

A CATHOLIC SPIRIT:

John Wesley and T. F. Torrance in Ecumenical Perspective

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Abstract: *Grounded in common commitment to a Reformed catholicity, both John Wesley and T. F. Torrance proffer Christian unity as a desideratum necessarily predicated upon the Nicene faith, and issuing from a common love of the triune God made known in Jesus Christ. Yet Wesley's rational and relational approach stands in tension with Torrance's ontological and sacramental emphasis. This article delineates points of convergence and divergence between these approaches, and suggests the possibility of their mutual complementarity and support toward the goal of Christian unity.*

Some might consider a theological comparison of John Wesley and Thomas Forsyth Torrance to be an exercise in futility. Such assessment will be shown to be mistaken if Wesley and Torrance are examined in their own right. While a cursory comparison may identify obvious differences, close examination will reveal convergence of thought between Torrance and Wesley in several important respects. Such convergence is evident in their ecumenical thought, the demonstration of which is the burden of this essay.

Admittedly, this comparison is not without challenges. The chief challenge is that "ecumenism" was not a principal concern for Wesley, as it was for Torrance. Torrance was directly engaged in ecumenical dialogue on a global level in the latter half of the twentieth century. By contrast, Wesley's ecumenical posture was a

practical outgrowth of his concern for the renewal of the church in (and of) England in the eighteenth century. Consequently, Torrance's ecumenical corpus is extensive while explicit ecumenical discourse from Wesley is sparse. Nevertheless, there are a key texts in Wesley's corpus that grant us insight into his ecumenical approach. An examination of these alongside select writings of Torrance will show that their views, while in tension, may broadly complement one another. Wesley's ecumenism is essentially *doctrinal* and *relational* while Torrance's is *ontological* and *sacramental*; yet both are grounded in a common Nicene and Reformational orientation.

Before examining Wesley and Torrance's ecumenical perspectives, let us briefly identify some key features of this shared theological orientation.

A Reformed Catholicity

Perhaps the best phrase by which to capture the shared theological orientation of Wesley and Torrance is a "Reformed catholicity." There are clear differences of context in their theologies, as well as substantial differences of emphasis and development, yet both are committed to a principle of catholicity that is broadly Reformational in outlook.

For Wesley, this posture is congruent with his formation and training as an Anglican, and reflects a classically Anglican ecclesiology – though modified by Wesley's particular views over time. For Torrance, this posture appears to have been the result of the "mixed marriage" of his Anglican mother and Presbyterian father, his training in Scottish theology (with attention to the Church fathers), and Karl Barth.¹ Setting aside the question of influences, the following shared commitments contribute to a shared posture of Reformed catholicity. As we examine them, we will also see important differences emerge.

¹ See Alister McGrath, *T. F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1999). See also Jason R. Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2014) 163-166.

Scriptural Foundation

The most basic Reformational commitment that Wesley and Torrance share is to the priority and authority of Holy Scripture. To what extent their respective doctrines of *revelation* are in agreement is another matter. Yet both are fundamentally committed to the theological priority of Scripture as “God’s Word written” (39 Articles of Religion, Article XX), and the ultimate authority of Scripture over all human authority.

At the same time, both figures reject a reductive biblicism. Wesley stresses the importance of multiple perspectives in the responsible interpretation of Scripture.² And Torrance develops a sophisticated theology of Scripture that is “ordered from a trinitarian theology of revelation, through an ontology of the prophetic and apostolic texts to a hermeneutics of repentance and faith.”³ As such, though for different reasons, both can be seen to share a *prima Scriptura* approach in contrast to the *nuda Scriptura* of a rationalist biblicism.

In particular, while both figures affirm the trustworthiness and authority of Scripture, they do so with keen awareness of the mediated character of Scripture’s reception and canonical formation by the Church. Both acknowledge the complex relation between apostolic authority, the Rule of Faith, and the formation of the canon.⁴ As such, their commitment to Scripture is held within a broad understanding of normative ecclesial tradition that can also be seen in their shared creedal orientation.

Creedal Orientation

Wesley and Torrance differ in the ways they approach and appropriate the creedal legacy of the Christian tradition, yet the fact of their shared creedal orientation is

² See Randy Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope: John Wesley and the Bible” *Methodist Review*, Vol 3 (2011).

³ John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 89.

⁴ For Wesley, see Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope: John Wesley and the Bible.” For Torrance, see “The Deposit of Faith,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36:1 (1983) 1-28.

vital to their shared Reformed catholicity. For Wesley, this orientation is of a piece with his Anglican ecclesiology. Article VIII (“Of the Three Creeds”) of the 1662 Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion states, “The Three Creeds, Nicene Creed, Athanasius's Creed, and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture.”

Wesley did not approve of the damnatory clauses of the Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque Vult*) and, likely for the same reason, he excluded Article VIII from the 25 Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church. Nonetheless, he was in complete agreement with the theological substance of the Creeds.⁵ Perhaps most important for Wesley is the fact that the Creeds “may be proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture” and serve as a normative summation of the teaching of Scripture – the Rule of Faith.⁶ As such, they establish the core “doctrines” of the Christian faith to which all orthodox Christians must subscribe, irrespective of theological “opinions” thereof. This distinction between “doctrine” and “opinion” is vital for Wesley, as we shall see.

Unlike Wesley’s Anglican orientation, Torrance’s creedal perspective stands in tension with the confessional ethos of his own Presbyterian tradition. Torrance sees the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as the *sine qua non* and theological touchstone of all Christian theological reflection, and evaluates all other perspectives in light of it. He elevates the Christological and Trinitarian implications of Nicaea’s fixing of the *homoousion* as the theological lynchpin of the Christian doctrine of God, as well as its profound implications for Christian soteriology and ecclesiology. Thus, while Torrance also sees the Creeds as normative distillations of core Biblical teaching, his concern is relatively less with their function as declarations of faith, and more with their insights into the Being, Persons, and relations of the Triune God.⁷

⁵ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialog* (Nashville: Abingdon 1995), 191.

⁶ Maddox, “The Rule of Christian Faith, Practice and Hope.”

⁷ See especially *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1991).

Patristic Perspective

Integrally related to Torrance and Wesley's shared creedal orientation is a common commitment to the relative authority of the patristic legacy. Both accept the Reformation critique of the medieval Roman Catholic distortion of the catholic faith. And both follow the Reformers in prizing especially the first four ecumenical councils and first five centuries of patristic development as the theological root and touchstone of the Christian tradition. For both Wesley and Torrance, the patristic perspective and precedent weigh heavily in their evaluation of later ecclesial developments.⁸

However, here too we see a difference in emphasis and approach to this shared perspective. Beyond the framing of the cardinal Christian doctrines of Christology and Trinitarian theology, Wesley's principal appropriation of the church fathers is in the domain of ascetical theology and practice. By contrast, Torrance focuses on patristic Christology and Trinitarian theology as quintessential achievements, the implications of which have yet to be fully realized in respect to both substance and method.

