

Thomas F. Torrance, “The Eternal Spirit,” Chapter 6 of *The Trinitarian Faith: A Reading & Discussion Guide*

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The Trinitarian Faith (TTF) originated from the Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1981, the 1600th anniversary of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 AD. The first and last chapters of the book were added later. It was published in 1988 and a Cornerstones reissue in 2016.

A critical introduction to the book can be found here:

Myk Habets, ““The Essence of Evangelical Theology.” Critical Introduction to Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*. In Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* Cornerstones Series. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016, vii-xxxii.

Summary of the book:

“*The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* represents a constructive and contemporary account of the Trinity wherein Thomas Torrance masterfully presents the ancient catholic consensus on the doctrine of God and develops those themes with characteristic precision and acumen. Creatively working with the Greek Fathers of the time (the ancient church), Torrance follows the mind (*phronēma*) of the catholic church in constructing an account of the triune persons that, while theologically dense, is not a species of scholastic synthesis, but rather an example of dogmatic theology (catholic), where the biblical and economic witness (evangelical) take precedence over theological propositions.¹”

From the Introduction

- Almost all references in the book are to the Fathers of the Greek east – or what he terms “eastern catholic theology” (p.2).
- The key principle of Pro-Nicene theology is this: only God can reveal God and only so via reconciliation.

“In elaborating the theology of the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed, Torrance made sure to do this within the framework of doxology, ‘the general perspective of faith and devotion within which all Nicene and Constantinopolitan theology must surely be understood, and to give definite expression to the Trinitarian convictions of the church that had been implicit in its faith from the beginning’ (p.2). Here Torrance is representing a distinctive feature of Christian theology that he first learnt from Barth and then from the patristic theologians, that revelation equals reconciliation, ‘for it is only through reconciliation to God by the blood of Christ that we may draw near to him and have access to him’ (p.3). This is what Torrance calls ‘embodied truth’ or ‘embodied doctrine’ (*SJT* 36 [1983]: 4)”²

- The vicarious humanity of Christ and the atoning exchange are at the heart of his theology and are on display throughout TTF.
- The trinitarian taxis is what the Creed acknowledges as the general formula that is revealed – from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit.
- Chapters 6 and 7 should ideally be read together as they form the third article of the Creed. The Spirit unites believers with God and with one another, so the Church becomes the locus of communion.

¹ Habets, ““The Essence of Evangelical Theology,” vii.

² Habets, ““The Essence of Evangelical Theology,” x.

C6: The Eternal Spirit

- Belief in God = belief in the Father, Son, and Spirit (p.191).
- “Holy Spirit” = Divinity + transcendence and immanence of God.
 - God is a personal reality and a dynamic event and this is designated by the term “Holy Spirit.”
- As Spirit is Holy and God, he draws to himself the same awe and adoration as the Father and the Son (p.193).
 - **NB** But TFT will shy away from this in its application, as we shall see below.

1 Prolegomena to the 3rd Article

- Doctrine of God requires Trinity due to the one Baptismal name of God (p.193).
- Spirit = ουσια and υποστασις (p.194).
- Christ is the image of the Father, the Spirit is the image of the Son.
- Doctrine of the *homoousion* of the Spirit – arose at this time between Nicaea and Constantinople (by Epiphanius, etc). (p.195).
- 3 triadic formulae are foundational for apostolic theology (p.197).
 - Baptismal formula – Matt 28:19
 - Benediction of 2 Cor 13:14
 - Giver of Gifts in 1 Cor 12:4-6
 - 3 lists which all start with a different divine person showing their equality.
- Other NT triadic formulae in NT support this (p.198).
- There is a diversity in order which shows equality and a mixture of doxological and mediatorial terms.
- The Creed thus makes explicit what is found in the NT and in early Christian worship (hymns, etc).
- Homoousion is the trinitarian key to pneumatology as it is to Christology (p.199).
- Belief in the deity of 1 leads to belief in the deity of all 3 (p.201).
- From these foundations, a comprehensive pneumatology was then developed by the Greek Fathers.
- Athanasius’ pneumatology was not built on the works of the Spirit *ed extra*, but rather *in se*, the same as that of the Son (p.201). ie. “the propriety of the Spirit of God on the divine side of the line dividing between Creator and the creature, and therefore from the inner relation of the Son to the one being of the Godhead” (p.201).
- Methodologically, pneumatology is derived from:
 - Biblical statements (p.202)
 - Doxological formulae (p.202)
 - Deposit of Faith (p.199)
 - Positive theo-logic (p.202).
- As I wrote in the critical introduction:

