
Reader's Guide: T. F. Torrance, "Access to the Father"

Torrance Reading Group, September 2, 2021, by Kerry Magruder

Thomas F. Torrance, "Access to the Father" (#1988-489c), ch. 2 in *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 47-75; #1988-489. See links for info, an audio version (#1981-TFT-4a), and a PDF of this handout.

1. God's being-in-relation: overcoming the radical dualism of the Hellenistic world (pp. 47-65)

Hellenistic Dualism	Hebraic/Nicene Integration
Mythological thinking	Theological thinking
Center in ourselves	Center in reality (God)
Philo, gnosticism, Arians	Hebraic and Nicene theologians
Primacy of the Creator/creature distinction: Infinite chasm from his works to his being; external relations	Primacy of the Father/Son relation: oneness in being (<i>homoousion</i>); internal relations (being-in-relation)

Athanasius: "It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name God from his works alone and call him Unoriginate" (p. 49).

Scientific knowing = *Kata physin* knowing: "according to nature" (pp. 51ff).

Discuss #1: What would it mean for Christian knowledge of "God and nature" today if we were resolved to have a "scientific" or Christocentric approach; "no creation without Christ"? What might this mean for natural theology? For natural science?

Discuss #2: How is it possible to have a point of access to God which is both in God himself and in our creaturely existence? (p. 52ff.)

Discuss #3: How is it that we can *apprehend* God, though we do not *comprehend* him? (p. 53)

Discuss #4: What is the epistemological role of the Holy Spirit? (p. 56, pp. 61ff.)

Discuss #5: What are the implications for reading and interpreting the Bible? (p. 57)

Three key passages for Nicene theologians: Luke 10:22 (pp. 58-60); 1 Co 2:10 (pp. 61ff.); and John 14:6 (p. 62ff.).

Discuss #6: How does Torrance explain why Jesus did not immediately or openly proclaim himself to his disciples as the Son of God? (p. 60)

Discuss #7: What is meant by the "vicarious humanity" of Christ? (pp. 62ff.)

2. The Contrast with Judaism (pp. 65-68)

Discuss #8: How might the piety of Judaism be co-opted and corrupted by Hellenistic dualism? That is, what does Torrance mean by “the desperate plight of a Judaism that becomes allied to some form of Hellenic dualism” (p. 66)? How might a similar peril confront Christians today?

3. The Contrast with Hellenism (pp. 68-75)

Adolph Harnack (1851-1930), *History of Dogma* (1894-1899), 7 vols.

Harnack asserted that Nicene theology represented “a radical Hellenising of Christianity.”

Torrance responds: “However, far from a radical Hellenisation having taken place something very different happened, for in making use of Greek thought-forms Christian theology radically transformed them in making them vehicles of fundamental doctrines and ideas quite alien to Hellenism” (p. 68).

Example (1): Image (*eikon*), pp. 69-72

Discuss #9: What does Torrance mean by an optical or mimetic model of thought? Does it refer to any kind of visual thinking? (What kinds of visual thinking are not intended?) What are the ramifications of mimetic modes of thought, and why? How is this related to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit?

Example (2): Word (*logos*), pp. 72-73

Discuss #10: What does it mean to proclaim *Deus dixit* = God speaks? That God is not silent, but “intrinsically eloquent, speaking being”?

Discuss #11: The assimilation of the Logos into the Word of the Lord eliminated the dualism of Hellenistic cosmologies which assigned the logos to a principle within nature. In contrast, for Nicene theology, there is no separation between God’s Word, Being, and Act.

Example (3): Activity (*energeia*), pp. 73-74

Discuss #12: What does it mean to proclaim that God acts? That in history, creation, and above all in the Incarnation, God is eternally active in love as an essential and intrinsic aspect of his being?

Discuss #13: How does the Nicene conception of God differ from Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover?

Torrance: “while the Nicene theologians made considerable use of Greek terms and ideas in articulating the conceptual content of the Christian Faith, they reshaped them in a very basic way under the creative impact of the Holy Scriptures. Being, word, and act in patristic theology came to mean something very different from what they meant in Platonic, Aristotelian or Stoic thought: they are in fact radically ‘un-Greek’. Thus far from Nicene theology resulting from a Hellenisation of Biblical Christianity, it represents a recasting of familiar Hellenic thought-forms in order to make them worthy vehicles of the Gospel...” (p. 74)

Discuss #14: Given the Nicene example of recasting familiar cultural thought-forms in order to think in a manner worthy of the Gospel, how does the church confront a similar task in every age? In our era?