



Incarnation and Atonement:

An overview¹

Robert T. Walker

The purpose of this paper is twofold. It is first to provide, particularly for students and those not yet familiar with Torrance, a brief orientation to the nature, aim and character of his dogmatics lectures. Secondly, it is to complement the address at the launch of *Incarnation* by selecting and outlining certain of the main themes in the lectures, particularly those appropriate to *Atonement* and not already highlighted, in order to give a wider overview of some of their most fundamental and distinctive concepts.



The lectures in character: biblical, theological, evangelical

Torrance's dogmatics lectures are inseparably biblical and theological, at once academic and pastoral in character and rooted in daily study of the bible in worship and prayer. Academic scholarship alongside scripture, worship and prayer are all for Torrance essential components of theology. Initially encouraged to read the bible regularly by his parents (three chapters a day and five on Sundays and thus once a year), Torrance in fact read it two or three times a year throughout his life. The intimate familiarity with the bible that this generated informs all his theology and is seen in the extent to which biblical language² and allusions resonate throughout the lectures even when he is not explicitly quoting scripture.

Encouraged also to see the bible as the word of God, in and through which God makes himself personally known in Jesus Christ, Torrance was significantly never taught any particular theory of scripture other than a christocentric one.³ For him, as for Calvin, it was to be interpreted in terms of its '*scopus*' or goal in Christ. When Christ is known, then scripture has achieved its aim and biblical interpretation becomes theological interpretation of the text in the light of the reality

of God in him. It is God in Christ who is the reality indicated by the words of scripture and when he is known exegesis becomes theology, worship and prayer.

It is important, therefore, in understanding the Torrance lectures, to appreciate the extent to which they are at once biblically rooted in careful exegesis, theologically structured in their narrative around the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and evangelical and doxological in intent. The lectures function as a guide to scripture, connecting passages and themes together in a presentation of the gospel of Christ which is highly illuminating and deeply moving.



The task of dogmatics

The task of biblical theology in general is to faithfully interpret scripture as God reveals himself in and through it. The task of dogmatics more specifically is to interpret scripture in the light of its goal and foundation in Christ.⁴ He is the centre of scripture who because he is God himself, the Word of God eternally in the heart of God, can make God known, for God can only be known through God. The universe was made through him and just as the universe is held together in him,⁵ so is scripture. The task of dogmatics for Torrance is to understand how scripture and all Christian doctrine cohere around him and it is then to articulate that, to put it into words as far as we may.



Systematic but not a system

For Torrance, theology and dogmatics are systematic but cannot be a system, for while Christian doctrine is ordered and structured around Christ it cannot be reduced to a logical system in itself. It points to him and is held together in him and not in itself or through any organising principle as such.

Thus while dogmatics must be as faithful as it can to scripture, it must avoid trying to tie up all the ends and must stop where scripture stops. As Calvin put it, God has made known to us in scripture everything we need to know for our salvation and 'where God shuts his sacred mouth we should shut ours'. The task of dogmatics therefore is

to follow and articulate the ‘inner logic’ of scripture as Torrance calls it, but without pressing our human understanding of it to the point where it distorts the bible. We must *hold together what scripture holds together without forcing things into a rationalistic system* such as universalism or limited atonement. Torrance endeavours to follow the whole course of the biblical understanding until it comes to fulfilment in Jesus Christ, emphasising what it emphasises, holding together what it holds together, in order to allow the central and inner logic of the biblical presentation of Christ and the gospel to come to light and be grasped without compartmentalisation or distortion.



Directional centredness

This means that one of the features of Torrance’s thought in general is the way in which it habitually focuses on the central issues, whether of scripture, theology or any other topic of debate. Although often dealing only with a particular aspect of theology, his thought remains characterised by an awareness of the whole, directionally and heuristically centred on the *scopus* of scripture, the Trinitarian revelation of God in Christ. The task of delineating the truth of Christ in its wholeness means that dogmatics for Torrance can never be finalised and must remain open to Christ’s continued disclosure to faith and fuller comprehension.



Openness to Christ

It is thus a further feature of Torrance’s theology that in indicating its centre in Christ it leaves it open for him to make himself known. Dogmatics may be a faithful structuring of scriptural doctrine, but it is dependent on Christ’s own self-presentation through its witness as dogmatics and apart from that self-revelation we do not know the truth of either scripture or of dogmatics. Both remain dependent for their meaning and coherence on knowledge of Jesus Christ himself and therefore on the continued self-revelation of God in him. True dogmatics for Torrance must accordingly be inherently evangelical, concerned to help further in the church a deeper knowledge and understanding of Jesus Christ himself in his person.