“The Deposit of Faith, an important concept for Torrance, acts as a guide here, with regard to the development of doctrinal orthodoxy. The way in which Torrance understands the *depositum fidei*, by means of Irenaeus especially and then the way in which it was utilized in pro-Nicene theology culminating in the Nicene – Constantinopolitan Creed, put him closer to an Eastern Orthodox understanding of the place and role of tradition than he is to Roman Catholicism. His is a more synthetic view of the Great Tradition, which seeks to think with the mind of the church (the *ekklēsiastikon phronēma*) – which is the mind of Christ. As Torrance sees it:

By clarifying the inner structure of the Gospel through subordinating its mind to the meaning (διανοια) of the Holy Scriptures and the apostolic mind (φρονημα), indeed the Mind (νοος) of Christ, which they enshrined, and by giving that structure authoritative expression in the Creed,

the Nicene Council had the effect of establishing in a hitherto unprecedented way the primacy of the Holy Scriptures in the mind of the Catholic Church (p.127).”³

- The Son reveals the Father and is *homoousios* with him. The Son reveals the Spirit and is *homoousios* with him. The Spirit reveals the Son and is *homoousios* with him. Spirit reveals the Father through the Son and is *homoousios* with him.
 - i.e. Fully onto-relational theology
 - The incarnate Son is the key as he is homoousios with God and with humanity – he mediates and actualises knowledge of God for us (p.203).
- Cyril and Basil developed these emphases, but Epiphanius brought them to clear affirmation and influenced the formulation at 381 (p.204-5).

II Interpreting the 3rd Article

1. *God is Spirit and Holy Spirit is God (p.205)*

- First, ‘Spirit’ in the absolute sense simply means divine. This, no crude use of creaturely or material images of God are admissible.
- Epistemic: we only know God by God, we only know Spirit from his internal relations within the Godhead and then from his economic activity (p.208).
- There is an objectivity to our spiritual experience made known by the Spirit’s work (p.208).
- To be ‘in God’ is to have the Spirit of God in us and the Spirit is in God. TFT here alludes to a doctrine of theosis (p.209).
- Based on the Spirit as divine and on the necessity of the Spirit in the trinity of God, TFTs argument is that to have the Spirit is to have the entire Godhead (p.209).
 - **NB** This is the basis for TFTs rejection of the Basilian (and then Palamite) doctrine of the divine essence *vs* the divine energies (p.210)
 - This accounts for the blasphemy of the Spirit pericope too (p.210).
 - 2 implications:
 - Spirit = the mystery and ineffability of God (who is Spirit) and of the Holy Spirit too – i.e. ousia and hypostasis.
 - Thus for TFT the Holy Spirit remains veiled in a way the Father and the Son are not (p.211). the Spirit is the “face of the Father” seen in the face of the Son (p.212). 3 persons but 1 image of eidos.
 - This leads TFT to declare of the Holy Spirit: “We do not know him face to face in his one hypostasis” (p.212).
 - We thus experience three hypostaseis “as one person/prosopon” (p.213).
 - **NB** this is perhaps where I disagree with TFT the most. I do not see the texts or the theo-logic leading to these consequences, and I think this fails to honour what was affirmed earlier, that we know, honour, and worship the Spirit as we do the Father and the Son.
 - P.213 again affirms the principle that the Spirit is God as ineffable and God in his fullness.
 - Ineffability does not mean unintelligibility (p.214).
 - We know God from the Spirit through the Son to the Father.
 - The Spirit of Truth reveals God to us – through the Son to the Father (p.215).
 - This is a “positive ineffability” (p.219).
 - Final para of the section on p.215 alludes to TFTs’s critical realism – through personal communion true knowledge is given while at the same time God remains ineffable (but not unintelligible), p.215.

³ Habets, “The Essence of Evangelical Theology,” xi.

