

Thomas F. Torrance

Biographical Sketch and Theological Distinctives

Introduction

“God loves you so utterly and completely that he has given himself for you in Jesus Christ his beloved Son, and has thereby pledged his very being as God for your salvation. In Jesus Christ God has actualised his unconditional love for you in your human nature in such a once for all way, that he cannot go back upon it without undoing the Incarnation and the Cross and thereby denying himself. Jesus Christ died for you precisely because you are sinful and utterly unworthy of him, and has thereby already made you his own before and apart from your ever believing in him. He has bound you to himself by his love in a way that he will never let you go, for even if you refuse him and damn yourself in hell his love will never cease. Therefore, repent and believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour.”

T. F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets & Howard, 94).

Thomas Forsyth Torrance, was born in Chengdu, China, to a missionary family on 30 August 1913. He died peacefully in Edinburgh on 2 December 2017 at the ripe old age of 94. Known affectionately as “T.F.” to his students (to distinguish him from his brother “J.B.”, also a theologian of note), Torrance was a towering figure in twentieth century theology. He was arguably the greatest Reformed theologian since Karl Barth, with whom he studied, and an eminent 20th century ecumenical churchman - having played key roles in the dialogue between the world wide Reformed church and the Eastern Orthodox church in particular. He served for 27 years as Professor of Christian Dogmatics at New College, University of Edinburgh and, was elected Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1976. In 1978, he was awarded the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion for his contributions to the emerging field of theology and science.

His prodigious literary output, translation work, edited volumes, world wide lectureships, and ecclesiastical and ecumenical endeavours has cast a huge influence over the 20 and 21 century theological landscape. As will be outlined below, Torrance continues to be of significant theological and pastoral interest for us today.

Heart of a Missionary, Scholarly & Pastoral

“This is the end to which my own life has been dedicated. What I have been trying to do is to show how the gospel can be taught and preached in ways that are faithful to the apostolic faith as it was brought to authoritative expression in the Nicene Creed, and at the same time may be taught and preached today in ways that can be expressed and appreciated within the scientific understanding of the created universe upon which God has impressed his Word ... Far from being hostile to one another, Christian theology and natural science are complementary to one another.”

T. F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Eerdmans, Preface, vii).

Born in China, Torrance spent the first 13 years of his life with his missionary parents until he left China for Scotland to pursue his education as teenager. His parents' zeal for the

proclamation of the Gospel and the missionary task remained a significant and formative influence throughout his life. His unswerving passion for the Chinese missionary work took concrete expression in his determined return to the Chinese provinces of Chengdu and Wenchuan in 1984 and 1994. These episodic events in his years of retirement, along with his lifetime commitment to the life and mission of the Church of Scotland shows Torrance to be not only a scholar of rare distinction but also one with a heart for God's mission (*Missio Dei*) through His church.

Torrance unashamedly indicated in person and in print that he was a missionary at heart and that his theology was an attempt to evangelise the scientific culture of his day. He often quipped that he was as much a missionary to modern theologians as he was to anyone else. Originally thinking he would, like his parents, serve as a foreign missionary, Torrance saw his call to the ministry of word and sacrament, and after this to the academy, as not a rejection of his call to mission, but rather a channeling of such a call into a more specific context. See his *When Christ Comes and Comes Again* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1957).

It should also be noted that his theological concerns had a pastoral dimension. This was no doubt influenced by his service during the war years as a chaplain on the front line (during the British campaign in the Middle East and Italy) and his time as a pastor 10 years prior to taking up his academic career. He was no ivory tower theologian!

“During those years what imprinted itself upon my mind above all was the discovery of the deepest cry of the human heart: Is God really like Jesus? This came home to me very sharply one day on a battle field in Italy, when a fearfully wounded young lad, who was only nineteen and had but half an hour to live, said to me, ‘Padre, is God really like Jesus?’ I assured him as he lay upon the ground with his life ebbing away that God is indeed really like Jesus, and that there is no unknown God behind the back of Jesus for us to fear, to see the Lord Jesus is to see the very face of God.”