Both figures also prize the eastern tradition over the western, though again for different reasons. While Wesley honors core doctrinal achievements, he especially prizes the synergistic soteriology and theotic orientation of figures like Origen and Clement of Alexandria, as well as the later ascetics (both eastern and western).⁹ Torrance, by contrast, is drawn to the Christological and Trinitarian theologies of Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria, for reasons we have already mentioned.

Reformational Ecclesiology

A final common commitment that Torrance and Wesley share is a broadly Reformational ecclesiology. As Anglican clergy, Wesley subscribed to Article XIX ("Of the Church") of the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion: "The visible Church of

⁸ For Torrance, see *The Trinitarian Faith*. For Wesley, see Ted A. Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers" *The Asbury Theological Journal* 51:1 (Spring, 1996) 57-70.

⁹ Campbell, "Wesley's Use of the Church Fathers."

Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same." This statement virtually parrots Calvin's "notes" of the Church from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.1.9): "Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence."¹⁰ In this respect, both the Anglican Wesley and the Presbyterian Torrance were shaped by a Reformational ecclesiology.

As heirs of their respective Reformation traditions, Wesley and Torrance share at least three derived ecclesiological principles: First, "the visible Church of Christ" is not to be identified exclusively in terms of any particular ecclesial institution, but rather in terms of the faithful ministry of Word and Sacrament. However, second, the predicate of that faithful ministry of Word and Sacrament – i.e., "those things that are of necessity requisite to the same" – is the visible manifestation of the Church in concrete ecclesial structures of authority and ministry. Thus, while the Church is not to be identified exclusively with any particular church or denomination, the Church is necessarily a visible, corporate reality in human history. Third, and following from the first two, this entails that the "visible Church" is somehow manifest in and among a variety of churches and Christian communities.

How, and in what manner, is the Church manifest in and among the churches? Here Torrance and Wesley diverge, as we will see. However, both affirm that the Reformational "notes" of the Church are not to be understood independently of, or in contradiction to, the received Nicene faith. Rather, in contrast to more radical readings of the Reformation, both insist upon the normative foundation of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian tradition as the necessary predicate of a Reformational ecclesiology.

¹⁰ See also Augsburg Confession, Article 7: "[The Church] is the assembly of all believers, among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel."

Much more could be said in regard to all of the above; however, these features outline a shared, broadly Reformed catholicity that frames the ecumenical perspectives of both Torrance and Wesley. By delineating these features, we are able to establish important points of convergence between our two figures while observing signs of substantial differences in approach. We will now turn to consider texts by each figure that will provide the basis for a more detailed for comparison.

John Wesley's Catholic Spirit

Written in the 1750 heyday of his "Methodist" movement, Wesley's sermon "Catholic Spirit" grapples with the question of Christian unity.¹¹ While Wesley believes that the true source of that unity is love, he laments the fact that Christians are not, in fact, united in love. Though they are called to obey the new commandment of Christ to love one another (John 13:34), says Wesley, "Daily experience shows to the contrary."¹² Christians are prevented from enjoying this unique, "peculiar" love for one another because of two basic barriers: First, they "can't all think alike," meaning that they have certain differences of theological judgment. Second, and consequently, "they can't all walk alike;" i.e., their differences are inevitably reflected in their practice. Wesley devotes the remainder of his sermon to addressing these problems.

Matters of Opinion

Wesley takes for his text 2 Kings 10:15, an interchange between Jehonadab son of Rechab and Jehu, king of Israel. Jehu asks Jehonadab, "Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thine heart? If it be, give me thine hand." Wesley sees Jehu's example as "well worthy both the attention and imitation of every serious Christian." It presents a portrait of Christian unity, a unity unrealized because of differences of opinion and liturgical practice. Wesley protests against this division:

¹¹ "Catholic Spirit," in *The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 5, edited by Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1996), 492-504. Wesley's 1740 "The Principles of a Methodist" articulates similar convictions, but "Catholic Spirit" provides the clearest explication of Wesley's ecumenical thought. See Wesley's 1749 "Letter to a Roman Catholic" for an excellent illustration of his ecumenical principles in action.

¹² *Ibid*, 493.

But although a difference in opinions or modes of worship may prevent an entire external union, yet need it prevent our union in affection? Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding these smaller differences. These remaining as they are, they may forward one another in love and in good works.¹³

From the start, we see Wesley drawing a clear distinction between matters of opinion and matters of the heart. For Wesley, matters of opinion are matters of thought and understanding, while matters of the heart are matters of love. And it is in love that Christians are united, not necessarily in opinions or practices. However, lest we err by assuming that by this Wesley intends here a facile division between "head and heart" or the exaltation of sentiment at the expense of reason or doctrine, we should note a few important aspects of Wesley's idea of "opinion."

First, for Wesley, the use of the term "opinion" generally entails those intellectual conclusions or judgments that we draw through inferential reasoning from our perception of objects, whatever those objects might happen to be.¹⁴ In matters of Christian belief, Scripture and the doctrines of the Christian creedal tradition are the objects of the Christian's perception. Doctrines for Wesley are used "primarily to denote the authoritative teachings of the Christian religion *in their own right*."¹⁵ By contrast, theological opinions are the particular intellectual conclusions that one draws in reflection upon Scriptural doctrines. We see this attitude exemplified in Wesley's sermon "On the Trinity." In discussing the importance of accepting the doctrine of the Trinity, Wesley says:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See Wesley's *Remarks upon Mr. Locke's "Essay on Human Understanding,"* Jackson 13: 455-464. Wesley reviews Locke quite favorably, though he still prefers the Aristotelian terms of apprehension, judgment, and discourse to describe mental operations. He seems to view Locke's epistemology as a more complex version of Aristotle (p. 456).

¹⁵ Randy L. Maddox, "Opinion, Religion and 'Catholic Spirit': John Wesley on Theological Integrity" *Asbury Theological Journal* 47, 1 (Spring 1992): 64-65. Maddox points out that "this distinction between opinions and doctrines was essentially a theological expression of the emerging Enlightenment conviction of a disjunction between one's knowledge or ideas (opinions) and their objects (doctrines)."

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I do not mean that it is of importance to believe this or that *explication* of these words. . . . I insist upon no explication at all; no not even on the best I ever saw; I mean, that which is given us in the creed commonly ascribed to Athanasius. . . . I would insist only on the direct words, unexplained, just as they lie in the text.¹⁶

As demonstrated by this appeal to the Athanasian Creed, there exists for Wesley a vital distinction between established Christian doctrines as the objects of our theological opinions, and those opinions themselves. In Wesley's view, doctrines are given, non-negotiables of Christian faith that stand independently of our opinions about them.

