

THOMAS F. TORRANCE'S THEOLOGY OF THE ASCENSION:

A Practical Theological Dogmatic Sketch

Stavan Narendra John, Ph.D.

**Assistant Professor of Theology, South Asia Institute of Advanced Studies,
Bangalore, India**

stavan.john@saiacs.org

Abstract: *This essay utilizes the three lenses of holism (ontology, spatiality, present ministry) from a recent study on Torrance's theology of the ascension to provide a practical theological dogmatic sketch. Specifically, through Torrance's trenchant acknowledgement of a robustly embodied ascended Christ, this work maintains that theological anthropology will be distinctly embodied in the eschaton, leading retrospectively and prospectively to a thoroughgoing rejection of all forms of Platonic thinking. Torrance's theology of space-time that affirms a spatiality attuned toward reconciliation and new creation arguably offers a macroscopic theological vision for concrete places in the world today. The salvific import of the doctrine of the ascension in Torrance's thought is a generative insight that can dialogue with proposals in mission theology that are calling for a paradigm shift from a cross-centered theology to one that is centered on the ascension, especially with respect to missions and evangelism. Cumulatively, through such an exploration, this article will demonstrate that Torrance's theology of the ascension is a fecund resource (albeit with certain shortcomings) that is not just theologically sophisticated but also practically relevant.*

1. Introduction

Torrance's theology is not known for its simplicity or accessibility. Elmer Colyer sheds light on this aspect of Torrance's work when he explains: "Torrance is a theological heavyweight whose writing style can be dense to the point of obscurity."¹ Torrance himself readily conceded that his theological writing is difficult to understand at points: "My weakness, I think, is my style. I do not know a way to put my theology across that makes for easy reading."² While the complexity of Torrance's writing has proved to be a stumbling block for some,³ many others continue to find his theology richly rewarding. Colyer again helpfully captures this sentiment when he avers: "The difficulty and obscurity of Torrance's theology was frustrating, yet I repeatedly found myself coming to understand what I had always tacitly believed as a Christian in a way that deepened my faith and clarified my grasp of the theological structure of the gospel."⁴ Contemporary studies on Torrance's theology acknowledge the challenges associated with reading and understanding his vast oeuvre "which canvas the fields of Christian dogmatics, science, philosophy, art, and culture."⁵ Myk Habets, for instance, argues that in comparison to most of Torrance's "academic works," the sermons he wrote "by contrast are immensely and attractively readable and accessible."⁶ Building on Habets's insights in my own work, I contend that Torrance's theological writings, with the ascension as a case study, demonstrate his remarkable ability to utilize art

¹ Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian & Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 15–16.

² Michael Bauman, *Roundtable: Conversations with European Theologians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 117–118.

³ Robert J. Stamps, *The Sacrament of the Word Made Flesh: The Eucharistic Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2007), 290, for instance, observes in the context of Torrance's theology of the Eucharistic that: "Torrance's doctrine ... might ultimately be disregarded not for its sheer realism, but for its sheer complexity."

⁴ Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 18.

⁵ Myk Habets, "Theologia Is Eusebia: Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 259.

⁶ Habets, "Theologia Is Eusebia: Thomas F. Torrance's Church Homiletics," 259.

and mystery to communicate dense theological concepts, not least the extra Calvinisticum, in a compelling manner. I therefore suggest that more work is needed to study Torrance's theology from a rhetorical perspective.⁷ One can make a strong case that Torrance's theology is accessible on many levels, but needs to be studied from different vantage points, such as his sermons and his use of rhetoric, for example, to appreciate it. However, much more work is needed to investigate the various ways in which Torrance's rich theology can be made accessible to the church at-large.

It is not uncommon to hear Torrance scholars bemoan the fact that his theology is not read more widely in the church. Marty Folsom is intimately aware of this lacuna, and through his ongoing five-volume work entitled *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone*, he is arguably providing a model for Barth scholarship that needs to be emulated for other theologians. Akin to how Folsom is making Barth's dense yet rich theology accessible to a vast ecclesial audience,⁸ a similar work is needed on Torrance. In this regard, Gerrit Dawson's work on the ascension is an excellent example of how a technical theological locus such as the ascension can be translated to an ecclesial setting without compromising depth.⁹ On a broader level, Stephen Morrison's overview of Torrance's theology in his *Plain English Series* commendably introduces his major theological themes in an accessible manner.¹⁰ These three theologians, in their own respective ways, are theological translators,

⁷ Stavan Narendra John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," (PhD diss., OCMS/Middlesex University 2022), 126–130.