2. **Holy Spirit is personal and inseparable from the Father and Son (p.215)**

- The homoousion of the Son with the Father has the effect of personalising the Father in our experience. The homoousion of the Spirit with the Son (and Father) has the same effect – it personalises our experience of the Spirit (p.216).
- TFT offers an extended summary of pro-Nicene developments of *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *prosopon*, and *ousia*, resulting in the concept of *tropos huparxeos* – or *personal subsistence* (p.219).
- This led to a proper personalisation of the Spirit (p.220).
- **NB** TFT then appeals to Gregory of Nyssa that we know the Spirit in a “sublime and exalted” way as “he is in his own person and in his life-giving power” (p.220). But this contradicts TFT’s earlier point that we can’t really know the Spirit in his own hypostasis, only through in, and as the Son.
- P220-223 provides an excursus on Epiphanius.
 - He spoke of personas as ‘enhyposstatic’ in God – ie coinhering hypostatically in the Godhead (p.221).
 - Homoousion spoke of inner relating of all 3 – such that Spirit is “in the midst” of the Father and Son or is the “bond of the trinity” (p.222).
 - Spirit shares fully in the reciprocal knowing and communing **NB** what I call a **relational ontology**.
 - P.223 TFT returns to a relational ontology in discussing the monarchia of God. Monarchia is not the Father but the Godhead (Being) then expressed by the Father (hypostasis)– Cf the Agreed Statement on the Trinity.
 - No Partitive thinking, no subordinationism, etc.
- p.223-235 excursus in Didymus.
 - An intensely personalised account of the Holy Spirit.
 - **NB** What TFT likes in Didymus appears to be what he rejects in his own theology! – a focus on the Spirit – but one that does not diminish the Father or Son.
- P.225-228 excursus on Cyril
 - Stuck to scriptural in affirming the deity of the Spirit.
 - Spirit animates all things in creation – ie as common grace – p.227.
 - Like Basil, the Spirit perfects the works of God – p.228.
- P.228-230 Basil’s idea of the Spirit as Perfecting Cause.
 - This is important as the sanctifying and perfecting work of the Spirit “personalizes” us. The perfecting cause (Spirit) and the Operative Cause (Son) does not destroy human personhood but establishes it.
 - In Baptism we ‘name God and he seals us with that name’ p.231. This enables an “Abba” relation.
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3. **Procession of the Holy Spirit (p.231-247)**

- As with the Son, so too with the Spirit – both are homoousios, both essentially God, and they are so enhyposstatically – ie Trinity or relational ontology.
- Ie p.233 – God is not God without the Father, Son, and Spirit.
- **NB** here is TFT’s rather distinctive ontology, shared by Scheeben, Mühlen, Staniloae, Weinandy, Anatolios, etc.
- P.234 – TFT sees this also in Augustine’s later trinitarianism on the Spirit as mutual bond of love, etc.
- P.237-8 TFT is critical of the Cappadocians for introducing cause and sequence into generation and spiration.
- Nazianzen is better as he sees a double movement from divine being and enhyposstatically (p.239).
- TFT sees the Cappadocians as locating cause in the *person* of the Father and thus an implicitly Arian view of God resulted.
- Didymus followed, he replaced the Athanasian and Nicene procession of the Spirit from the *being* of the Father with from the *person* of the Father.
- None actually were Arian, all qualify that the Spn and Spirit are eternally and essentially God. ‘Cause’ is relational, not substantial.

- Epiphanius built on Athanasian theology – p.244.
- Spirit proceeds from the Father *with* the Son – p.244. An enhypostatic and essential procession out of the Father (person) but not without the Son (person) and recognising the Spirit is God and in the midst of God – p.245.
- **NB** This is his relational ontology and onto-relational account of the divine being, found more clearly in Staniloae, Weinandy, and endorsed by Coakley and Anatolios, etc.
- Filioque controversy would have been avoided if Athanasian-Epiphanian-Cyrrillian theology was more closely followed – p.246.

- “As a Reformed theologian, Torrance accepts the Fathers as a subordinate standard of authority, under Holy Scripture in terms of formal authority, and like the Reformers, he identifies and adopts key figures and themes as representative of the churches thinking. Notable in this regard throughout *The Trinitarian Faith* are Irenaeus and the Deposit of Faith, Athanasius and the *homoousion*, Epiphanius of Salamis and a relational ontology, Gregory Nazianzen’s teaching that the Father is not the cause (*aitia*) of the being of the Son and Spirit (as claimed by Basil and Gregory Nyssen), and Cyril of Alexandria’s stress upon what we might express as Trinity in Unity, Unity in Trinity. Of course, many other figures and many other themes are at play in this work, and they are on display for all to see, but these are some of the central ones.”⁴

3. *Holy Spirit and Church (p.247-250)*

- The Spirit received by the church via Christ is the same who spoke through the OT prophets.
- Word and Spirit have an indissoluble relation.
 - Epiclesis – to Word in Athanasius, to Spirit in the Jerusalem Rite.
 - Vicarious advocacy of the Spirit – the High Priestly Spirit – p.249-250.
 - CF Rom 8 – Spirit creates prayer and worship through his heavenly advocacy and intercession.