T. F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Eerdmans, p. 55).

In his 27 years as Professor of Christian Dogmatics, Torrance authored, edited or translated more than 360 pieces of work ranging widely from patristic to modern theology, the relationship of theology to science, including the impressive translation of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and Calvin's *New Testament Commentaries*. It seems even more remarkable that he also had added 250 more scholarly works after his retirement. His diverse works have aroused significant constructive and critical responses and proven influential not only in the United Kingdom but more so in the United States and areas in Southeast Asia. Besides academic writing, another major contribution of Torrance is the founding of the influential peer reviewed *Scottish Journal of Theology* with J. K. S. Reid in 1948.

Although Torrance's scholarly endeavours has been described as theologically rigorous in content, idiosyncratic in style, and voluminous in output, Torrance's theology is also deeply pastoral, engaging, and Gospel centred. These elements of his theology, even if less obvious in some of his scholarly works, are nonetheless present, undergirding and informing his theology. The underlying goal was not simply to communicate information but to be transformative, even evangelistic.

Reflecting on his missionary sensibilities Torrance wrote, “This orientation to mission was built into the fabric of my mind, and has never faded—by its essential nature Christian theology has always had for me an evangelistic thrust” (*Itinerarium Mentis in Deum: My Theological Development*,” 1).

Upon Torrance’s retirement from New College, University of Edinburgh, his colleague J. McIntyre commented, “But his aim is not solely to enlighten intellectually: it is rather to impart such a lively sense of the claim of the Word of God upon us all, that our obedience manifests itself not only in integrity of thought, but also in faithfulness in proclamation and care in counselling. Theology in service to the ministry has always been the sequence of his intention” (“Thomas Forsyth Torrance,” *New College Bulletin* 10 [August 1979], 1). This call to training men and women for Gospel ministry was a large part of Torrance’s decision to stay in Edinburgh, a university that trains ordinands, rather than succeed Karl Barth at the University of Basel. Myk Hybets recalls how Torrance was fond of pointing out from his favourite theologian, Athanasius of Alexandria, that true “knowledge of God — *theologia* — actually equals or is equivalent to godliness and worship — *eusebia* — such that godly faith in and worship of God the Trinity belong wholly to a proper understanding or knowledge of God” (M. Hybets, *Catalyst*, January 28, 2014).

Biblical & Reformed

Torrance’s theology is self-consciously Reformed. That is, it is shaped by the protestant movement that ‘reformed’ the theological perspective held by the Roman Catholic Church in the 16 Century “Reformation” and asserted the primacy of Scripture.

Note. Reformed being commonly defined by affirmation of the five Solas. These Latin phrases (or slogans) emerged during the Reformation to summarise the Reformers’ theological convictions about the essentials of Christianity. Namely:

- 1) Sola Scriptura (“Scripture alone”): The Bible alone is our highest authority
- 2) Sola Fide (“faith alone”): We are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ
- 3) Sola Gratia (“grace alone”): We are saved by the grace of God alone
- 4) Solus Christus (“Christ alone”): Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King
- 5) Soli Deo Gloria (“to the glory of God alone”): We live for the glory of God alone..

He was an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland, an authority on John Calvin, and a key representative of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in ecumenical activity with other Christian traditions. Nevertheless, Torrance was a vigorous opponent of what has been termed Reformed scholasticism, especially as it gave rise to what he considered a rigid and pastorally deficient Federal/Westminster Theology.

“The Reformation represents an attempt to carry through a Christological correction of the whole life and thought of the Church. It was an attempt to put Christ and his Gospel once again into the very centre and to carry through extensive reform by bringing everything into conformity to him and his Gospel ... I cannot see any reformation coming to its fulfilment and taking its place as it ought within the thinking of mankind, and among all the peoples of the earth, except that which is wholly committed to belief in the Creator and Redeemer God, and which takes seriously and realistically the stupendous fact of the Incarnation, and except that which develops its theological understanding not by means of its own artistic creations but through rigorous and disciplined obedience to the objective reality of the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ.”

