



The Torrance dogmatics lectures¹

Robert T. Walker

As a student at New College I heard T. F. Torrance give his second year lectures in 1967–68. Over thirty years later it was a totally unexpected privilege to be asked to edit for publication those unforgettable dogmatics lectures. They made an indelible impression on me and I found them tremendously exciting and stimulating.

Torrance gave the lectures from 1952 to 1978, rewriting them many times in the process. By the time he retired in 1979 (his final year was a sabbatical), most of his lectures had been typeset and duplicated for students and it is these ‘handouts’, given out over the years, which form the basic text for their publication, the Christology lectures under the title, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, and the soteriology lectures under the title, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*.



A brief outline of the chapters

The Christology lectures begin with an extensive introduction to the nature of theology and dogmatics and the inseparable relation in Christology between the theological and the historical, the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. There are three major chapters: first, the incarnation and its Old Testament background; second, the life of Jesus the Word made flesh and Son become servant; third, the ‘hypostatic union’ of God and man in Christ and the development of the classical doctrine of his person. Interspersed between them there are three shorter chapters: the virgin birth and its place in theology; the mystery of the person of Christ and the relation between Christ in time and in eternity; and the kingdom of Christ and evil. All unfold Torrance’s understanding of the central concepts of Christology. The person of Jesus Christ, understood dynamically through his work, is the heart of reconciliation. The union of God and man in his person,

which is begun in the incarnation and lived out in his life, holds firm in the agony of atonement and death on the cross and so emerges triumphant in the resurrection.



Accessibility

A central aim of preparing the lectures for publication has been to make them as accessible as possible to a wider audience. Extensive biblical referencing, explanatory footnotes, a glossary of theological terms and a full index have been supplied. Numerous headings have also been added to sum up the content of each section. Listed together at the front of the book, the headings provide a detailed synopsis of its contents and argument. A short editorial foreword outlines the background and significance of the lectures. An editorial introduction then outlines Torrance's understanding of dogmatics, explains the purpose of the lectures, summarises the key points of their theology and details the editing process behind their preparation for the press.



The nature of the lectures – theology, faith and ministry

Most of the students were candidates for the ministry. The main aim of the lectures was to give them a grasp of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the heart of the Christian faith, as a basis for their ministry. For Torrance, theology and evangelism go together. If the task of theology and dogmatics is to articulate the doctrine of Christ, the task of evangelism and preaching is to communicate the gospel, whether formally from a pulpit or in ordinary conversation and pastoral visitation in the home. Applying the truths of the gospel and of theology personally in this way brings them home to people and in turn enables the theologian to appreciate more deeply the truth of what is taught in the classroom. Torrance writes,

Actually I myself learned more about those truths in my own pastoral ministry [Torrance had about ten years pastoral experience either in parish ministry or with soldiers during the war] than through reading books. Again and again as I wrote a lecture or delivered it, I said to myself that is something that

I learned in Alyth or Aberdeen, and remembered the situation when that truth of the Gospel really came home to me when I was engaged on a pastoral visit, and read a passage of the Bible and prayed with people in their homes. [...] It was when the truth of the Gospel struck home to me like that, that I really understood it and its relevance to people in their everyday life.²

Torrance's lectures were appropriately academic, involving biblical exegesis and extensive knowledge of early church, Reformation and modern theology, but his theology held together doctrine and faith, theology and prayer. He began each lecture with a brief prayer which students soon found was a concise summary of the lecture and in his endeavour to bring theology home to them, he would often lay aside his lecture notes and illustrate what he was saying with anecdotes from his own pastoral experience. Aware of the challenge and responsibility of the task, Torrance prayed before and after his lectures,

I realise [...] that students of mine in Edinburgh often found it difficult to relate the kind of disciplined academic theology they heard from the rostrum in my lecture room with the actual ministry of the Gospel to which they felt called and for which they were being prepared. I always made a point of praying before and after each lecture, for I was aware of trying to talk about the truths of the Gospel in the reality of the Lord's presence, and in the awareness of my inadequacy to speak of them in a way worthy of them.³



Reactions to the lectures – divergent and sometimes conflicting

There were widely different reactions to the lectures. In their replies to a questionnaire sent to New College alumni asking how easy or difficult the lectures had been, or what they had meant to them, former students expressed a wide range of opinions: 'easy', 'difficult-ish', 'impossibly difficult to follow', 'became easy to follow', 'demanding but not difficult', 'not always easy but with some effort on the part of the student eminently understandable'. Although several respondents found the lectures 'easy to follow' albeit challenging, the majority

did find them hard to follow initially, but demanding as opposed to inherently difficult.