⁸ Two volumes in the series have been published so far: Marty Folsom: *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone, Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners & Pros* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2022); and *Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone, Volume 2: The Doctrine of God: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners & Pros* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023). Marty Folsom also leads a T. F. Torrance Reading Group (Zoom) that meets weekly to discuss both the primary and secondary resources on Torrance's theology. These videos are posted on the Facebook Reading Group page and on YouTube; therefore, they have a wide reach. For more, see: <https://tftorrance.org/readingGroup>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/209427593830583>; <https://www.youtube.com/@t.f.torrancereadinggroup5430>.

⁹ Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

¹⁰ Stephen D. Morrison, *T. F. Torrance in Plain English* (Columbus, OH: Beloved Publishing, 2017).

as it were, and are extending the reach of Torrance's theology to audiences that would otherwise probably not read his work. This is an ongoing task, and through this essay, I hope to join the conversation.

In this essay I seek to communicate some of the practical implications of Torrance's magisterial work on the ascension. Specifically, through Torrance's trenchant acknowledgement of a robustly embodied ascended Christ, I maintain that theological anthropology will be distinctly embodied in the eschaton, leading retrospectively and prospectively to a thoroughgoing rejection of all forms of Platonic thinking. Furthermore, through Torrance's theology of space-time that affirms a spatiality attuned toward reconciliation and new creation, arguably, he offers a macroscopic theological vision for concrete places in the world today. In addition, the salvific import of the doctrine of the ascension in Torrance's thought is a generative insight that can dialogue with proposals in mission theology that are calling for a paradigm shift from a cross-centered theology to one that is centered on the ascension, especially with respect to missions and evangelism. Cumulatively, through such an exploration of the ascension in dialogue with certain aspects of (1) theological anthropology, (2) theology of space-time, and (3) mission theology, this work aims to demonstrate that Torrance's theology of the ascension is a fecund resource (albeit with certain shortcomings) that is not just theologically sophisticated but also practically relevant.

2. Ascension and Theological Anthropology

Torrance's affirmation of an embodied ascended Christ (albeit in a transformed resurrection body) is trenchant and unequivocal.¹¹ Eloquently, Torrance explains: "The hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Jesus preserves the human and creaturely being he took from us."¹² He goes on to enumerate the implications such a view has for theological anthropology in this manner: "it is in and through our sharing in that human and creaturely being, sanctified and blessed

¹¹ For a more detailed overview of Torrance's views on the ascension vis-à-vis theological anthropology, see John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," 56–62; 77–81.

¹² Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 136.

in him, that we share in the life of God while remaining what we were made to be, men and not gods.”¹³ In other words, humankind is assured an eschatological existence as human beings, and any fears of being expunged in the eschaton are to be dispelled. Torrance argues that to deny such a view would be tantamount to rejecting Christian orthodoxy.¹⁴

Torrance’s vision of Christian eschatology is a clear rejection of Platonic thinking prospectively and retrospectively. By this, is meant, retrospectively, that all aspects of life are sacred. Any view that affirms a divide or a prioritization of the spiritual over the material aspects of life should be rejected as a *dualistic* imposition. Torrance fleshes out his theological anthropology primarily from a *theological* perspective,¹⁵ but does not go on to provide a detailed elaboration of how his views entail practical implications. In recent scholarship, perhaps no one has been able to disseminate a theological anthropology that is holistic, accessible, and importantly grounded in a robustly corporeal account of the resurrection (and ascension) better than N. T. Wright.¹⁶ Wright offers helpful insights that shed light on how an affirmation of Jesus’s embodiment in the resurrection and ascension has significance for today.

Principally, Wright maintains that the future Christian hope of bodily resurrection provides a compelling rationale for ethics, social responsibility, and stewardship of one’s vocation.¹⁷

The point of the resurrection ... is that *the present bodily life is not*

¹³ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1960), 176.

¹⁵ See John, “The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance’s Holistic Christology,” 56–62.

¹⁶ N. T. Wright: *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), which is aimed at an academic audience; and *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2007), which is his popular book written for a wider readership.