However, second, it is important to note that Wesley's use of "opinion" here also includes judgments that involve "smaller differences," i.e., theological differences that do not pertain to central matters of Christian faith. Differences of opinion about central doctrines *do* matter; indeed, to have a theological opinion that denies any of the central claims of the Christian faith is, *de facto*, a denial of that faith. However, "smaller differences" of opinion are tolerable if they do not undermine the cardinal doctrines of faith. Wesley affirms that this objective body of doctrine forms the "root" and "main branches" of Christian teaching. As Geoffrey Wainwright puts it:

Liberal Methodists [e.g.] isolate Wesley's dictum that "we think and let think" and make him the patron of sentimental ecumenism or even religious indifferentism. They forget that Wesley's magnanimity was limited to "opinions that do not strike at the root of Christianity."¹⁷

Indeed, says Wesley:

[A] catholic spirit is not *speculative latitudinarianism*. It is not an indifference to all opinions. . . . A man of a truly catholic spirit . . . is fixed as the sun in his judgement concerning the main branches of

¹⁶ Jackson, vol. 6, 200-201.

¹⁷ Geoffrey Wainwright, *Methodists in Dialog*, 231. cf. also *The Character of a Methodist*, Jackson vol. 8, 340-347.

Christian doctrine.¹⁸

Third, Wesley holds that a diversity of human intellectual judgments – in this case, theological opinions about non-critical doctrines – must *necessarily* result from the limited inferential processes of human reasoning and the finite scope of human understanding. Note that Wesley says we “*can’t*” think alike; i.e., we are *incapable* of coming to entirely identical intellectual judgments because of the limitations of human reason. Yet it is necessary that we make judgments, that we draw conclusions. Differences of theological opinion on secondary matters are not evil, they are inevitable. Says Wesley:

It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that several men will be of several minds, in religion as well as in common life. Nay farther: . . . although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true . . . yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true.¹⁹

It is for this reason – the inevitability of the existence of differing theological opinions – that Wesley insists upon toleration among Christians concerning “smaller points” of theology. No person can or should think that his/her judgments – either in particular or as a whole – regarding theological matters are infallible. Moreover, because this kind of conformity is impossible, it is also impossible that unanimity of opinion should serve as a sufficient basis for Christian unity. Says Wesley:

Every wise man therefore will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to unite in love that single question. “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart?”²⁰

¹⁸ “Catholic Spirit,” 502.

¹⁹ Ibid, 494-495.

²⁰ Ibid, 495.

Thus, for example, Wesley would not insist that a Dordtian Calvinist reject a predestinarian understanding of divine election before he could be in concord with him; neither would he feel obligated to give up his own theological construal of election. Neither of these interpretations of Scripture is essential to the matter of a right heart.

Matters of Practice

Wesley understands the relationship between opinion and practice – i.e., between theological conviction and mode of worship – as that between the intellect and the will, of putting opinion into action. Thus, “a variety of opinion necessarily implies a variety of practice.”²¹ As with the variety of religious opinions, so Wesley insists that a catholic toleration should be maintained in respect to religious practices. For Wesley, these include such matters as which church one belongs to, forms of church government, forms of prayer, forms of the Lord's Supper, various ways of administering Baptism (including ages of administration), or even the practice of Baptism and the Lord's Supper at all. In all of these, Wesley insists:

No man can choose for or prescribe to another. But everyone must follow the dictates of his own conscience in simplicity and godly sincerity. . . . I dare not therefore presume to impose my mode of worship on any other. I believe it is truly primitive and apostolical. But my belief is no rule for another.²²

However, Wesley also makes two important qualifications of this statement, lest the reader misunderstand his intent. First, as with religious opinions, religious practice is not a matter of indifference toward one's form or manner of public worship. Wesley describes such an attitude as *practical latitudinarianism* and rejects it by insisting:

But the man of a truly catholic spirit, has no doubt, no scruple at all concerning the particular mode of worship wherein he joins. He is clearly convinced that *this* manner of worshipping God is both

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, 496.

scriptural and rational.²³

Second, Wesley is vehemently opposed to any sort of indifference to congregational affiliation. Wesley describes this as “another sort of latitudinarianism” that we might call *ecclesial latitudinarianism*. Implicit in this view is the denial that every Christian is obliged by the very character of Christian faith to be a member of a particular congregation. Says Wesley, concerning such an attitude:

But it is far from a man of a truly catholic spirit. He is fixed in his congregation as well as his principles. He is united to one, not only in spirit, but by all the outward ties of Christian fellowship.²⁴

Summary

In light of the above, we begin to have a sense of the kind of unity that Wesley does *not* have in mind. In matters of theological opinion about non-essential doctrines, we see him attempting to walk a middle way between erroneous extremes. He seeks to avoid a demand for absolute dogmatic uniformity on the one hand, and a negligent indifference on the other. Thus, his notion of unity preserves the freedom of the believer's conscience within the bounds of orthodoxy. Likewise in matters of church practice, Wesley seeks to avoid the extreme of slavish conformity to on the one hand, and excessive individualism on the other.

In regard to ecumenical concerns, several inferences can be drawn: First, Wesley is clearly wary of any demand for organic or structural unification of churches. He would take issue with any assertion that Christians cannot be in real unity as long as the Church is not visibly, sacramentally one.²⁵ True Christian unity surpasses such ecclesial distinctions. C. S. Lewis famously observed that Christians

²³ Ibid, 502.

²⁴ Ibid, 503.

²⁵ See Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 4, 10; and *Methodists in Dialog*, 31. See also “Letter to a Roman Catholic.”

at the center of their respective theological traditions are actually closest to one another.²⁶ Wesley would concur with Lewis in this regard.

However, second, Wesley would most certainly object to any notion of unity that denies a commitment to historic Christian doctrine concerning the self-revelation of God as Jesus Christ. Indeed, true Christian unity takes a common commitment to creedal Christian faith as an essential prerequisite.²⁷ The notion in some contemporary circles that historic Christian doctrine is somehow a barrier to unity stands in diametric opposition to Wesley's perspective. Contemporary ecumenists who wish to represent him otherwise do so only by quoting him in a highly selective manner. In scathing rebuke of all such attitudes, Wesley says:

Observe this, you who know not what spirit ye are of; who call yourselves men of a catholic spirit, only because you are of a muddy understanding; because your mind is all in a mist; because you have no settled, consistent principles, but are for jumbling all opinions together. . . . Go, first, and learn the first elements of the gospel of Christ, and then shall you learn to be of a truly catholic spirit.²⁸

Third, Wesley would without question take issue with the radical autonomy and indifference displayed by many toward ecclesial commitments. Wesley assumes that serious Christians will be committed to a particular tradition because they are convinced of the merits of that tradition as a faithful way of service to Christ.

At this point, we may also summarize the mode of Wesley's approach to the question of unity and its ecumenical implications. Wesley's principal appeal is to *the rational apprehension and affirmation of the cardinal Christian doctrines* as the basis for ecumenical concord. This appeal is predicated upon an epistemological realism that regards the cardinal doctrines as given objects of knowledge, regarding

²⁶ "It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine." C. S. Lewis, preface to *Mere Christianity*.