In general, the lectures made a profound impact. Though ‘challenging in content and depth’, students found them ‘absorbingly interesting’, ‘brilliant’, ‘stretching’, ‘thrilling’ and hugely stimulating, even when they could not go along with them, or only partially so.

The following can be singled out as typical of people’s recollections of the lectures and their impact:

- ‘In my own theological development, I think I have probably come to positions diametrically opposed to those of Prof Torrance on nearly every point. However, they were an immense stimulus to reflection, and a model of how theology should be done in a systematic and coherent manner. I remain deeply indebted to them.’ (Professor)
- ‘his lectures did nothing to equip me for the rigours of weekly preaching, wrestling with real theological issues at the front line over 30 years of ministry.’ (Minister and Chaplain)
- ‘his brilliant reasoning and full engagement with the class held me in thrall.’ (Teacher)
- ‘T. F. Torrance taught me how to love God with my mind and to preach with passion.’ (Evangelist)
- ‘I spent 30 years in parish ministry and ten years as a senior lecturer in theology ... Tom and James Torrances’ lectures and books sustained my ministry theologically and still inspire me in my retirement.’ (Minister and Lecturer)
- ‘TFT was the most important influence upon my training for the ministry and I will always be indebted to him for providing me with a ‘working theology’ which has sustained my ministry these past thirty-five years. I believed long before I met him but it was he who first led me to understand what I believed, and showed me that it was reasonable to believe. He gave me

confidence in the Gospel and I bless God for the day our paths crossed.’ (Parish Minister)

It is clear there were strikingly different, indeed contradictory estimates of the lectures. Some could not agree with Torrance’s theology in whole or in part, despite the lectures’ impact, and while one respondent confessedly learnt nothing from them for the parish ministry, others described their theology as sustaining that ministry.



Why did the lectures engender such a variety of reactions?

There are several reasons behind the divergent and opposing reactions to the lectures:

(i) *The challenging nature of the lectures*

The depth of Torrance’s theology, the newness for the class of many of the concepts and terms, and the fact that the lectures were tightly packed in terms of content and covered so much ground meant that students had to concentrate to follow them. But while all students found the lectures challenging, some had no difficulty following them, others found them difficult initially, and others continued to find them difficult.

The main difference, as I understand it, lay not in the difficulty of Torrance’s theology which is not inherently difficult as such (though some of his philosophical and scientific thought is so) and has an inner simplicity, but in following Torrance in what he is doing and then coming to grips with it. This was a task which was conditioned partly by the nature of the Divinity course, partly by students’ background and training and by the frames of reference they brought to the lectures.

(ii) *Student training and backgrounds*

a) *the time and the nature of the divinity course* – the pressurised nature of the BD course, the competing demands and contrasting approaches of the different subjects, particularly after the retirement of J. S. Stewart from New Testament, meant that for many students there was simply not sufficient time to absorb adequately the material they were being given in Dogmatics or think it through

and integrate it into their preaching. H. R. Mackintosh in his day had tried to help students with this issue in the sermon class mentioned so appreciatively by Torrance.⁴ It would seem to have been something of a role model of how students could be helped to integrate Dogmatics and preaching, theology and evangelism. Modern candidates for the ministry find themselves under even greater time pressure with the added emphasis on placements and management training during theological study. One result has been that at New College, for example, fewer Church of Scotland candidates are now taking the Honours BD. One can imagine Torrance and Mackintosh lamenting the way such a trend affects the quality of a student's theological education and, if continued, the calibre of future church teachers and training of ministers of Word and sacrament.

b) *philosophical training* – Torrance's thought was theological and not philosophical, but though not essential, philosophy was a very useful tool in helping students to follow his lectures. It gave them an understanding of the philosophical concepts he often used and helped them to think conceptually.

Torrance had himself been given an extremely good grounding in philosophy from the great Norman Kemp Smith and A. E. Taylor⁵ and there is no doubt that the Scottish philosophical as well as theological background is of great significance for his thought, particularly on the nature of theological knowledge and its relation to science.