¹⁷ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 193. Also see Amy L. Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), who depends on Wright’s work in several places to develop a theology of “vocational stewardship.”

valueless just because it will die. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it. And if this applies to ethics, as in 1 Corinthians 6, it certainly applies to the various vocations to which God's people are called. What you *do* in the present — by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself — *will last into God's future.*¹⁸

In another place, Wright sheds further light, specifically on 1 Corinthians 15:58 vis-à-vis how the future resurrection compels one to present action in society:

Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit led-teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world — all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.¹⁹

Torrance does not flesh out the implications of Jesus's resurrection and ascension in the manner that Wright does, but arguably, he would concur with everything that Wright espoused above. Retrospectively, therefore, Wright provides illuminating insights on how beliefs about the future should impact the way we live in the world today, and in doing so, provides resources for how Torrance's theological views could be illuminated in a practical manner. What about the prospective implications of Jesus's embodiment in the ascension?

¹⁸ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 193. (Emphasis in original.)

¹⁹ Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208.

Prospectively, Torrance's views on the embodied ascended Christ impact the way we must think about our eschatological destiny as *corporeal* human beings. In case some think otherwise, he issues a cautionary exhortation: "There are people who imagine that in eternity all personalities are swallowed up and lost in God, that all temporal distinctions, and all that is finite and individual, melt into the infinite. That may be the view of some heathen Nirvana, but it is certainly not the teaching of the Christian faith."²⁰ Ultimately, for Torrance, the Christian eschatological vision is found in a new creation, which cannot now be fully grasped, but it will comprise "a new heaven and a new earth peopled with human beings living in holy and loving fellowship with God, with one another, and in harmony with the fullness of creation."²¹ Importantly, he goes on to insist that such a destiny is not in an esoteric realm, but one wherein heaven and earth will be brought together: "the Kingdom of God is not a realm characterized by heaven only. It is a homely Kingdom with earth in it."²² While Torrance is reticent to provide too many details about new creation, he does clarify that: "Whatever else that may mean it certainly implies a physical existence of created beings."²³

In light of this, one can state that there will be persons with resurrected bodies in the new creation, but there will also be redeemed space and time.²⁴ Gender and sexuality, as male and female, in its redeemed form will also be present

²⁰ Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*, 176.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²² *Ibid.*, 176.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Thomas F. Torrance: *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997); *Space, Time and Resurrection*. See also John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," 91–134.

in the new creation, as well as redeemed ethnicity.²⁵ Importantly, the resurrected and embodied ascended Christ will be in the new creation and will continue to mediate God the Father to human beings there.²⁶ This is an aspect of the *visio Dei* that is debated within theology generally,²⁷ but Torrance clearly interprets the *visio Dei* Christologically: "The Father whom we shall see yonder is none other than Him whom we see in Jesus. Yonder we shall see Him in a fullness of vision which is denied to us here, but it will ever be God as revealed to us in Jesus and no other for there is no other."²⁸ Torrance's views on the ascension vis-à-vis theological anthropology have significant practical implications, as this section has demonstrated. It will pay to focus on how his views on the ascension in relation to space-time have consequences for today.

²⁵ See Thomas F. Torrance, "The Soul and Person, in Theological Perspective," in *Religion, Reason and the Self: Essays in Honour of Hywel D. Lewis*, ed. Stewart R. Sutherland and T. A. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989), 109, where he clarifies that gender and sexual differentiation as male and female will continue in the eschaton, albeit without sexual procreation: "this divinely instituted union between man and woman is a characteristic not only of their creation but of their life in the resurrection in which their creation as man and woman will be brought to its ultimate completion." See Thomas F. Torrance, "Salvation is of the Jews," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 22 (1950): 166, where he explains that Jesus's ethnicity is not something he gave up at the resurrection but continues to possess it: "when God came into this world He came as Jew. And to this very day Jesus remains a Jew while still the eternal Son of God."

²⁶ Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*, 182–183.

²⁷ The debate surrounds what role the person of Christ will play in the *visio Dei*. For some, the *visio Dei* will be mediated through the person of Christ; for others, human beings will be able to see God without Christ's mediation, and for still others, Christ will play a role in mediating the *visio Dei*, but the vision of God will not be solely fixated on the person of Christ, but on the Triune God *through* Christ. See Suzanne McDonald, "Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ: John Owen and the 'Reforming' of the Beatific Vision," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to John Owen's Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (London: Routledge, 2016), 141–158; Simon Francis Gaine, "Thomas Aquinas and John Owen on the beatific vision: A Reply to Suzanne McDonald," *New Blackfriars* 97 (2016): 432–446; Gavin Ortlund, "Will We See God's Essence? A Defence of a Thomistic Account of the Beatific Vision," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 74 (2021): 323–332.

