler*, ed. Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991); see also the Introduction, in *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 1-33. Outler also initiated the new scholarly edition of *The Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), and edited the first four volumes, *Wesley's Sermons*.

appropriate to describe Wesley as a pastoral or practical theologian, though not a dogmatician. He was, however, a systematic thinker, and major works by Randy Maddox, Kenneth Collins and others, have examined comprehensively his writings on every major Christian doctrine.⁴ Thomas Oden brought together a compendium of his doctrines.⁵

While Wesley was not formally a systematic theologian, it is also true to say that that term is rarely applied to T. F. Torrance. He never occupied a chair of "Systematic Theology", but rather held the chair of Christian Dogmatics at New College, Edinburgh. As an explicitly confessional study, Christian Dogmatics, centring on the great central *dogma* of the Nicene Creed, is clearly closely related to pastoral theology. Wesley's pastoral or practical theology specialized in plain English for 'plain men', and his calling was to evangelize the 'common people' of his day. Torrance was an academic, and yet he always saw his teaching as fulfilling a call to mission and evangelism.

Comparing Contexts

The political and social context within which Torrance worked was so different from that of Wesley that it appears to be a different world. Wesley preached, wrote, and rode through the villages and small towns in the peaceful stable, structured, rural society of eighteenth-century England. Foreign wars were fought by professional armies and by the Royal Navy, but the Kingdom of Great Britain during the reigns of the Hanoverians only knew the two brief warlike episodes of the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. The Industrial Revolution began slowly and it was not till the last decade of Wesley's life that the factory system began to have much effect on the population. Torrance was born in war-torn China just before the great cataclysm of the First World War and served as a chaplain in the Second. In contrast to the itinerant Wesley, while he lectured widely, his professional life was spent almost

⁴ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 1994); Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007).

⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity: A Plain Exposition of His Teaching on Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994). This was considerably expanded in *John Wesley's Teachings*, 4 Vols (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012-14).

entirely in Edinburgh. They were both British, but whereas Wesley was an Englishman, Torrance belonged to the subtly different national culture and heritage of Presbyterian Scotland.

The cultural and intellectual contexts were strikingly different too. Wesley lived at the zenith of the Enlightenment when thinking was dominated by the great Sir Isaac Newton, by the continental rationalists and by the British empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. He opposed the dominant Deism of the day, but while the age could boast great philosophers, it was not an age of great theologians. Eighteenth-century theology may well be regarded as stuck in the categories of seventeenth century scholasticism. Before Torrance was born, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Ritschl, and Harnack had revolutionized Theology, and during his lifetime, Barth, Brunner, Bultmann, and Niebuhr had reacted in their various ways to classic Liberalism. Deism had largely given way to widespread atheism or agnosticism among the educated elite, although during Torrance's lifetime it was still defensible to regard the United Kingdom, and particularly Scotland, as a "Christian" country.

It is when we come to compare the family circumstances of the two that we come closer to characterizing the similarities and differences in their thought. John Wesley grew up in the rectory at Epworth, a rural village in the fen country of Lincolnshire. His parents had both been born into Puritan Nonconformist families, but each had independently returned to the Church of England. While their Puritan upbringing influenced their serious and disciplined approach to living, they were Tories, belonging to the "high church" party of "Church and King," the heirs of the Arminians led by Archbishop William Laud who had supported Charles I and the divine right of kings. They had recovered their dominance after the Cromwellian interlude when the monarchy and the Elizabethan settlement of the Church of England was restored in 1660. Samuel Wesley supported the subsequent "Glorious Revolution" of 1688 when the Catholic James was replaced by William and Mary and Parliament became effectively supreme. But Susanna had the Jacobite sympathies of the Nonjurors, those Arminian "high church" bishops and clerics who regarded themselves as bound by oath to the dispossessed King James. John was the thirteenth or fourteenth child (with many infant deaths, they lost count), and was one of only three sons to survive to adulthood. Susanna was an educated woman,

very much a theologian, and believed in strict though kindly discipline which must break a young child's will to make it obedient. John Wesley's methodical, tidy, logical mind was a reflection of his mother's.⁶