²⁷ E.g., in "The Catholic Spirit: The Need of Our Time" in *Freedom and Grace*, edited by I. Jones and K. Wilson (London: Epworth, 1988), Ralph Waller distorts Wesley's intent in this sermon by stressing the inclusivity of the Church at the expense of its faithful witness to the unique revelation of God in Christ.

²⁸ "Catholic Spirit," 502.

which a variety of opinions is inevitable. Opinions that deny the substance of core Christian doctrine are to be repudiated; however, a variety of opinions regarding non-essential doctrines and practices should be tolerated.

Thus, for Wesley, the possibility of Christian unity is contingent upon the successful negotiation of a set of binary questions: 1) Does the other affirm the cardinal doctrines of the historic catholic faith? If so, then unity is possible; if not, it is not possible. 2) Does the other affirm a principle of toleration in regard to non-essential doctrines and practices? If so, unity is possible; if not, it is not possible.

Wesley's 1749 "Letter to Roman Catholic" is perhaps the best illustration of this approach in action. Having explicated his affirmation of the Nicene Creed and core Christian virtues, Wesley pointedly asks his Roman Catholic counterpart, "Are we not thus far agreed? . . . Let the points wherein we differ stand aside; here are enough wherein we agree, enough to be the ground of every Christian temper, and of every Christian action."²⁹

T. F. Torrance and the One Church

Turning to consider T. F. Torrance's approach to ecumenism, we immediately encounter a fundamental difference of emphasis. While Torrance also looks for a consonance of belief, the primary vector of his ecumenical approach is ontological rather than epistemological. Torrance might agree with the substance of Wesley's thought regarding doctrines and opinions; however, his consistent mode of argumentation is from the ontology of God's being and acts in human history and the real relations entailed therein. For Torrance, God's principal act, second only to Creation and the atoning economy of the Incarnation, is God's formation of the divine-human community in and of Jesus Christ – the Church.

This difference in approach is consistent with the whole of Torrance's thought. His "scientific" (kataphysical) and ontorelational approach to all theological matters consistently inquires first about the God-revealed ontology of his object of

²⁹ Wesley, "Letter to a Roman Catholic" in *A Wesley Reader: Writings of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. Ted A. Campbell (Dallas: Tuckapaw Media) 168-69.

theological concern, analyzes and correlates its real constitutive relations, and then seeks to extrapolate doctrinal and practical implications.³⁰

However, this difference also highlights a particular difference in sociohistorical context between Torrance and Wesley. Wesley's ecumenical concern is framed within the context of eighteenth century England and the various Anglican and Nonconformist parties comprised therein. While certainly aware of non-Protestants,³¹ Protestants are his principal interlocutors. By contrast, the scope of Torrance's ecumenical concern is broader, and arguably more focused on relations with Orthodox and Roman Catholics.³² Consequently, Torrance seeks a basis for Christian unity that ontologically precedes and cuts behind matters not only of theological difference but also of historical divergence.

In contrast to Wesley's few and occasional ecumenical writings, Torrance's are numerous and span the decades of the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, we see a pattern of ecumenical reasoning that persists throughout. Torrance begins not by asking what it is that separates Christians from one another, but rather what it is that stands as the objective, ontological ground of Christian unity. For Torrance, it is clear that nothing less than the being of God can serve as a sufficient basis for such unity. And it is the union of human being with God, and the correlative reunion of humankind within itself, that is the essential redemptive purpose of God's saving economy accomplished in Jesus Christ and realized in his Body, the Church. Thus, for Torrance, the fact that the Church *is* one in Jesus Christ stands as the uniquely sufficient ground of its ecumenical unity. Let us examine how this is the case.

The Incarnation: God's Elected Ground of Human Unity

"The Church is grounded in the Being and Life of God, and rooted in the eternal purpose of the Father to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to be the Head and Saviour of

³⁰ See *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

³¹ See "Letter to a Roman Catholic."

³² Though also engaging Anglican and Lutheran perspectives. E.g., Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, I: Order and Disorder* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959) 23-145.

all things."³³ This essentially Pauline³⁴ understanding of the Church, Torrance argues, must be the starting point for all ecumenical theology. For it is the eternal purpose of God to save alienated and dying humanity by first uniting to himself, through his Incarnate Word and Holy Spirit, a covenant people conformed to his will and purposes.

Thus God's eschatological purposes for the Church are bound up with God's purposes for the whole human race, and indeed the whole of creation. Given that the fundamental problem of human existence is our alienation from God and the resultant alienation we experience within ourselves and in relation to one another, the reconciliation effected by God in human history must eventuate in the reconciliation of human beings with one another, resulting in a new united humanity grounded in God's saving union with humanity in Jesus Christ. The Church of Jesus Christ is God's chosen means and proleptic realization of this eschatological purpose:

What has been fulfilled intensively in the Church through the operation of the Spirit must be fulfilled extensively in all mankind and in all creation. As such, the Church is to be regarded as the new humanity within the world, the provisional manifestation of the new creation within the old. At its heart lies the mystery of the union between Christ and His Church, which presses out toward universal fullness.³⁵

However, continues Torrance:

The Church cannot share the life of Christ to the full, and cannot embody in itself the reconciliation He bestows, without fulfilling its mission to all mankind, in bearing the Gospel of reconciliation to all for whom He died, without seeking to embody in the midst of the world's divisions the oneness of the fellowship of reconciliation.³⁶

³³ Torrance, "The Foundation of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 113.

³⁴ E.g., Ephesians 1:22.

³⁵ Torrance, "The Mission of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19 (1966): 138.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 140.

From the outset, then, the question of the unity of the Church in Torrance's thought is inextricably related to the larger question of the eschatological reconciliation and unity of humanity with and in God.

For Torrance, the germ and matrix of this re-union of humanity is the Incarnation of the eternal Word and Son of God as Jesus Christ. In his assumption of human nature in and through the saving economy of his earthly ministry, Christ the incarnate Son binds alienated and dying humanity to himself, reestablishing the ground of human being in the life of God and forging a way within himself for human beings to be reconciled and united to God. In the union of his divine nature with human nature, Christ establishes himself as the Head of the Church. Indeed, says Torrance:

Christ is the Church, for the Church is Church only in Him. Christ the Incarnate Son of God is the Church because He embodied Himself in our humanity and as such gathered our humanity in Him into oneness with God. He identified Himself with us, made Himself one with us, and on that ground claims us as His own, lays hold of us, and assumes us into union and communion with Him, so that as Church we find our essential being and life not in ourselves but in Him alone.³⁷

Thus, while Christ is the Church, Torrance simultaneously avers that the Church is *not* Christ. For the ground, source, and dynamic vitality of the Church's existence lies not within the Church but beyond itself in its divine, ascended and reigning Head, Jesus Christ, to whom the Church is united through the Gospel by His Word and Spirit. Rejecting all suggestions that the Church is somehow a continuation of the Incarnation, Torrance insists that the Church exists only by virtue of its union and participation in Christ through the Holy Spirit. As such, *the Church is the Body of Christ*, but only through a relation of union and communion with Christ its Head. Yes, as the Body of Christ, united and conformed to Christ in its cruciform life, the Church is far more than another human community. Indeed, it is nothing less than "the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ."³⁸

³⁷ Torrance, "What Is the Church?" *The Ecumenical Review* 11 (1958) 9. Emphasis his.