²⁸ Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today*, 183.

3. Ascension and Theology of Space-Time

Torrance's theology of space-time vis-à-vis the ascension takes its point of departure from the incarnation.²⁹ In other words, the incarnation and the ascension share similar space-time theological convictions. Says Torrance, "As in the incarnation we have to think of God the Son becoming man without ceasing to be transcendent God, so in his ascension we have to think of Christ as ascending above all space and time without ceasing to be man or without any diminishment of his physical, historical existence."³⁰ Just as the incarnation does not amount to an elimination of the divinity of the Son, Torrance declares, so too, in the ascension, the humanity of Christ is not surrendered.³¹ Importantly, this means that what happens to Christ in the ascension has direct ramifications for space-time as well, which Torrance expounds through the category of "redemption," rather than eradication.³² To this end, Torrance urges one to recognize that "the resurrection means the *redemption of space and time*, for space and time are not abrogated or transcended. Rather they are healed and restored."³³ This category of "redemption," notwithstanding Torrance's many other notable contributions in this area, sheds light on how his theology of space-time has implications for today.

Alistair McGrath correctly points out that Torrance's theology of space-time is principally "physicalist or ontological" in nature, thereby underscoring the reality of God's condescension into our human space-time reality.³⁴ McGrath commends Torrance's prioritization of the objective reality of God's interaction with our space-time, because it undercuts "subjective approaches," "vested interacts and personal

²⁹ For a more detailed exploration of Torrance's theology of the ascension vis-à-vis space-time, see John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," 91–134.

³⁰ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 129.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 90.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Alistair McGrath, "Place, History and Incarnation: On the Subjective Aspects of Christology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 75 (2022): 138.

biases" that human beings can foist onto a theology of space and time.³⁵ However, McGrath also accurately observes that Torrance's spatial theology of the incarnation does not sufficiently address the "subjective impact of Christ on embodied humanity."³⁶ He goes on to construct a model that balances the "objective" with the "subjective,"³⁷ in a theology of space-time, particularly by taking into account the "affective"³⁸ aspects.

Inspired by Simeon Zahl's critique of the lack an "affective"³⁹ emphasis in theology in general and Torrance in particular, McGrath seeks to develop a theological model of space-time that explores the impact of "subjective human concerns and interests" as well.⁴⁰ McGrath does this principally by utilizing the concepts "history" and "place," which he believes will extend Torrance's own theology of space-time in ways that address *both* theological and philosophical issues, but also existential concerns.⁴¹ Propelled by such a conviction, McGrath explains: "the ... concepts of 'history' and 'place' captures the fact that both are domains of human habitation and construction, and hence are linked with a series of existentially significant issues (such as the shaping of personal and cultural identity) that affect the way we feel about and act within the world."⁴² The practical outworking of such an approach, for instance, will mean simultaneously affirming two aspects when one looks at the doctrine of the incarnation. The focus will not just be on discerning with Torrance (1) "objectively ... how a transcendent God could be positioned using the four coordinates x , y , z , and t ," but also (2) subjectively with Zahl and McGrath: "to believe rightly in the Incarnation is to be

³⁵ McGrath, "Place, history and incarnation," 139.

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

³⁷ Ibid., 140–147.

³⁸ Ibid., 139–140. McGrath's theological construction on the "affective" aspects of space and time is inspired by Simeon Zahl's work on the subject. For more, see Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

³⁹ McGrath, "Place, History and Incarnation," 139.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁴¹ Ibid., 140.

⁴² McGrath, "Place, history and incarnation," 140.

filled with the affection of love.”⁴³ This constructive suggestion from McGrath will certainly bolster Torrance’s own account in helpful ways. There is, however, a seed idea in Torrance’s own theology that must be noted here, because it can add to the excellent insights on the “affective”⁴⁴ aspects that McGrath highlights.

Torrance’s affirmation of both oneness and threeness within the Trinity can shape a theology of space-time that has significant practical implications. Torrance writes: “the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinctive Persons ... [who] dwell *in* one another ... in such an intimate way ... that their individual characteristics instead of dividing them from one another unite them indivisibly ... and yet in the mystery of their perichoretic inter-relations they are not three Gods but only one God.”⁴⁵ This fundamental theological conviction about the Trinity — of both oneness and threeness can shape a theology of spatiality in important ways. While Torrance himself does not flesh out the implications, Murray Rae and John Webster do so in ways that are arguably consonant with Torrance’s theology.