T. F. Torrance was the second eldest child and the oldest son among the six children born to British missionaries to China, the Rev. Thomas Torrance from Scotland and his English wife, Mrs Annie Torrance.⁷ They were part of that great generation of student volunteers who re-invigorated the nineteenth-century missionary movement which had its roots in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival of Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield. Thomas Torrance, Snr, grew up in the "Auld Kirk," the established Church of Scotland left behind by the evangelical wing which had left to form the Free Church in the great Disruption of 1843. Virtually alone among British denominations, it had no missionaries, and it is a fascinating link with the Wesleyan tradition, that Thomas Torrance, Snr, went to Cliff College in Derbyshire, a training college for evangelists later associated with evangelical Methodists, to prepare for his missionary work.⁸ As in the Wesley home, the Torrance children were carefully taught to read their Bibles and pray. And their mother, brought up within the Church of England was, like Susanna, a well-informed lay theologian.

The contrast between the two families lay in their theological traditions. The Wesleys, as we have noted, were heirs of the "high church" party of the Church of England. That should not be confused with the later Anglo-Catholic Tractarian

⁶ Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1989) is the definitive biography and also a history of early Methodism.

⁷ For biography, see Alister E. McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999): see also Elmer M. Colyer, *How To Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 35-51.

⁸ A photograph of Thomas Torrance during this period is annotated by Thomas F. Torrance, "My Father at Missionary College." During this period there are two possible settings for the photograph: either at Hulme Cliffe College in Derbyshire where he received missionary training 1892-1894, or at Livingstone College in London where he did basic medical training 1894-1895. The evangelist Henry Grattan Guinness, founder of the Livingstone Inland Mission, trained missionaries at Hulme Cliffe College at this time. Its name was changed to Cliff College when it was acquired by the Wesleyan Methodists in 1903.

movement of Newman, Keble, and Pusey in the nineteenth century. The seventeenth-century "high church" party of Archbishop Laud, and of bishops Lancelot Andrewes, Thomas Ken and Jeremy Taylor, were not "papists," although they were suspected of such by the Puritans because of their defence of episcopacy, liturgy, and their emphasis on the sacraments. They were known as "Arminians," whereas the majority of the Puritans were in that part of the Reformed tradition often known as "Calvinism." They particularly rejected what was to become the "high" Calvinism of the Westminster Confession and of John Owen. They saw the Church of England as exemplifying a true catholicism, and became interested in proving their loyalty to the "primitive Christianity" of the early Church Fathers. But that formative Anglican tradition had no tradition of systematic or dogmatic theology. Once the Puritans were evicted from their livings at the Restoration of "Church and King" in 1660 to become the three "Nonconformist" or "Dissenting" denominations – Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists – systematic theology departed with them. John Owen, Vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford under Cromwell, was to continue to produce as a Nonconformist minister what was probably the greatest Puritan theology of the century. But in the Church of England, systematic or dogmatic theology was not even part of the curriculum at Oxford or Cambridge. Accordingly, Wesley's theology is not to be found in a work of systematic theology, but primarily in his collected and published sermons.

Thomas Torrance, Snr, by contrast, stood in the Reformed tradition of the Church of Scotland, a tradition in which systematic or dogmatic theology was vibrant. The greatest name, of course, was that of John Calvin, and so Thomas Torrance was in the Calvinist tradition. But this was not the "high" Calvinism of the Synod of Dort with its "five points" including the doctrine of "limited atonement" and the decree of unconditional reprobation. The Torrance family tradition rejected "scholastic Federal Calvinism," but revered the theology of John Calvin himself. They could have been called "moderate Calvinists" although there was a spirit of evangelical ecumenism in that whole enthusiastic generation of the student missionary movement which rejected such labels. They were, as it has sometimes been said of Charles Simeon and the Anglican evangelicals, Arminians in the pulpit, but Calvinists on their knees.