³⁸ Torrance, quoting Karl Barth (CD 4.1) in *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1991) 276.

Nonetheless, the sole real, constitutive relation that grants the Church its life, vocation, and vitality is its union and communion with Christ. So Torrance:

That is what we need to learn again today . . . that when we think of the Church our eyes must travel at once to Christ the Lord Himself, for it is He who is the essence of the Church; it is only in Him that the Church is Church, only in Him that it coheres and has its principle of being and unity, and only in and through Him does it have its function and mission in the Gospel.³⁹

The One Church

Throughout his corpus, Torrance proffers this Christocentric ecclesiology as representative of the apostolic and patristic legacy of the Church leading up to and finding expression at Nicaea.⁴⁰ As with other aspects of his theology, he employs this line of argument in both a positive and negative manner. Positively, he uses it to articulate and flesh out the relations and structures of his own neo-patristic⁴¹ ecclesiology. Negatively, he uses it as a means of critiquing later ecclesiological developments in the history of the Church that he deems deficient.

In regard to ecumenism, Torrance employs this strategy to affirm the Church's union with Christ through the Holy Spirit as the sole, sufficient ground of Christian unity, while rejecting any attempt to appeal for Christian unity on the basis of a social or juridical understanding of the Church. He is especially critical of Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage for what became the dominant "Latin" understanding of the Church as a closed community under the authority of the bishop, which was "clearly influenced by Roman conceptions of society and law." This development played a determinative role in the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church as "a divinely instituted society in the world under the universal headship of the bishop of Rome, and with canonically defined structures of unity,

³⁹ "What Is the Church?" 7.

⁴⁰ See especially the chapter "The One Church" in *The Trinitarian Faith*, 252-301.

⁴¹ I intend this only as a description of Torrance's approach and do not identify him with any particular movement or school of thought. For further exploration see Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*.

continuity and authority."⁴² By contrast, church authority and government in the East, while ordered according to conciliar canons and bishops, "were construed in terms of *κοινωνία* rather than in terms of hierarchical structure," and the episcopate "was held to be subordinate to the apostolic foundation of the Church, as well as to the Lord Jesus Christ the one Head of the Church."⁴³ Torrance clearly sees the Eastern tradition as preferable to the West in this respect.

Torrance is likewise opposed to any ecclesiology that would construe the unity of the Church as an essentially moral or conceptual unity. Such ecclesiologies presuppose that the Church's chief mode of relation to Christ is moral or rational, not a real, personal and spiritual union. Whether in regard to Arianism or to modern ecclesiologies that relegate Jesus Christ to the status of moral exemplar, Torrance's response is the same: the Church is not a community formed through the external, voluntary association of like-minded people; rather, the Church is constituted by a dynamic, internal ontological relation to Jesus Christ "through the reconciling and incorporating activity of the incarnate Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴

The vital point to underscore here is Torrance's insistence that the ground of the Church's unity in Jesus Christ *is ontologically prior to its ecclesial structures*. Such structures are necessary, but they are secondary to the real, transcendent ground of the unity of all Christians as the Body of Christ united to its living Head, who is continually establishing and extending his Church throughout the world. While necessary to the order, discipline, and ministry of the Church in its various sociohistorical contexts, all ecclesial structures and their distinctives are relativized by the Church's fundamental unity with and in Christ, who is himself the Church's *Esse*.⁴⁵

⁴² *The Trinitarian Faith*, 271.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 272.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 278.

⁴⁵ "Christ is Himself the essence of the Church, its *Esse*. That fact immediately relativises and makes ultimately unimportant these endless and tiresome discussions about what is of the *esse* or the *bene esse* or the *piene esse* of the Church. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest," said Jesus to Saul of Tarsus. . . . That is the place to begin in our understanding of the nature of the Church, and in all discussions with one another regarding reunion." "What Is the Church?" 7-8.

Thus, for Torrance, the ground of the Church's unity is nothing other than the very relation of union with Christ through the Holy Spirit that constitutes its existence in the first place. Just as all believers are united to Christ, so all believers are united to one another in Christ. Christian unity is possible because Christians *are already one in Christ*. Says Torrance:

Jesus Christ alone is the ground of the Church's unity and the Holy Spirit establishes the Church upon that ground, gives it unity through union with Christ and continues to maintain and uphold the unity in the midst of diversity. There is only one Mediator between God and Man who makes all who believe in Him one Body with Him. There is only one incarnation and one atonement. There is only one Spirit, and therefore there is only one Body of Christ and one Church in Him. . . . Oneness thus belongs to the very nature of the Church in its inner and outer life. . . . As it is one in the Spirit, so it must live out that oneness in the Body.⁴⁶

In light of his elevation of the Church's ontological union with Jesus Christ as the singular basis and criterion for the unity of the Church, it stands to reason that Torrance elevates Baptism and Communion as the sacramental correlates of that union and unity. Baptism is the Christ-appointed means by which all believers are united to him by the Holy Spirit, in his baptism at the Jordan River, in the baptism of his death and resurrection, and in the whole of his vicarious reconciliation of humanity to God. And if Baptism is the sacramental means of our union with Christ, then it is also the means of our union with one another in Christ.⁴⁷

As Baptism is Christ's sacramental means of the Church's union with him, so the Lord's Supper (Torrance also uses "Communion" and "Eucharist") is his means of the continual renewal and strengthening of that union. In its repeated practice of participation through Communion in the life of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit, the Church continually receives into itself His indwelling presence and is

⁴⁶ "The Mission of the Church," 141.

⁴⁷ See *The Trinitarian Faith*, 290 ff. See also, "The One Baptism Common to Christ and His Church" in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays toward Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 82-105.

renewed as His Body. And, like Baptism, if Communion is the sacramental means of renewing our union with Christ, then it is also the sacramental means of renewing our union with one another in Christ.

Thus, for Torrance, Baptism and Communion are Jesus' own appointed sacramental means and signs by which the unity of his Church is established, persists, and is made manifest within the life of the Church in the world. While Baptism is the sacramental entry point into union with Christ and ground of the Church's unity in Christ, it is Communion that especially stands as the visible sign of that unity. Baptism is inherently and unavoidably individual; Communion, by contrast, is the inherently corporate sacrament of union with Christ that most visibly manifests the unity of the Church in the world. Thus, says Torrance, "It is in the Eucharist . . . that the Church becomes visible as the Body of Christ in history, for it is there that it becomes a membered Body under the Headship of Christ."⁴⁸

Summary and Comparison

With the preceding in view, we can now summarize the distinctives of Torrance's ecumenical thought in order to draw comparisons with that of John Wesley. As we do, we can more clearly see points of convergence, albeit for divergent reasons.