Writing in the context of Barth’s theology of space from a Trinitarian perspective, Rae explains that “Space is, on Barth’s account, a condition by which one person is differentiated from another — in God first!”⁴⁶ Importantly, Rae notes that this means: “proximity and distance are essential to the distinction of and communion between the divine persons.”⁴⁷ As stated above, Torrance would concur with this theological view about “proximity and distance,”⁴⁸ but it is important to see how such a view would be helpful in shaping a practical theology of space-time. Webster is especially helpful in this regard because he is convinced that “distance

⁴³ Simeon Zahl, “On the Affective Saliency of Doctrines,” *Modern Theology* 31 (2015): 432. McGrath quotes this phrase from Zahl in his article. For more see: McGrath, “Place, History and Incarnation,” 147.

⁴⁴ McGrath, “Place, History and Incarnation,” 139–140.

⁴⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 172.

⁴⁶ Murray Rae, “The Spatiality of God,” in *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, ed. Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2012), 79.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

and proximity” undergird a theology of spatiality that fosters “mutuality and togetherness” — between God and human beings, and consequently between human beings themselves.⁴⁹ However, Webster is keenly aware that in such a theological conceptualization of space, various “sinful perversion[s]” could conceivably set a new agenda that is opposed to God’s telos for space.⁵⁰ “[R]elative independence” was meant to lead to “spatial relation,” but it could lead instead to “spatial autonomy.”⁵¹ Similarly, “mutual determination of creatures” was designed by God to be good, but instead of leading to deep interpersonal relationships, the very antithesis of this could obtain — people could end up as “agnostics.”⁵² Furthermore, “the gift of space” is a wholly good notion, but instead of fostering benevolence, it could end up as “possessed territory.”⁵³ However, in and through the incarnation, Webster declares, Christ overcomes all antithetical forces and sets space aright:

He has set an end to the wicked project of spatial autonomy. In him all creaturely places are reordered, by being claimed with the full authority of the one who is Lord of heaven and earth, as the spaces in which we are to discover the presence of God. And being so claimed, they are also made into places of adjacency to other creatures.... in Jesus Christ, now present to all places through the Spirit’s power, space is made a medium of fellowship.⁵⁴

Rae and Webster’s insights clearly show how a Trinitarian spatial theology can be fleshed out in practical ways to underscore mutuality and deep interpersonal relationships. Together with McGrath’s constructive contributions, there are clear suggestions about how Torrance’s rich theology of space-time can be practically

⁴⁹ John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 105.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

relevant to the church and world at large. Having briefly explored the practical implications of Torrance's theology of the ascension vis-à-vis theological anthropology and a theology of space-time, it is important to discern how his theology can dialogue with certain discussions taking place within mission theology.

4. Ascension and Mission Theology

The ascension is a crucial doctrine in Torrance's theology. He underscores this fact when he declares that the "Ascension is not just an addendum to the story of Jesus, a ringing down of the curtain on his earthly life, but it is one of the great essential salvation events."⁵⁵ This is so, Torrance explains, because the goal of the incarnation was not fully realized until the ascension; it is in the ascension that the ultimate destiny for humankind is manifested. To this end, Torrance points out that the ascension "was the completion of the Incarnation event ... The very same body which had been born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified, and died and was buried, ascended into heaven for the accomplishment of all things. Thus, the saving work of Christ reaches up into eternity, into the ultimate mystery of God."⁵⁶ Far from being static, however, the doctrine of the ascension, for Torrance, testifies to the ongoing present ministry of Jesus, not least through his ministry of intercession.⁵⁷ Torrance writes, "The Heavenly Session of Christ speaks of the fact that he ever lives to make intercession for us as our Advocate and High Priest and only Mediator, and prays and intercedes for us."⁵⁸ David Fergusson memorably summarizes Torrance's stress on the *ongoing* nature of Christ's ministry after the cross: "The work of Christ neither begins nor ends on the cross; rather, it is a function of his person as the living and active Word of God."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22. For a fuller exploration of Torrance's emphasis on the present ministry of Jesus in light of the ascension, see John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," 135–176.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Scottish Theology*, 22.