T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Wipf & Stock, p. 265).

Torrance, a pupil of Karl Barth, commended Barth to his English speaking students and readers as the most faithful advocate of Calvin's theology in the modern era and of the orthodox Reformed faith in general. As such, Barth's doctrine of God has been one of the most influential on Torrance's own exposition of the Christian doctrine of God. Like Barth, Torrance believes that nothing is or can be known of God but that which comes by his active self-revelation. Torrance takes up and consistently develops Barth's claim that what God is in his revelation, he is antecedently and eternally in himself. It is for this reason that Torrance is above all a theologian of the doctrine of the knowledge of God. As mentioned above, Torrance was responsible for the translation and publication of Barth's voluminous *Church Dogmatics* into English and wrote extensively on or about Barth's theology, including *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (T. & T. Clark, 1990) and *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910–1931* (T. & T. Clark, 2000).

Catholic & Ecumenical

As well as being distinctively Reformed and biblical, Torrance's theology is also rightly considered *catholic*. 'Catholic' here refers to being universally orthodox, grounded in the Great Tradition (or Classical Christianity, 100-451 AD), and consciously founded on the Creeds of Christendom, especially Nicaea and Chalcedon. Torrance himself has described his own theology as "deeply Nicene." By "Nicene" Torrance is referring to the theologians of the Nicene era - especially Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, his two main Patristic mentors. Torrance primarily attributes to these two theologians the foundational place of the Trinity in Christian theology as built on the doctrine of the *homoousion* of Christ (and Spirit) to God the Father. This is very evident in his *Trinitarian Faith*. It is this commitment to a catholic theology, and his mastery of the riches of Patristic theology, that enabled Torrance to interact so productively with the Eastern Orthodox communion along with the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions.

"The Nicene Creed was distilled, as it were, through careful exegesis of the Scriptures, in order to find a basic and accurate way of expressing those essentials of the Christian faith, apart from which it cannot remain faithful to the Gospel. Hence in the tradition of the Orthodox Church the Nicene Creed has the effect of throwing the mind of the Church back upon the Holy Scriptures, and making them central in all its worship, doctrine, and life."

*T. F. Torrance, **The Relevance of Orthodoxy** (Eerdmans, p. 326).*

Torrance was committed towards seeking common ground in a shared commitment to this Nicene orthodoxy. In his ecumenical interactions the pro-Nicene doctrines of Christology, pneumatology (Holy Spirit), and Trinity have been the central. Torrance believed that agreement on these central points of doctrine, which lay at the heart of Christian theology, allowed for optimism in future agreement on other topics. See his edited work, *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381* (Handsel Press, 1981), and his *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Wipf & Stock, 1997).

Trinitarian-Christological Theology

The doctrines of God and Christology take pride of place in Torrance's theological endeavours. These doctrines formed the heart of his theological program. As a lifelong student of Barth, a reader of the Fathers (Patristics), and a Calvin scholar, the doctrine of

the Trinity forms the ground and grammar of Torrance's entire theology. Such is the controlling doctrine of the Trinity in his theology that Paul Molnar simply describes Torrance as the 'theologian of the Trinity' (*Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* [Surrey: Ashgate, 2009]).

Torrance's theology is founded and oriented at every point on the revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, it is Torrance's conviction that Christian theology is intrinsically and so necessarily trinitarian - its proper subject matter is *this* particular God, the one revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture. This 'given-ness' (more technically ontic reality) of God as Father, Son, and Spirit is the source and meaning of every other doctrinal point in Torrance's theology.