First, like Wesley, Torrance is wary of predicating discussions of Church unity upon considerations of structural reunification. If the Church is already really and truly *one* in the ontological ground of its being in Christ, then questions regarding ecclesial authority, doctrinal distinctives or sacramental validity, while necessary, can never serve as proper starting points for Christian unity. However, in contrast to Wesley, Torrance *does* see visible unity – minimally in the practice of shared Communion and maximally in structural unity – as a desired goal of ecumenical discourse, which we will discuss further below.

Second, like Wesley, Torrance would utterly reject any suggestion that Christian unity might be achieved by setting aside or minimizing any aspect of the Nicene faith. Moreover, he would draw a bright, shining line between "ecumenism" as a uniquely Christian endeavor and "interfaith" dialogue. However, Torrance's

⁴⁸ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, II: The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960) 194.

reasons for doing so would not be primarily because such would fail to remain within the bounds of an ecclesially sanctioned orthodoxy or to subscribe to the propositional content of its Creed. True as that may be, the even greater problem with such strategies is its their failure to apprehend and submit to the transcendent object of that faith: the risen, ascended, and reigning Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of his Body, the Church.

We should note in fairness to Wesley that he would share Torrance's concern for a real and personal apprehension of Jesus Christ as the object of Nicene faith. Nonetheless, Wesley's emphasis in his ecumenical writings is principally upon questions of doctrinal agreement, toleration of divergent lesser opinions, and mutual affection. In respect to his ecclesiology, Wesley tends to move alternatively between two views of the Church, sometimes complementing and sometimes conflicting. On the one hand, he affirms the historic institution of the church that persists in apostolic succession to the present age and preserves the doctrines and practices of the apostolic faith. On the other hand, he frequently describes the church as a fellowship of "the whole body of true believers" united in faith and love to God.⁴⁹ Insofar as these two views may represent an irreducible tension in Wesley's thought,⁵⁰ Torrance would likely see Wesley's ecclesiology as an iteration of the Western Latin dualism between the church as a juridical society and the church as a mystical body – a dualism which Torrance rejects on the basis of his Christocentric ecclesiological realism.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Howard A. Snyder, "Wesley's Concept of the Church" *The Asbury Journal* 33:1 (Jan, 1978) 34-59.

⁵⁰ David Lowes Watson argues that Wesley consistently holds these two emphases in tension – one of which derives from his Anglican formation and the other of which derives from Puritan influences – by positing his Methodist class meetings as "*ecclesiolae in ecclesia*." (Watson, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting: Its Origins and Significance*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1985). However, Wesley's mode of argumentation in both "Catholic Spirit" and "Letter to a Roman Catholic" emphasize a fellowship of consonant belief and mutual affection.

⁵¹ *The Trinitarian Faith*, 275-77. Torrance sees this dualism as an unavoidable consequence of the general Western acceptance of the Latin notion of the church as a juridical society, which divides the visible, external structures of the church's historic existence from the invisible mystical unity of the church's spiritual existence.

Third, Torrance would utterly agree with Wesley in his condemnation of a modern autonomy that eschews ecclesial commitments, and he would agree that Christians should be convinced members of a local congregation. However, given his ecclesiology, Torrance would diverge from Wesley in regard to the breadth of liberty he would be willing to grant in ecclesial practice. In particular, Torrance would not so readily set aside questions of liturgical or sacramental practice. Just as his approach to doctrinal agreement would go beyond epistemological consensus to the shared apprehension of the singular ontological ground of the Church's being, so Torrance would expect that ecclesial practice be predicated upon a theology of real participation in the Person of Jesus Christ in Christian worship, and in the sacraments of Baptism and Communion. Any tradition that would reject some version of this understanding of the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church would have difficulty meeting Torrance's definition of catholic faith and practice.⁵²

What should be clear from the preceding is that Torrance's approach to Christian unity, while sharing key concerns with Wesley, is pressing for a basis not ultimately located in doctrinal consensus, though that is clearly entailed, but in a mutual apprehension of the Church as the visible Body of Christ, ontologically established beyond itself in the Incarnate Word of God and persisting through human history. Doctrinal formulations necessarily outline and describe church faith and order and are therefore required, but they cannot serve as a sufficient basis for unity – in part because they cannot agree on which doctrines are primary and which secondary. Rather, in Torrance's view, the singular basis and starting point for Christian unity must be *the mutual recognition among each of the churches of the one Church and Body of Christ subsisting within the others*. Thus, says Torrance:

If we ourselves are in Christ we cannot fail to discern His Body in others whom He is pleased to call His own and whose Sacrament He is pleased to honour with His own real Presence and Spirit. If we fail to discern it in others the first question we must ask is whether we have ourselves learned to regard the Church as Christ's very own Body, as

⁵² See Paul Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Surrey: Ashgate Publications, 2009), 265-323. See also George Hunsinger's appropriation of Torrance's thought in *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

the Body of which He is the Head and Lord and Saviour and Husband.⁵³

This contrast between Wesley's emphasis upon doctrine and Torrance's emphasis upon ontology evokes a feature of Torrance's theological approach that now comes to the fore. For Torrance, theological knowledge is kind of critical realism that necessarily includes what he identifies as three distinct but mutually informing levels of activity: (1) the evangelical/doxological, (2) the doctrinal/economic, and (3) the theological/ontological.⁵⁴ While all Christians inhabit (1) an experiential field of tacit theological knowledge formed by the concrete daily life of Christian faith and worship in Word and Sacrament, the Church's reflection upon this body of knowledge has resulted in (and continues to inform) a coherent body of doctrinal understanding (2) that identifies and organizes the key features and conceptual relations of God's creating and redeeming economy. The Nicene Creed is one such iteration of the Church's doctrinal/economic knowledge of God. However, this level of doctrinal reasoning in turn grants true disclosure, albeit limited, of (3) the actual ontological structure of God's being. This properly theological/ontological level of understanding has granted the Church profound insight into, for example, the triune character of God's being, persons, and perichoretic relations. In terms of ecclesiology, as we have been describing, the Church is rightly seen at the theological/ontological level to be constituted in real ontological union with Jesus Christ through the Word and Spirit of God.

What is vital to grasp in relation to this critical realist understanding of theology is that the interrelated levels of knowledge cohere with and mutually inform one another. Thus, key theological insights into, for example, the triune ontology of the Gods' nature, inform important doctrines such as the inseparable operations of the Persons of the Trinity in the divine economy. Such doctrinal formulations in their turn directly impact daily Christian life, such as how we interpret Scripture, our forms of liturgical action, the content of our prayers and hymnody, the forms and habits of our spiritual practices.