⁵⁹ David Fergusson, "The Ascension of Christ: Its Significance in the Theology of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio* 3 (2012): 95.

Torrance develops the present ministry of Christ in light of the ascension. In other words, there is an actual *ongoing* aspect to Christ's ministry in the present, rather than merely appropriating the benefits of Christ's earthly ministry to the present-day context.⁶⁰ While Torrance utilizes the *munus triplex* to provide keen insights on how Christ's present ministry is shaped by the ascension, there are certain shortcomings. He robustly develops the priesthood of Christ but does not pay sufficient attention to providing an in-depth theological reflection on the kingship and prophetic ministries of the ascended Christ.⁶¹ Nonetheless, Torrance's theology of the present ministry of Christ is robust and well-suited for a range of practical applications. For instance, Torrance's theology of the present ministry of the ascended Christ can helpfully dialogue with some recent developments in mission theology on the significance of the doctrine of the ascension.

Missionary and theologian Herbert Hoeffler, in an article entitled "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," persuasively argues for a paradigm shift in missiological strategy for shame-based cultures, wherein instead of beginning with the cross, the ascension serves as an effective starting point.⁶² He insists that people in shame-based cultures require a presentation of the Gospel that does not follow the typical way in which it is presented in Western cultures.⁶³ Rather than start by saying: "Receive the forgiveness of sin won for you by Christ and have the gift of eternal life,"⁶⁴ (Western), Hoeffler proposes starting with pressing questions

⁶⁰ See Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 106–122.

⁶¹ See *ibid.*, 112–122, where Torrance's exposition of the priestly ministry of Christ is much longer the sections dedicated to expounding the kingly and prophetic ministries of the ascended Christ. For a constructive attempt at expanding on Torrance's account, see John, "The Risen and Ascended Humanity of Christ in Thomas F. Torrance's Holistic Christology," 162–172.

⁶² Herbert Hoeffler, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," *Missiology: An International Review* 33 (2005): 435–449.

⁶³ *Ibid.* On page 436, Hoeffler highlights the difference between a "guilt-based society" and a "shame-based society" as follows: "In the guilt-based society, individuals have internalized a set of moral standards, and they feel personal guilt is they fail to live up to those standards. In the shame-based society, individuals are very aware of the judgment of their social peers and authorities. If they violate these people's expectations, they feel great shame."

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 435.

from the various contexts that comprise shame-based cultures (Eastern).⁶⁵ "In tribal African societies, the question is if there is a power that can control the powerful, capricious spirit world... [I]n China ... the question ... [is] if Christianity can produce a better person and a better society. In India, the spiritual quest is for a truly spiritual character."⁶⁶

Hoeffler is convinced that by starting with the ascension rather than the cross in one's gospel proclamation, one is not only being theologically sound but importantly also contextually sensitive.⁶⁷ From a theological perspective, Hoeffler finds justification for this shift in approach in the manner in which the apostle Paul encountered Christ on the road to Damascus.⁶⁸ Paul's starting point was "the Ascension," which then enabled him to better understand "the implications of the resurrection and the crucifixion."⁶⁹ Paul's experience, Hoeffler observes, resonates with the way in which people from other faiths are encountering Christ. Says Hoeffler, "people of other religions primarily come to a relationship with Jesus through their experience of him as ascended Lord of history. From there, they will go on to an understanding of Jesus' life and work and an acceptance of him as Savior. However, they generally come to receive him as personal Savior only after they have received him as personal Lord."⁷⁰

The proposed shift in evangelistic approach from one that is centered on the cross to an ascension-centered one seems to be theologically and practically prudent. Nevertheless, one must be careful not to create a divide between the cross and the ascension. In some contexts, the doctrine of the cross is probably not the best approach to begin with in evangelism because it may create unnecessary obstacles. With this said, however, there can be a danger of undermining the cross in favor of the ascension, or even separating the cross from the ascension. One

⁶⁵ Ibid., 438.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 438.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 442.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 438.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 442.

illustration will underscore this point. Hoeffler, in an appendix to his article, highlights the exasperated views of a "Jesu Bhakta."⁷¹ "Jesu Bhaktas" are "followers of Jesus still living in their Hindu communities,"⁷² and one in particular wrote to Hoeffler to express his frustration with the all-encompassing role the cross plays in Christian theology.⁷³