Summary p.250-251

- Spirit is bond of Trinity, dwells in midst of Trinity, creates community among us, and brings us into divine community.
- So church is the body of Christ due to communion and personalization of the Spirit. Church is the locus of theosis.

Critique

- TFT’s work is profound and helpful, but it is not without its critics. Here I simply note some of the critique and then focus on just one of these points.
- 1. Use of sources and ability as a Patristics scholar.
 - a. This is an oft-repeated critique of TFTs theology, that it plays fast and loose with the sources, turns people into heroes and villains, lacks historical nuance, and reads back into people TFTs own ideas. It is not uncommon to read about how TFT turned Athanasius into a Torrancean, for example, or that Augustine was the root of all theological evils, etc.
 - b. My critical introduction addresses these concerns head on.

“Morwenna Ludlow notes the tendency to mistake the genre of Torrance’s work, commenting that ‘[his historical work] is carried out on partly textual grounds, but also in response to broader questions being discussed between systematic theologians’. [Morwenna Ludlow, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.]

As a work of Christian dogmatics informed by the Tradition, Torrance modelled what today is called a theology of retrieval. But, in Torrance’s hands, the Tradition is not a static monolithic ‘thing’ to be reckoned with. Rather, Tradition is one aspect of the church universal, as together, under the Spirit and in the Word, the

⁴ Habets, “The Essence of Evangelical Theology,” xi-xii.

people of God discern the mind of Christ. It is on this basis that Torrance could place so much confidence in the ecumenical creeds and the theology they have bequeathed to the later church, such as the *homoousion*, *perichoresis*, and such like. This method, if we may call it such, has not gone unchallenged, however. Many historians still believe they can do history in the abstract, in a vacuum as it were, shielded from genuinely theological questions and commitments. Certain systematic theologians, likewise, operate on the assumption that it is legitimate to move from a reading of biblical texts to their immediate systemization, as if the Bible were a badly conceived book of doctrine requiring human help to make it coherent, and rendering the history of Christian thought to a footnote in failed interpretation. Torrance, of course, is neither a ‘detached’ historian nor a ‘pure’ systematician. Ludlow has described Torrance’s method as follows: ‘Torrance constructs a line of what one might call Trinitarian heroes extending from the earliest discussions of the idea of a triune God via Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus to Calvin, and thence to Barth. He thus ... supports his argument ... by placing Nazianzen in a tradition or family of theological antecedents and descendants of whom Torrance approves.’ Ludlow is correct; Torrance creates a theological lineage and lines up his representatives on either side of that divide. Torrance is not alone in this method; in fact, he stands with a great host of church voices. This is nowhere more evident than in the way he uses the *homoousion* throughout *The Trinitarian Faith*.⁵

2. Lack of a developed pneumatology

- a. This is a critique I have offered myself, although it has been misunderstood. TFT’s work is robustly trinitarian—perhaps it is the most trinitarian work produced in the 20th century—that is not in dispute. But a trinitarian theology differs from a pneumatology in that a pneumatology is a developed and comprehensive account of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. TFT’s theology is spiritually rich, but I still contend, it is not yet a robust pneumatology.

- b. In my thesis book I argue that:

“Davidson maintains that any reclamation of the theological couplet must be supplemented with a robust pneumatology in order to specify the relevance of the human Jesus for revelation, salvation, anthropology, ethics and ecclesiology. Davidson is surely correct in this assessment and it is at this point that Torrance’s theology is somewhat lacking. In his discussion of *enhypostasia* and *anhypostasia*, and other christological themes, Torrance speaks of the Holy Spirit regularly but fails adequately to incorporate a pneumatological discourse. By positing too great an emphasis on the agency of the divine Word on the human nature of Jesus, as opposed to a relation mediated by the Holy Spirit, Torrance implicitly makes the human nature of Christ merely instrumental. It would be too much to suggest that Torrance’s christology is docetic or Apollinarian, but his lack of pneumatology in this area does risk bringing him to the brink of such a failing.”⁶

- c. A robust pneumatology would be evident in a detailed discussion of the incarnation dynamics of Jesus’ life, in a study of the cross, in issues of practical theology, and most especially, in detailed discussion of the Christian life. Which leads to the next point of critique.