⁵³ "What Is the Church?" 8.

⁵⁴ See Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985) 131-159.

I would suggest that Torrance's integrated model of theological knowledge offers a helpful way to correlate his and Wesley's convergent but distinctive approaches to ecumenism – and perhaps serves as a model for correlating ecumenical discourse in general. In our case, it is clear that Torrance would question whether Wesley has sufficiently considered the ontological ground of Christian unity. Is Wesley's emphasis upon doctrinal consensus and toleration of lesser opinions, not to mention practices, indeed a sufficient basis for unity? Or is it merely a strategy for agreeing to disagree which endorses a status quo of Christian schism? If Wesley truly grasped the transcendent ground of the Church as the earthly-historical form of Christ's existence, would he be content with an ecumenism that privileges matters of doctrinal belief over matters of church practice? Indeed, can we be content with an ecumenism that does not call all churches into greater conformity to the shape of Christ's own Person and Work – and ultimately toward visible unity? In short, Torrance would be concerned that Wesley is operating at the levels of the doctrinal and evangelical, without sufficient integration of the ontological.

However, while this critique of Wesley's ecclesiology and ecumenical theology *qua* theology may be accurate, it may also be partly anachronistic. We must recall the sociohistorical context of Wesley's endeavors and the purposes of his "ecumenical" writings, which are few. Wesley's chief concern was not for visible unity, which would have been a practical impossibility in the established church context of eighteenth century England. Rather, his concern was for a unity in spirit and cooperation among fellow Christians of various churches – which surely is a necessary aspect of ecumenical endeavor in any age. Consequently, Wesley's "ecumenism" is a grassroots ecumenism, which brackets questions of visible or sacramental unity and focuses on questions of personal relations between Christians across church boundaries. In this respect, Wesley's focus on the doctrinal and evangelical levels of theological reasoning is entirely congruent – even if ontologically deficient – with his practical approach to overcoming Christian division.

From this perspective, Wesley might also level his own criticism of Torrance's ecumenical thought. While he might admit to the need for Torrance's Christocentric

ecclesiological realism, he might also question whether Torrance has sufficiently considered the practices required for a concrete ecumenical unity among believers. Moreover, he might press Torrance to ask what Christians from various traditions are to do when visible and sacramental unity has not yet been – and may never be – achieved. Are actual relations of Christian love and cooperation impossible prior to such visible unity? Or could it be that this very kind of relation is a form of Christian ecumenism – a practical ecumenism – that is achievable in the interim? In this regard, could it be that Torrance is so focused on the ontological and doctrinal levels of his ecumenical reasoning, that he fails adequately to work out the concrete implications and forms of Christian life for a still-divided *oikumene*? Moreover, could it not be the case that something like Wesley’s approach to Christian unity is a form – its ecclesiological deficiencies notwithstanding – of just such an interim and practical ecumenism?

Whether or not it is helpful to employ Torrance’s three-tiered model of theological knowledge in regard to Wesley and Torrance’s ecumenism, it does appear to clarify the relative strengths and weaknesses of their approaches and how they might serve to complement and even bolster one another. While Torrance’s ontological/sacramental ecumenism offers a proper basis for mutual ecclesial recognition and movement toward sacramental and institutional unity, Wesley’s practical/relational ecumenism offers a concrete strategy for ecumenical discourse and cooperation, especially at the grassroots level. The strength and profundity of Torrance’s approach is that it discloses the proper ontological ground of what we might call a “Nicene ecumenism.” The strength and practical utility of Wesley’s approach is its ability to appeal directly and concretely to the daily life of the Church. We now turn to a brief consideration of the respective desired outcomes of Wesley and Torrance’s ecumenism, which will further illustrate this comparison.

Wesley and Torrance on the Fruit of Ecumenism

Wesley – A Peculiar Love

Notably, both Wesley and Torrance affirm that the principal mark and measure of all ecumenical effort must be Christian love. In “Catholic Spirit,” Wesley’s discussion

moves from of the necessity of having right belief (*orthodoxia*) to the matter of having a right heart (*orthokardia*).⁵⁵ While right belief is necessary, it is not alone sufficient for a heart that is right, first and foremost with God. Wesley asks:

Is thy faith ενεργουμενη δι αγαπης -- filled with the energy of love?
Dost thou love God . . . "with all thy heart, and all thy mind, and with thy soul, and with all thy strength"? . . . Is God the center of thy soul?
The sum of all thy desires? . . . Hath the love of God cast the love of the world out of thy soul?⁵⁶

The Christian must *love* God. Faith without love is dead. And this love-filled faith in God must necessarily result in the love of neighbor; otherwise, it is not truly right-hearted. For Wesley, such right-heartedness is also the only sufficient ground of true Christian unity. Anything short of this is at best a unity of mere belief, not a unity rooted in a common faith alive with love for God and neighbor, a "faith filled with the energy of love." However, when such Christian *orthokardia* is present, it establishes a foundation of mutual Christian love, a "peculiar love" that transcends differences of theological opinion and ecclesial practice.

Wesley concludes this section of his sermon by describing what he means by "give me your hand." He reiterates that this has nothing to do with sharing common lesser opinions or common ecclesial/liturgical practices "I have no desire to dispute with you one moment any of the preceding [points]," says Wesley, "Let them never come into sight."⁵⁷ Rather, he says:

Love me. And that not only as thou lovest all mankind . . . Love me with a very tender affection, as a friend that is closer than a brother; as a brother in Christ, a fellow-citizen of the New Jerusalem . . . Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint-heir in his glory.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See Gregory Clapper, "Orthokardia: The Practical Theology of John Wesley's Heart Religion" *Quarterly Review* 10, 1 (1990) 49-66.

⁵⁶ "Catholic Spirit," 497.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 500.

This is the "peculiar love" which for Wesley serves as the only sufficient basis for true Christian unity. Note that the love that forms the bond of unity between Christians is not "unconditional" – for the simple reason that unity requires mutuality. If Christian love is not mutual, then Christian unity is impossible. "Give me your hand" thus means both a mutual giving and receiving of Christian friendship and brotherhood, all of which are rooted in right belief and right affections.

Finally, "give me your hand" also means to cooperate with one another in the service of God. Says Wesley, "So far as in conscience thou canst, (retaining still thy own opinions, and thy own manner of worshipping God,) join with me in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand."⁵⁹ Cooperation in ministry is indeed a goal; however, it is the final result of a spiritual cooperation of mind and heart that is rooted in a common Christian faith and common Christian love.