In his own words, this "Jesu Bhakta" states: "I do not doubt that Christ is the incarnate God. But I think the crux of all Christianity is that the Incarnation was for the purpose of redemption. And it is this latter point that has been a stumbling block for me. It seems to me that Christians focus more on the sacrifice on the cross than on the living, resurrected Christ."⁷⁴ Elsewhere he explains that the cross "does not seem to have a personal application," and furthermore that "It is the living, resurrected, ascended Christ that I can relate to."⁷⁵ The views of the "Jesu Bhakta" underscore the point Hoeffler has made in his whole article, which is that a different approach must be adopted in evangelism in majority world contexts, particularly in Asia, where instead of beginning with the cross one can start with the ascension. Nonetheless, it would seem like an approach that balances the cross with the ascension would provide a holistic account that would be effective in the long term in both evangelism and discipleship. It is at this point that T. F. Torrance's theology of the ascension would be a helpful dialogue partner.

Torrance contends that the cross and ascension are deeply interconnected doctrines and must not be separated. On the basis of biblical passages, among others, such as John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34 he insists that "the glorification of Christ begins not with his actual ascension or resurrection, but with his crucifixion."⁷⁶ He goes on to argue that "the ascension of Christ ... is his exaltation

⁷¹ Ibid., 448–449.

⁷² Ibid., 439.

⁷³ Ibid., 448.

⁷⁴ Ibid. These are the views of the "Jesu Bhakta" that Hoeffler documents in the appendix to his article.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 110.

to power and glory but *through the Cross*, certainly an exaltation from humiliation to royal majesty, but through crucifixion and sacrifice, for the power and glory of the Royal Priest are bound up with his self-offering in death and resurrection.”⁷⁷ For Torrance, therefore, the cross and ascension, as doctrines, are mutually reinforcing; one cannot have one without the other.

The above theological insight would commend and supplement the existing stress on the ascension within mission theology, as represented by Herbert Hoefler, in the following manner. It would commend the strong emphasis on the ascension as a soteriologically significant doctrine. It would, however, provide a supplement not necessarily to Hoefler, who does not separate the cross from the ascension, but to some “Jesu Bhaktas” who may prioritize the ascension over the cross to such an extent that the two doctrines could become detached from one another. The supplement Torrance provides is a clarification that the ascended Jesus *is* the Jesus who was crucified and vice-versa. This emphasis is evidenced when Torrance explains that “Christ Jesus crucified and risen is on the Throne.”⁷⁸ Importantly, he goes on to add that “Jesus ... is now at the right hand of God holding the reins of the world in his hands, the hands that bore the imprint of the nails hammered into them on the cross.”⁷⁹ The interconnection between the cross and the ascension, therefore, provides a safeguard against theologies that prioritize experience over history, or “glory” over “suffering.”⁸⁰ Therefore, in light of the supplement Torrance offers, the missiological strategy of beginning with the ascension in certain contexts would not need to change. What would need to be added to the strategy, however, is a clarification that there is no divide between the ascension and the cross. In this way, an evangelist can communicate the Gospel in a culturally sensitive manner, even while being faithful to Scripture and to theological orthodoxy, resulting in a holistic pedagogy for discipleship.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁷⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002), 194.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 134 and 123, respectively.

5. Conclusion

This essay provides a practical theological dogmatic sketch on key facets of Torrance's theology of the ascension, to show how his rich theology can be made more accessible to a wide ecclesial audience. Torrance affirms an embodied ascended Christ, which has enormous practical implications, not least a thoroughgoing rejection of platonic thinking, retrospectively and prospectively. The complex spatial theology that Torrance espouses is shown to have an undergirding theological and practical impulse — namely, the need for space to be oriented toward relationality, reconciliation, and redemption. Torrance's stress on the ascension as a soteriologically significant doctrine is germane to the contemporary call for a paradigm shift from a cross-centered to an ascension-centered focus in mission theology to majority world contexts. It was noted that while Torrance would affirm the strong emphasis on the ascension for missions and evangelism, he would always want to integrate the cross with the ascension, lest one end up with a deficient theology and, in turn, an inadequate pedagogy for discipleship. Cumulatively, each of these three areas (ontology, spatiality, present ministry) of the ascension in Torrance are not only theologically sophisticated but immensely relevant and practical to the church at large. The work of theologically translating Torrance's work on a variety of foci is an ongoing one. As more theologians work in this area, the church will benefit from a theological voice who deserves to be read widely. This is an exciting prospect!