In Torrance's day, many of his contemporaries and fellow ministers had enjoyed the benefit of the Scottish philosophical tradition in education. The continued decline in that as in the Scottish theological tradition, meant that students were no longer as well equipped to understand his lectures as students of Torrance's own generation.

c) *biblical knowledge* – Torrance's lectures are deeply biblical and theological, interpreting the bible in the light of its goal and

fulfilment in Christ. His language resonates with biblical allusions. In the chapter on the doctrine of the church in *Atonement*, for example, there are several hundred clearly recognisable biblical quotations, phrases or allusions, none of them referenced or explicitly quoted as such. Students with good biblical knowledge had the advantage of being able to recognise the roots of Torrance's theology and follow more readily the logic of the lectures in offering a christological understanding of scripture.

d) *dualist presuppositions* – one of the major factors affecting students' understanding and reception of the lectures was the dualism lying behind so much of modern thought. This was true on both the left and right of the theological spectrum. Liberal and paradoxically evangelical presuppositions also both occasioned questioning of Torrance's theology, and often resistance to it, compromising even the ability to understand and take in what he was saying (or was not saying).

On the liberal side, the assumption of a dualism between God and the universe meant that the reality and possibility of the incarnation was axiomatically ruled out. On the evangelical side, there was often a latent dualism in operation either between God and creation affecting the relation between the Father and the Son (for example in the theology of the cross, as in the hymn "How deep the Father's love for us", the line 'the Father turns his face away'), or between God in heaven and knowledge of him on earth where the two need to be held together by a doctrine of the infallibility of the word of scripture – more on this topic later. On either side there was a failure either to take the incarnation seriously or to think out its implications in the way that Torrance had done and was presenting in his lectures.

What then was Torrance doing in the lectures and what was it about his theology and its content or nature which appeared to make it so difficult (at least initially) for students to grasp and follow?



Torrance's theology and his exposition of it

Torrance characterised his theology as trinitarian-christocentric in nature with its 'cutting edge' in the 'vicarious humanity of Christ'.⁶ Although in this paper on his lectures the focus is on revelation, revelation for Torrance is inseparable from reconciliation.⁷ It is only through revelation, through restoration to true knowledge of God that we can be reconciled and at the same time it is only through atonement and reconciliation that we can be restored to knowledge of God. Both are worked out for us in the person of Jesus in the whole course of his life and work and are ours in him through the Spirit.

There are three elements which can be singled out as being both fundamental to Torrance's theology and as bearing on the way he expounds it:

- (1) *The Word of God has become flesh in Jesus Christ and remains identical with him.*
- (2) *The key to understanding scripture is the person of Jesus Christ.*
- (3) *The hypostatic union in the person of Jesus begins at Bethlehem and is worked out throughout his life and can therefore only be understood dynamically and not statically.*

(1) Knowledge of God is always personal knowledge of God in his eternal Word⁸

For Torrance it is important that when God makes himself known, he does so in his Word and that he does not just give truths about himself in his Word but makes himself known in his Word. The Word is the mediator of all knowledge of God, mediating always personal knowledge of God. Because he is the eternal Son, to know Jesus is to know the Father and because he is the eternal Word in God, to know him is to know the personal mind and rationality of God himself. He did not just begin to be when God spoke in creation but on the contrary has always been the eternal Word in the heart of God who therefore can make God known as he is in his eternal being.

(a) The identity of the Word in God with the person of Jesus Christ

In the incarnation the Word has become man, human flesh and human word, in the human mind, heart and soul of Jesus. The eternal Word of God is now man, identical with the person of Jesus Christ and cannot be separated from him.

(b) A deeper view of scripture focussed on the mediator between God and man

The importance of this for Torrance is that it leads to a deeper view of scripture which cannot be regarded simply as a deposit of divine truth, but as finding its truth in the living Jesus Christ to whom it points. If when we claim to know God through the word of God in scripture we do not really know God himself in his person but are simply given truths about him in words and statements, then a theory of verbal inspiration is necessary to connect and identify the truths of scripture with the truth as it is in God. In that case, there are two foci of knowledge, the truth of scripture and the truth in God, held together by a theory of inspiration. But if the word of God we know in scripture is the Word who is in God, who has become man, who in his person is the one hypostatic union of God and man, of the Word who is known and the man who knows the Word, then he in his person is the mediating point of knowledge of God. He is the mediator, the new focus of knowledge, the one who holds God and man together in himself, the eternal Word become living human word. Scripture then becomes the indispensable but intermediary mediator of the real mediator, Jesus Christ, and the inspiration of scripture becomes the fact that it has been specially inspired by the Spirit to be the written word that leads us to and is itself shaped by and patterned on Jesus Christ.

