

Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time, and Resurrection*, Preface and Introduction
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Chapter in a Nutshell:

This “rather difficult” introduction is concerned largely with Torrance’s epistemological convictions and their implications for theological work. This introduction functions as something of a transition between Torrance’s early epistemological work as found in *Theological Science* and his major epistemological works published in the eighties (*The Ground and Grammar of Theology, Christian Theology and Scientific Culture, Reality and Evangelical Theology, Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge*). We see several key ideas developed with more explicit connection to how they operate in practice than in some other treatments.

Outline:

Preface:

-Torrance begins with a recollection of a conversation he had with Karl Barth regarding science, epistemology, and the resurrection. The major focus is that we must move natural theology/epistemology into the structure of our theology rather than developing it independently and then forcing our theology to conform to it.

-Torrance also emphasizes the centrality of the resurrection as the “starting point” of Barth’s theology. While Torrance is generally in agreement with Barth’s assessment, some of Barth’s would-be followers made Torrance feel that it must be clarified that this must also include Incarnation.

Introduction:

-Torrance opens his introduction with an appeal for a unitary relationship between form and content, method and subject-matter. This unitary way of engaging with biblical and theological issues is characteristic of Torrance’s whole way of thinking. Crucially, Torrance highlights that this is manifested in and demanded by our investigation into the Incarnation and the New Testament scriptures.

-It should be noted that, in one place, this conviction is expressed in a way that can lead to confusion (a la Thiemann). When Torrance says that we do not have to do with a “non-cognitive” relation. One might assume that he means we have a *merely* cognitive revelation. This is not what Torrance means as is evident in his other writings. “He is the Truth communicating Himself in and through truths, who does not communicate Himself

apart from truths, and who does not communicate truths apart from Himself.”
(*Theological Science*, 147).

-Note also the way Torrance discusses faith. Faith may indeed be a subjective experience, but when understood correctly, it is not *merely* subjective. Torrance elsewhere uses “personal” in the Polanyian way of expressing when the subjective and objective poles in our knowledge are properly coordinated.

-Pages 5-7. While he does not use the term, Torrance expounds on what he elsewhere calls kataphysic understanding of biblical interpretation where we understand the scriptures properly only when we understand them according to their natures. He also includes critiques of contrary approaches.

-Torrance articulates four points of clarification as to the use of scripture in theology:

1. Theology is not developed deductively from biblical statements. Torrance finds this error evident in seemingly opposite views of nominalism (terms have no real connection to realities) and extreme realism (terms and realities are not significantly separable)
2. Theology is equally not developed deductively from “raw” or “uninterpreted” facts of experience as in “Neo-Protestantism.”

-Torrance connects this attitude to Newton’s claim that he feigned no hypotheses but only deduced his theories from experience. This inadequate assessment of his own work could be seen as sowing the seeds of Positivism.

-Newton and Neo-Protestantism both assume that “experiences” are individual, isolated things that can be distinguished and separated from the field in which they are experienced. Before Clerk Maxwell and Einstein, this could be seen as reasonable, even “scientific.” We now know that even in the most “objective” of natural sciences, phenomena and field cannot be separated.

3. Theology is not interested in “what really happened,” when such is defined as being what Biblical Scholars can unearth through analysis. Whatever such an approach can yield, it is not what arose organically in the life of the church and so will always be a distorted oversimplification. The theologian must consider all the multi-layered complexity of scripture into account, paying special attention to the aim of the scripture.

As such, Torrance states that the theologian must “dwell in the semantic focus of the many-layered memory or tradition embodied in the New Testament.” This is an expression of kataphysic investigation and is also tied in to the multi-layered development of our theories as expressed in books like *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* and *The Christian Doctrine of God*.

4. The theologian “interprets the New Testament Scriptures within the framework of objective meaning which gave rise to the layered character of the apostolic tradition embodied in the New Testament...” This is a further unpacking of the stratified structure of our scientific theories. This is contrasted with the tendency in Biblical scholarship to separate the particulars in the scripture and so lose their joint significance (stereoscope).

-Here, Torrance also alludes to ultimate beliefs. While such an emphasis goes a long way to why he has been labeled a “fideist,” Torrance explains why, when

dealing with ultimates, there is a proper circularity. [As an editorial aside, this is really not all that far removed from how natural science operates. After all, one cannot give an account of the basis of the study of physics that somehow bypasses the actual physical world. At some point, every properly scientific enterprise must take its object as given and resist calls to justify its existence on independent grounds.]

Starting on page 17, Torrance shifts from epistemological and hermeneutical considerations toward preliminary comments on the content of the book.

-Incarnation and Resurrection “forced themselves on the minds of Christians” as ultimate beliefs, generating an alternative to the prevailing conceptual system.

-“It is still in that way that the incarnation and the resurrection force themselves upon our minds, within the vastly changed cultural and scientific outlook of our own times.” This is Torrance’s way of claiming that all the cultural and scientific changes cannot be used to reject Christian faith as these central events are *ultimate* beliefs and not consequents on cultural or scientific antecedents.

-In the light of the previous reflections, this book is going to be primarily about examining these ultimate beliefs, understanding their empirical/theoretical basis, and unpacking their implications. No attempt will be made to justify them, just as there is no attempt to justify the physical world throughout a physics textbook.

-Torrance also (22-23) anticipates the way the three levels of our scientific theories work themselves out, an idea that is fleshed out elsewhere. Each level is open to the ones above them but are not reducible downwards. The importance of “empirical correlates” are hinted at but not fleshed out, as they will be taken up in subsequent chapters.

Questions for reflection on Preface and Introduction

1. In your church tradition, what is the “starting point” of theology? Is the “starting point” implied by the practice of ministers and laypeople different than the one stated in official documents?
2. Torrance stresses that we must not “think thoughts” or “think statements,” but “think reality *through* thoughts and statements.” Where have you errors as the result of thinking statements and how are they solved by thinking realities?
3. Torrance makes four points of clarification about how theology works or does not work. It could be argued that each of his concerns are alive and well in the church. Where have you seen them at work and how might they be overcome?
4. In what way do ultimate beliefs shape our theological convictions? Where do your ultimate beliefs rise to the surface?