Comparing Theological Perspectives

Given the points of comparison and contrast in their social, intellectual, theological, and family contexts, how might we characterize the respective theologies of John Wesley and T. F. Torrance? At this point, before we come to the scholarly papers which follow, we need only attempt an introductory overview.

We have to begin from the context we have just sketched by noting that the horizons of the eighteenth century were much narrower than those of the twentieth. Two centuries after the Reformation, Protestant theology, both continental and British (including the colonies), was still fighting the battles which arose then. In particular, the theological scene was dominated by the Protestant scholastic orthodoxy of the seventeenth century. The dispute between Calvinists and Arminians was dominant, particularly among those who participated in the evangelical awakening. But the rise of German Pietism, coming to England with the Moravians, brought a new flavour to the scene with its doctrine of instantaneous conversion or "new birth." But that also characterized the revivalist Puritan theology of Jonathan Edwards, closely reflected in the other great Calvinist leader (Church of England clergyman though he was), George Whitefield. To that emphasis on the new birth, the Wesleys added their concern with Christian "perfection," a heritage from the early Fathers, pre-Reformation spirituality and the "holy living" school of Jeremy Taylor and George Herbert among the Anglican Arminians.

What made all of that rather "narrow" was its focus on the justification, regeneration, sanctification, and eternal destiny of *the individual*. That focus arose from Luther's deep (and legitimate) concern with his own justification. But it meant that in the shape of Protestant theology revealed in the great Reformation confessions, the doctrine of the Trinity and Christology were reduced to two doctrines among many others. In Protestant thinking, they no longer gave focus and shape to the whole of Christian theology as they did in the age of the Fathers and the creeds. In the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, for example, there are certainly five articles on the doctrines of God and Christ, two on Scripture, one on the creeds, and one on the atonement. But there are thirty on the individual Christian and the Church. It would not be unfair to say as a broad generalization that Protestant theology, whether Lutheran or Anglican, Calvinist or Arminian, magisterial or

Anabaptist, largely took the doctrine of the Triune God for granted. It is true that they were loyal to the creeds (the Anabaptists not perhaps so clearly). It is also true that Christology was debated between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, but little of that percolated across the English Channel to Great Britain. The real focus of interest was either the doctrine of the Church (particularly Church government and the sacraments) or the salvation of the *individual*. It is worth noting that the Reformation was largely contemporary with the Renaissance: Protestantism was a child of the era of modernity with its focus on the *individual*.

Wesley cannot be blamed for living in his own century, and several things can be said here in his favour. Elmer Colyer has argued that the doctrine of the Trinity is the “deep structure” of his theology, and it can be argued that there is a Trinitarian structure to the organization of the body of his *Sermons*.⁹ It is certainly true to say that, if we take Methodist worship into account as shaped by the hymns of Charles Wesley, Methodism was a living tradition of Trinitarian faith and piety.¹⁰ It can also be shown that from 1738, following his encounter with the Moravians and his clear testimony to trusting in “Christ alone” at the famous meeting in Aldersgate Street, Wesley’s theology was focused on the gospel of Christ.¹¹ But all that being said, it remains true that neither Wesley nor any of his contemporaries demonstrate that clear and explicit integration of Christian theology as a whole into that Christocentric, Trinitarian shape which is so clearly exemplified in the theology of T. F. Torrance.

Of course, Torrance was standing on the shoulders of giants. Schleiermacher, for all his inverted Pietism, demonstrated a new methodology of integrated,

⁹ See T. A. Noble, “John Wesley as a Theologian: An Introduction,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, 82 (2010), 238-57. See also Elmer Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension of John Wesley’s Theology*, (Nashville: New Room Books, 2018).

¹⁰ See T. A. Noble, *Holy Trinity: Holy People* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 203-09; Jason E. Vickers, “‘And We the Life of God Shall Know’: Incarnation and the Trinity in Charles Wesley’s Hymns,” *Anglican Theological Review*, 90 (2008), 329-44; Geoffrey Wainwright, “Why Wesley Was a Trinitarian,” *The Drew Gateway*, 59.2 (1990), 26-43, and “Trinitarian Theology and Wesleyan Holiness,” in *Orthodox and Wesleyan Spirituality*, edited by S.T. Kimborough, (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s, 2002), 59-80.