(i) The Word and truth of God identical with Jesus Christ who always makes himself known

If Jesus Christ is the mediator of knowledge of God, then we are at once involved in a relation of depth between scripture and God in his being. Jesus Christ stands in the middle, reaching into the eternal depths of God and reaching out to us

through the Spirit and the written word of scripture. The truth remains identical with Jesus Christ and to know this truth and this Word in his divine-human person is to know God himself in his triune being. This is the Word and truth of God, known in the richness of its depth in God, speaking to us in scripture and communicating himself through it.

(ii) A simple identification of scripture with the truth of God bypasses the incarnate mediator

This means that there cannot be any simple identification of the Word and truth of God with the written word of scripture without flattening out the relation of depth which should lie between it and God and without bypassing Jesus Christ in his person as the mediator and so disregarding the incarnation. Since when he makes himself known, God always makes himself known, the Word and truth of God always remain identical with himself and now that the Word and truth of God have become incarnate they cannot be torn apart from the person of Jesus Christ. Scripture therefore cannot just be regarded in a flat two-dimensional way, as if it could hold the truth in itself or be a transcription of a truth which has been separated from Christ, but has to be regarded three- or four-dimensionally in a relation of depth in which it finds its truth in the person of Jesus Christ, for as Jesus said it is to him that the scriptures point.⁹

(2) The key to understanding scripture is the person of Christ – a doctrine of scripture must be patterned on and reflect the uniqueness of his person

If when God became man he did so in such a way that he was fully God and fully man, ‘two natures in one person, without any confusion, change, division or separation’, then for Torrance that must be our basic guide in understanding the nature of the scriptures. They are the Word of God speaking personally to us and the written creaturely word through which he speaks, without any change in either his deity or the humanity of scripture. Though the Word of God and the

word of scripture cannot be divided or separated from each other, neither is confused with or changed into the other. The Word remains divine Word and is not changed into human word. Similarly, though inseparably united to the divine Word, the written and human word of scripture remains human word and is not divinised.

Torrance's doctrine of scripture¹⁰ is deeply and carefully christological and thought provoking. For him the heart of scripture is Jesus Christ, the hypostatic union of God and man in one person. In scripture there is to some degree an analogous union of divine and human, but whereas in Christ the hypostatic union is in his person, in scripture the union is between the divine-human person of Christ and the human word of scripture and is therefore a union outside his person.

At the same time, the scriptures reflect and point to the uniqueness of the hypostatic union in Christ. Though there is no personal union between the Word and the written word in scripture, the scriptures partake of the union in Christ. Through the Spirit they are holy scriptures, the specially inspired and shaped means through which we know Christ, the one and only place where we are given to hear and know the Word of life.

(3) Jesus Christ can only be understood dynamically, in the wholeness of his person and work and in the inseparability of christology and soteriology, incarnation and atonement¹¹

The becoming flesh of the Word in the hypostatic union is an event which begins at Bethlehem and which, as the union of God and man in Jesus, is itself the beginning of salvation. Torrance sees the life of Jesus here as being one of increasingly solidarity with sinners¹² in which he identifies himself more and more with their weakness and sin, taking it on himself, and at the same time undoes their sin by his obedience, offering up his life for them in atoning reconciliation. The bringing of man into union with God is thus an event which begins at Bethlehem but is completed in the cross and resurrection, taken into heaven in Jesus' ascension and extended to us at Pentecost. Salvation is one whole dynamic event in the inseparability of Jesus' person and work.



The implications of the three elements for the nature and content of the lectures

(1) Since the Word and truth of God remain identical with the Jesus Christ in his person, theology or dogmatics cannot be the teaching of a system of truths about him which have been separated from him. (2) Analogously, since Jesus Christ is the heart of scripture, theology cannot expound it as a series of proof texts or as if it contained the truth in itself but only in its essential relation to him. (3) Since he is the living Jesus Christ, whose whole life of creative and decisive deed is part of his saving person, dogmatics cannot but attempt to preach him by trying to reflect in its language about him the dynamic unity of his person in its inseparability from his word and action.