The significance of the Patristic affirmation of Trinitarian faith and Christology for the unity and health of the Church is seen in his rigorous exposition of Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (AD 381), and in Torrance's deep appreciation of Athanasius' defence of the identity of the Son of God as consubstantial with that of the Father. As is evident in *The Trinitarian Faith*, Torrance in his own words regards the Creed as 'essentially the fruit of Eastern Catholic theology' and, that: 'The basic decisions taken at Nicaea made it clear that the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the Godhead was regarded in the Church as the supreme truth upon which everything else in the Gospel depends.' With regard to the Spirit, Torrance regards the identity of the Spirit as consubstantial with that of the Father and the Son is particularly developed 'from the essential structure of knowledge of God grounded in his own self-communication through the Son and in the unity of the Spirit' *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T. & T. Clark, 1995, p. 2-3,9)

As to Christology, his class lectures, published posthumously as *Incarnation* (IVP, 2008) and *Atonement* (IVP, 2009), reveal the heart of Torrance's understanding of the Gospel, the 'vicarious humanity' of Christ.

In *Incarnation*, Torrance's expounds his distinctive belief that the object of our theological study—Jesus Christ—actively gives himself to us in order that we may know him. In it is developed an understanding of our union with Christ and how it impacts the Christian life, as well as his reflections on the in-breaking of Christ's kingdom and its intense conflict with and victory over evil.

"What overwhelms me is the sheer humanness of Jesus, Jesus as the baby at Bethlehem, Jesus sitting tired and thirsty at the well outside Samaria, Jesus exhausted by the crowds, Jesus recuperating his strength through sleep at the back of a ship of Galilee...for that precisely is God with us and one of us, God as 'the wailing infant' in Bethlehem, as Hilary wrote, God sharing our weakness and exhaustion, God sharing our hunger, thirst, tears, pain, and death... He does not override our humanity but completes, perfects, and establishes it."

T. F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Eerdmans, p. 13).

The companion volume, *Atonement*, is an account of the saving work of Christ carried out in deep awareness of God's grace towards humanity in Christ and his Spirit, drawing upon the Biblical witness, Patristic theology, and John McLeod Campbell's work. The atonement is presented along the lines of Jesus' vicarious representation of humanity before God that

avoids what Torrance considers to be crude theologies of the atonement, including certain impoverished preaching on penal substitution which lacked trinitarian rigour and nuance.

“In giving his own dear Son to die for us in atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, God has revealed that he loves us more than he loves himself ... In him we believe that God himself has come into the midst of our human agony and our abominable wickedness and violence in order to take all our guilt and our just judgement on himself. That is for us the meaning of the cross. If I did not believe in the cross, I could not believe in God. The cross means that, while there is no explanation of evil, God himself has come into the midst of it in order to take it upon himself, to triumph over it and deliver us from it.”

T. F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today* (Eerdmans, p. 28,29).

Both volumes are predicated upon the inextricable integration of the doctrine of the Trinity with the Christian Gospel and so the unavoidable need to articulate a trinitarian soteriology (the Trinitarian nature of salvation). Perhaps more than any other contemporary theologian, Torrance stressed the importance of a robust doctrine of the immanent Trinity for the life and mission of the Church. His *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (T. & T. Clark, 1995) and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T. & T. Clark, 1996) give ample witness to this.

Scientific and Methodological

In 1969 Torrance published *Theological Science* (Oxford). It marked the beginning of his exploration of the interaction between theology and natural science. One which would see him being awarded in 1978 the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion for his contributions to the emerging field of theology and science. He saw his task as a clearing of the epistemological ground for a starting point in theological discourse. Torrance wanted to clear the way for an explicitly Christian epistemology (basis of knowing). One that took seriously the starting point for all knowledge of God in Christology, mediated by the Word written through the Holy Spirit. It was this epistemic concern which led Torrance into his interaction with the sciences, especially physics. Here, as in his other works, the concern was with ‘the actual knowledge of God’, disclosed by none other than ‘God in His Self-revelation’, which is the ‘Self-disclosure in His Being and His Act’. He drew on the scientific enterprise while maintaining that: ‘Theology is the unique science devoted to the knowledge of God, differing from the sciences by the uniqueness of its object which can be apprehended only on its own terms and from within the actual situation it has created in our existence in making itself known’ *Theological Science* (Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 281, 350).