¹¹ See Isaac Hopper, “‘Christ Alone for Salvation’: The Role of Christ and His Work in John Wesley’s Theology,” University of Manchester PhD thesis, 2016.

comprehensive theological thinking. That left behind the scholastic model in which doctrines were strung out in distinct, separate articles or *foci* like washing on a line (as R. P. C. Hanson vividly expressed it).¹² Hegel had introduced the notion of a dynamic Trinity as a *Vorstellung* (illustration) of his panentheistic philosophy. But Barth had rejected the whole “Neo-Protestant” theology of the nineteenth century.¹³ It is true that he followed Schleiermacher in presenting an integrated comprehensive theology, but it began not with “religion” but with God’s self-revelation in Christ. And in contrast to Hegelian Idealism, he embraced Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference,” further amazing the theologians of his day by launching his *Church Dogmatics* with a treatise on the Trinity.

It was following those theological revolutions, and particularly as the heir to Barth’s turning of the tide, that Torrance claimed a thoroughly scientific methodology for Christian Dogmatics in his first *magnum opus*, *Theological Science*.¹⁴ His integration of the doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement, long clearly expounded in his posthumously published Edinburgh lectures,¹⁵ underlay many of his publications and was clearly evident in *The Mediation of Christ*.¹⁶ But the full shape of his Trinitarian theology became evident in *The Trinitarian Faith* and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*.¹⁷ What is clear is that, while his theology had a “scientific” methodology in the way that was understood by Michael Polanyi and exemplified by Clerk Maxwell and Einstein, it was a contemporary version of the theology of the great Greek Fathers, particularly Athanasius and Cyril.

¹² R. P. C. Hanson, *The Attractiveness of God: Essays in Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1973), 47.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM, 1972).

¹⁴ T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1969).

¹⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP), 2008; Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster and Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009).

¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

¹⁷ T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996).

Unlike Wesley, therefore, Torrance was educated within a tradition which valued dogmatic theology and which had come to see it in a richer, fuller Trinitarian form. Like Wesley, he was a keen student of the Fathers, but even within that similarity we see a profound difference. Wesley was interested in the ante-Nicene Fathers as exemplars of holy living. He paid comparatively little attention to the Nicene Fathers, Athanasius and the Cappadocians, who defended the deity of Christ and formulated the church doctrine of the Trinity, or to Cyril of Alexandria, who carried on the Alexandrian tradition of basing Christian sanctification not only in the death of Christ, but in his incarnation.¹⁸ Wesley defended the doctrines of the Trinity and the deity of Christ against the Deists, and without question these were the “deep structure” of his theology. It is also true that he regarded the atonement as (in George Cell’s words) the “burning focus of faith.”¹⁹ But he did not integrate incarnation and atonement and was not Christocentric in the way that Torrance was. He did not integrate his doctrine of the Christian life into the Christocentric, Trinitarian shape of theology in the way that Torrance did. That is not a criticism, for Wesley lived in the eighteenth century, Torrance in the twentieth.

One point where there is considerable agreement between them was in their conviction that “scholastic Federal Calvinism,” with its series of eternal decrees and its doctrines of predestination and limited atonement, was a distortion of the faith of the Reformation. They both regarded it as an unbiblical, rationalistic system, which seriously distorted the doctrine of God and had devastating pastoral consequences. Wesley employed the resources of the Arminian tradition to confront it, and yet that still remained within an *individualistic* way of thinking. Torrance presented a deeper critique which focused not on the election of the individual, but on election in Christ.

Across two centuries then from the eighteenth to the twentieth, we have much to learn from the comparisons and contrasts between these two Christian thinkers, both theologians, but in different ways. This broad sketch may serve to

¹⁸ See Ted Campbell, *John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). See particularly the revealing table in Appendix 2.

¹⁹ Cell, *Rediscovery*, 297.

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set the scene for the following papers which examine the comparisons and contrasts in greater depth.