We can see in this description of the love and cooperation which result from Wesley's "catholic spirit" that his approach is entirely consistent throughout. Note that for Wesley Christian love has nothing to do with shared lesser opinions or ecclesial forms of practice, but purely with a shared faith and love for God that overflows into love for one's fellow Christian. Likewise, Wesley's call to cooperation in ministry is entirely unrelated to any consideration of shared opinions or forms of worship. In all of these, we see continued evidence of Wesley's unmooring of the question of Christian unity from questions of ecclesiology. Rather, the locus of Christian unity is found precisely *in a relation of shared doctrine and mutual affection* between believers.

On a related note, it may also be observed at this point that Wesley's appeal to Christian unity is essentially an *individual* appeal. Christian unity is predicated on a relation of shared belief and mutual affection between individual believers. And Wesley's apology for Christian unity is intended to persuade and exhort individuals to believe and act accordingly for the furtherance of that unity in the Church – or perhaps more accurately, in Christian society.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Torrance – A Communion of Love

Like Wesley, we see in T. F. Torrance's thought an equally profound commitment to Christian love as the outcome of Christian ecumenical endeavor. However, unlike Wesley, Torrance consistently orients his understanding of that love to his Christocentric ecclesiology. For Torrance, the locus of Christian unity is the love of God poured into the world in and through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. And as Christ's Body, the earthly-historical form of his existence, the Church is the principal place in which that love is to be found:

This Church is a communion of love. . . . In the Christian Church there dwells the personal presence of Jesus Christ and it is His love that masters the community and binds them into unity, and this love was such a new and masterful thing, divine love in its overflow into the lives of men, that a rare word had to be used to describe it — *agape*.⁶⁰

Note, in similarity to Wesley, that Torrance understands Christian love to find its source in the love of God; however, note also in contrast that he emphasizes God's love for the Church as the ground of that love, and Christian love as the "overflow" of God's love. In this manner, Torrance consistently keeps his thought oriented toward the ontological ground of God's being and acts.

This overflow of divine love between Christians in the Church means that the Church is also a community of reconciliation, "a fellowship of those who have been reconciled to God in Christ and those who have therefore been reconciled with one another."⁶¹ This reconciling love is not limited to the interior life of the Church but is an ever-expanding center of the reconciling love of God in the world, coextensive with the proclamation of the Gospel and the Church's embodiment of the Kingdom of Christ in the world.⁶² Sin has corrupted the natural diversities of the world, distorting them into destructive divisions, but Jesus has sent his Body into the

⁶⁰ "What Is the Church?" 16-17.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 17.

⁶² "The Mission of the Church," 138-140.

world “to overcome the power and divisiveness of sin, and so to provide healing for mankind, reconciling man to God and man to man in Himself.”⁶³

Thus, it is within the frame of the Church as a communion of love and community of reconciliation that Torrance locates Christian unity, the nucleus of the eschatological unity of humanity. Tragically, however, sin has also invaded the Church, bringing division where there should be unity, and presenting a divided Church to the world. While God graciously continues to use the Church to draw people to himself, this does not negate the “sin of division.”⁶⁴ And in Torrance’s view, the place at which the Church’s division is to be overcome is the Lord’s Table. Thus:

The discipline of the Lord teaches us that because the Holy Supper witnesses to our unity in Christ, we must first be reconciled with our brother before we bring our gift to the altar, but it also teaches us that it is here above all that we are renewed in our reconciliation with our Lord, and therefore that it is by this renewal that we can be reconciled to one another.⁶⁵

Consequently, Torrance insists that intercommunion between churches should not be the result of their reconciliation, but its starting point. If Communion is the matrix of Christian reconciliation, then it must be so not only among individuals, nor only within a given church or denomination, but also between separated ecclesial bodies. For the real, ontological union and unity we already share as the one Church of Jesus Christ precedes not only all ecclesial structures, but their divisions, as well. Thus, concludes Torrance:

If we are really ready to seek reconciliation in Christ we cannot but enter upon Intercommunion as soon as possible, and, in and through the forgiven and healed relation to Christ which it mediates, work together towards *fullness* of Communion between the Churches.⁶⁶

⁶³ “What Is the Church?” 17.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁶⁵ “The Mission of the Church,” 143.

⁶⁶ *Conflict and Agreement in the Churches, II*, 10–11. Emphasis his.

In light of the above, we can see more clearly the contrast between Torrance and Wesley's approaches to ecumenism. While both see love as the chief characteristic of Christian unity, they diverge in their understanding of its locus and means of attainment. For Torrance, the locus of Christian unity is inherently, and therefore principally, in the relation between Christ and the Church before it is realized between individual Christians. It is therefore principally a corporate unity, which cannot be reduced to matters of individual relations – though it necessarily includes them. Moreover, it is a unity that is objectively real prior to any rational apprehension thereof or mutual affection among those who share in that apprehension – though such should be its outcome. Finally, it is precisely in and through the shared ecclesial practice of Holy Communion that, for Torrance, Christian unity should be undertaken and effected.

Conclusion

In concluding our comparison of Torrance and Wesley's ecumenical thought, we return to our earlier analysis. What appeared to be the case in our comparison of their approaches to ecumenism also appears to hold true in their visions of the fruit of ecumenism. Torrance envisions an ecumenism that flows out of the life of the one Church in its various traditions, while Wesley envisions an ecumenism that flows from a common faith and love between individual Christians. Torrance envisions a unity that is manifest in corporate reunion and sacramental intercommunion, while Wesley envisions a unity that is manifest in Christian friendship and cooperation in ministry.

Without question, these perspectives – both in their approaches and in their anticipated outcomes – are in tension with one another, and potentially at odds. However, what is equally clear is their potential to complement and potentially reinforce one another in important respects. While Torrance would likely not relent in his critique of Wesley's neglect of ecclesiology, he might well recognize the value of Wesley's relational approach as a grassroots ecumenical strategy, and the value of shared mission as a complement to sacramental practice. Conversely while Wesley might accuse Torrance of having too lofty and formal an understanding of Christian unity, it is difficult to imagine him not embracing Torrance's insistence that

the Church is already one in Christ as a more sure foundation for ecumenical endeavor.

As for the significance of our comparison for ecumenism in our time, at the very least we may acknowledge that Wesley and Torrance broadly typify two approaches that continue to appear in ecumenical discourse today. George Lindbeck characterizes these as “unitive” and “interdenominational” approaches. Like Torrance, unitive ecumenists ground their efforts in sacramental theology and patristic *ressourcement*, with emphasis upon the unifying efficacy of Communion. Like Wesley, interdenominational ecumenists are less interested in matters of ecclesial identity and practice, and instead ground their efforts in a common experience of new birth.⁶⁷ Insofar as this is the case, our comparison appears to support the suggestion that these two approaches need not be positioned in mutual opposition. Rather, especially when grounded in a broadly compatible Reformed catholicity, their principles may serve to complement and support one another toward the goal of Christian unity.

⁶⁷ George A. Lindbeck, “Two Kinds of Ecumenism: Unitive and Interdenominational” *Gregorianum* 70:4 (1989) 647-660.