Torrance also drew upon Albert Einstein (and James Clerk Maxwell and Michael Polyani) as the exemplar of a truly scientific method that recognised scientific knowledge as having both an objective and subjective pole, which necessitates the nature of the object dictating the appropriate methods for its study. For Einstein this led to, among other things, the general and special theory of relativity. Torrance, from a layman’s perspective, quickly saw in Einstein’s work a method (not basis!) for discerning the nature of reality complementary to that of Christianity theology. From Einstein’s reflections on science and religion Torrance drew much inspiration for his own project in dogmatics. See his *Theological Science* (Oxford University Press, 1969).

Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege! ('Take up and read; Take up and read', St. Augustine, *Confessions*)

For anyone who's never read Thomas Torrance, perhaps this brief sketch and our seminar on *The Trinitarian Faith* will encourage you to read more of his works. To read Torrance is to encounter an understanding of God that shatters all our images of him, revealing Himself to be a God of infinite grace and love.

Torrance's *oeuvre* is quite large, and this can be intimidating when starting out with him. Probably the most accessible place to begin – as well as perhaps the most significant place in terms of Torrance's theology – is with his Christology. Two options present themselves in this realm.

- ***The Mediation of Christ*** - For those who want to begin with a small bit of Torrance, this tidy volume is a good place to begin.
- ***Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*** - These posthumously published class lectures from Torrance's time at Edinburgh is a good, if more substantial, point of entry. The companion volume, ***Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*** is also an edifying read. In both volumes you can sense the passion and love that Torrance had for Jesus Christ. This is true theological reflection - not just for academic purposes, but also in order to elicit a change in our thinking and in our spiritual life. The prayerful reader will not only 'learn' information about the Incarnation and Atonement, but be challenged, encouraged and transformed by understanding more deeply the immense work of Jesus Christ in his life and ministry; his death and resurrection. Theological study as it should be!

Some secondary sources that can help to understand Torrance better, include:

- Elmer Colyer, ***How to Read T. F. Torrance***
This is a 'one-stop-shop' for Torrance secondary sources. Colyer begins with a brief biographical sketch of Torrance, and then goes on to treat his theology extensively. A criticism of Colyer's book is that he tends to over systemise Torrance.
- Alister McGrath, ***Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography***
McGrath does more biography than Colyer, and attempts to put the biographical concerns into conversation with Torrance's theology. McGrath's own academic background in science is especially evident in the section on Torrance's 'scientific methodology' as applied to the theological tasks.
- Elmer Colyer (ed), ***The Promise of Trinitarian Theology***
A collection of essays from various theologians – David Torrance, George Hunsinger, Ray Anderson, Kurt Richardson, Colin Gunton, etc. – engaging with Torrance's work from differing perspectives.
- Paul Molnar, ***Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*** (Great Theologians Series)
Offers a clear, comprehensive and perceptive account of Torrance's exposition of the trinitarian shape of the Christian faith. Molnar identifies Torrance's understanding of the Trinity as the proper point of entry to his theology as a whole. Torrance's perception of the inner relations between the doctrine of God, of creation and the incarnation are shown to flow from this.

The **T F Torrance Theological Fellowship** has an excellent website. It is devoted to the exploration, development, and dissemination of the theology of Thomas F. Torrance and other theologians contributing to this endeavour. The society exists to promote and sustain fellowship and truth-seeking (*fides quaerens intellectum*) in theological reflection upon the Christian faith, within the mainstream of the Christian Church and tradition in light of the theological legacy of Thomas F. Torrance. The site does assume some background in theological studies and acquaintance with the works of Thomas Torrance. It can be found here: <http://www.tftorrance.org>

*“Faith in Christ involves a polar relation between the faith of
Christ and our faith,
in which our faith is laid hold of, enveloped, and upheld in
his unswerving faithfulness.”*

T. F. Torrance, **Preaching Christ Today** (Eerdmans, p. 31)