In his lectures therefore, Torrance attempts to indicate the truth in and behind scripture, Jesus Christ in his wholeness, using language which in sentence structure and increased use of verbs and adverbial phrases is designed to hold the truth together and reflect its living dynamic character as saving event. He teaches each element of Christian doctrine as part of the whole Christ and his procedure is spiral, looking at Jesus Christ from different angles, from the various perspectives of biblical teaching in order that he may be seen in his wholeness. This meant that while students could struggle initially to understand what Torrance was doing or to grasp his whole theology, they found him coming round to the same Christ from a different angle and began to follow his logic. They began to integrate the various perspectives and gain a feel for the way in which they were held together in the one Christ.



The nature of theological understanding in Jesus Christ

While theology and dogmatics for Torrance must be systematic, they cannot be a system and cannot be taught or grasped simply as a logical system. The various elements of doctrine, or of scriptural understanding, are held together in Christ and can be understood only through knowledge of Christ himself. Following Torrance's lectures therefore and grasping them demands a deeper way of thinking and understanding which, without ever bypassing the bible, involves

penetrating through it, behind and ‘beyond’ it to a knowledge of Jesus Christ, interpreting it in an integrated way in its relation of depth to him.¹³ Often that meant being prepared to rethink one’s own theology or scriptural understanding, sometimes radically. This did not necessarily mean giving up one’s theology, although it did often mean being prepared to go beyond the form in which it was held initially in order to find it being given back again in a profounder form.

The extent to which students were able or willing to do this depended on the factors already mentioned. Many students, even if sympathetic to Torrance’s dogmatics in general, found it impossible amid the pressure of New College (or the subsequent demands of the parish) to think his theology through for themselves or realise its implications for their preaching and ministry. Those who were able to do so found their ministry sustained and enriched by the content of the lectures. Their publication now makes them available to theologians, students, ministers and laity and if widely read and studied will greatly contribute to a timely reinvigoration and renewal of theology in Scotland.



The significance of the lectures

i) *Readability and accessibility* – the lectures are very readable and accessible. The sheer number of Torrance’s publications, many of them collections of essays and lectures, articles in journals, or often books of a more specialist nature, means it takes time to grasp his theology as a whole. The lectures present his understanding of the gospel together and in detail, so giving the best introduction to the heart of his theology.

ii) *A guide to the ‘inner logic’ of the bible and the doctrine of Christ* – the lectures are a theological commentary on the bible in the light of Christ, showing how its whole movement of salvation is fulfilled in his person and work.

iii) *A corrective to misinterpretations of his theology* – in unfolding a full account of his doctrine of Christ from its biblical roots, the lectures give a definitive understanding of Torrance’s Trinitarian Christology

and soteriology which enables them to be seen in their wholeness and therefore without the misinterpretations often made of his teaching.

iv) *An ecumenical presentation of the classical doctrine of Christ* – although written from the Reformed viewpoint, the lectures incorporate patristic, Reformation and modern insights in a profound integration which, as the advance reviewers have recognised (two Presbyterians, two Anglicans, a Methodist, a Roman Catholic and an Orthodox) is of far-reaching significance for the world-wide church.

Notes

- ¹ Address at the day conference, Edinburgh, 29th October 2008, to mark the launch of *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* by T. F. Torrance.
- ² Elmer M. Colyer, ed., *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance* (Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 322.
- ³ Loc. cit.
- ⁴ T. F. Torrance, Appreciation of “Hugh Ross Mackintosh Theologian of the Cross,” in H. R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ* (ed. T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 94. First published in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987):160–73.
- ⁵ “A Pilgrimage in the School of Faith: An Interview with T. F. Torrance,” by John I. Hesselink, *Reformed Review* 38 (1984): 52.
- ⁶ Interview in *Life and Work*, May 1976, p. 14.
- ⁷ For the twin emphasis on revelation and reconciliation in the hypostatic union, see T. F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), chap. 6, sections 1 & 2, pp. 184–96; cf. pp. 77–79.
- ⁸ For the following, cf. the sections “The Truth as it is in Jesus” and “Propositional Truth” in T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), chap. 8, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” pp. 219–22.

- ⁹ Cf. John 5:39,46; Luke 24:27; cf. also John 8:56.
- ¹⁰ Elaborated in his *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), chap.10, section 4 (b).
- ¹¹ Cf. Torrance, *Incarnation*, 85.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 137f.
- ¹³ While knowledge of Christ is inseparable from scripture, he is not to be identified with it but remains himself. ‘Beyond’ is thus not to be understood in the sense of leaving scripture behind, but only in the sense of finding the risen and ascended Christ behind and beyond it while inseparably through it.