3. Impractical Theology at Risk of Projectionism

- This concern has been addressed by Simeon Zahl in his work *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (OUP, 2020). Zahl’s work is concerned to make the connections between theology and experience in the belief, well-founded, that theologians often wax eloquent about the theoretical, ontological, or theological aspects of the Christian life, but rarely if ever actually discuss the experiential aspects of the faith. Zahl holds TFT up as a prime example of this problem. I summarise this below.

1. Zahl notes the recent rejection of forensic accounts of justification in favour of participatory ones, especially those that empathise theosis, based on claims that these participatory accounts offer a more experientially rich portrayal of the faith. Zahl disagrees and TFT is one of his representative figures to make his case.

⁵ Habets, “The Essence of Evangelical Theology,” xv-xvi.

⁶ Habets, *Thesis in the Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 71.

2. TFTs premise, noted above, is that theologians should have “nothing to do with any attempt to reach an understanding of the Spirit beginning from manifestations or operations of the Spirit in creaturely existence, in man or in the world” (TTF, 201).
 - a. **Why did TTF make this claim?**
 - b. **What was TTF safeguarding in making this statement?**
 - c. **Was it an over-reaction or not?**
3. Christ, who is homoousios with God and man, acts for us in every dimension of salvation, such that our salvation is a participation in his already completed salvation. We share via ontological participation in the finished work of Christ. Notions of ransom, sacrifice, propitiation, expiation, reconciliation, etc are retained, but contextualised into a the more fundamental scheme of participation. By means of the Holy Spirit, people share in the salvation Christ has achieved. The Spirit is the agent of deification.
4. It is here that Zahl finds TTF wanting: “But what is such participation like from the perspective of the participant? ... Are there any practically recognizable experiential correlates to this process? Does it change our feelings or desires or cognitions or behaviours? ... Torrance makes no attempt to answer these questions” (Zahl, p.97). Zahl’s critique then matches my own above, “From the perspective of a full-orbed pneumatology, this seems a deep weakness in Torrance’s account” (Zahl, p.97).
5. There are two possibilities for TFTs silence, according to Zahl: 1) the work of the Spirit in salvation never affects actual human bodies in time; or 2) there are experiential correlates of participation, but the task of theologically analyzing or describing them is so laden with problems that it should never be attempted” (Zahl, p.97).
 - a. **Are these our only options, however?**
 - b. **What alternatives are there?**
6. TTF always defaults to ontological descriptions as opposed to experiential ones. The Spirit works in the ontological depths of our humanity and existence (see TTF p.181, 156, 155, 159 for examples). This amounts to a “rhetorical sleight of hand on the subject of experience” (Zahl, p.98).
7. “From the perspective of pneumatology, this will not do. ... a purely ‘invisible’ Christianity is one that does not take seriously the reality of the Holy Spirit” (Zahl, p.99).
8. Once again echoing my own conclusions, Zahl writes, “absent any affectively and experientially plausible account of how theosis might play out in the world, Torrance’s soteriology ends up operating, in practice, at the level of pure conceptuality. It functions as a kind of pneumatological Docetism: it has no real connection to bodies, just the appearance of such a connection” (Zahl, p.99).
9. Zahl concludes, “far from reintegrating experience into theology, Torrance’s account of participation simply reestablishes an earlier Protestantism’s naïve anti-experientialism on a framework of deification” (Zahl, p.101).
 - a. **What accounts for this reluctance (omission) on TFTs part to talk about Christian experience?**
 - b. **How much did Barth influence TTF here in TFTs fear of “Neo-Protestant subjectivism”?**
 - c. **How is TFTs insistence on a purely “objective relation toward God” an antidote to subjectivism?**
 - d. **Can there be a middle ground here, or is it a zero-sum game?**

The challenge for Torrance scholars is how to move beyond Torrance without leaving him behind. As with Barth, so too may it be with Torrance, that one can’t do theology today without going through Torrance. Any detours are too costly.