Understanding Torrance and his theological integration

It normally takes time to understand Torrance and many students struggled to comprehend him initially until they began to learn his language, recognise his patterns of thought and then gain a feel for his theology and follow what he was saying. His theology is a profound integration of biblical interpretation and the classical tradition of Christian theology. It combines intimate familiarity with the bible, extensive exegetical study⁶ and a remarkable knowledge of the history of theology. Key insights from the Patristic, medieval, Reformation and modern periods, especially of the great theologians such as Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Anselm, Luther and Calvin, Kierkegaard and Barth, and not least H. R. Mackintosh, are all woven together in a framework which in depth and scope is compelling and indeed thrilling as it unfolds the classical doctrine of Jesus Christ from its biblical roots.

The three overlapping components of Torrance's theology – biblical knowledge, integrated dogmatic framework and directional centredness on Jesus Christ – are all elements integrally involved in its understanding. Knowledge of the bible, of his framework of interpretation and of Christ himself all go together as step by step they illuminate each other in the process of comprehension. It is important with Torrance to focus not on understanding each part of his writings and theology piece by piece, but to concentrate on developing a feel for the whole and to keep reading. It is more a matter of coming to comprehend the whole and through that of slowly deepening an understanding of the parts, than of trying to understand his theology sentence by sentence or part by part. The two of course go together, but rather than trying to grasp the elements first and then the whole, it is better to work on reaching a slowly developing understanding of the parts through the whole and thereby at the same time of the whole through the parts.

FUNDAMENTAL THEMES IN TORRANCE



INCARNATION

Jesus Christ is very God and very man

The heart of Torrance's theology is that in the incarnation God himself, God the eternal Son has become man. He is very God and very man, the eternal God who in Jesus Christ is now also a fully individual human person. To speak of the divinity of Jesus here is at once to think of him in his relation to the Father and the Spirit. It is to think of him in God and to think of him in Trinitarian terms.

The full deity of Jesus Christ and his absolute oneness with the Father in the Spirit is the very cornerstone for Torrance of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ is very God come amongst us for our salvation and to look into his face is to see the very face of the Father. In this man we have at once true God and true man.

The one person of Jesus is the heart of salvation

Equally important as the fact that Jesus is true God and true man, is the fact that he is *one person*. He who is God is now he who is man. The very person who is the eternal Son is now also the man Jesus, so that in his one person he is at once God and man.

The fact that Jesus is one person, not two, means that *in his one person he is the living union of God and man*. Further, the fact that the incarnation was not a temporary event, that Jesus is man still, means that he is the *eternal* union of God and man, that the union which began at Bethlehem is for all eternity. It means that in his person Jesus Christ constitutes the whole bringing of man into union with God: he is the union of God and man begun in the incarnation, worked out in his earthly life and victorious over sin and death in the cross, resurrection and ascension. It means that Jesus in his one divine-human person, inseparable from his work, constitutes our salvation. He is himself our salvation and hence the significance of all the great 'I AM's of the Gospel of John, such as 'I am the resurrection and the life'. Hence too the importance which Torrance attaches to Christology and the inseparability in it of the person and work of Christ.



REVELATION AND RECONCILIATION

In both *Incarnation* and *Atonement* Torrance stresses the mutual importance and inter-dependence of revelation and reconciliation in the life and work of Christ. He has come to make the Father known and to restore humanity as his children through atonement and reconciliation, but at the same time it is only through being brought to see and know the true face of the Father that humanity can be reconciled. Throughout his theology, therefore, Torrance is vividly aware of the centrality of knowledge of God and of the importance of epistemological issues. In *Atonement*, for example, he sees and stresses the epistemological significance of the resurrection⁷ alongside its soteriological significance. The resurrection for him means not only the concrete establishment of our forgiveness in the risen humanity of Jesus but of our human knowledge of God. The resurrection tells us that in the human knowing of the Father by Jesus in his risen humanity we have the permanent completion of reconciliation.⁸ Reconciliation and revelation are inseparable in Christ and both are completed for us in his risen person.



INCARNATION AND LAW

In the incarnation, God steps out from above and behind the law to make himself personally known and to reconcile humanity to himself, under the law but apart from it. He is no longer known simply through the medium of the law, at one remove, but directly and personally in Jesus.

Law – interim knowledge of God

One of the most striking features of Torrance's doctrine of atonement is his concept of the law of God⁹ and the relation between it and atonement, justification and reconciliation. The law is holy and given by God in the situation where humanity has fallen and no longer has true knowledge of God. In that situation, it does give a kind of knowledge of God but one that is abstract and interim only. It does

give some knowledge of his will for us and of how we are to live, but it can only function in the gap between the 'is' and the 'ought' where God is not known and we do not do the truth.

The very fact of law means that we are not what we ought to be, since if we were what we ought to be we would not need law. It is given only because there is an existential severance between our very being and our doing the truth, and the mere fact of law reveals the severance, reveals our situation of sin and that we cannot fulfil the law. It can indicate, in abstract form, something of what we ought to be but in so doing cannot give us the power to become it or do it. It only serves to reveal our sin and thus to be 'the schoolmaster that leads us to Christ'.

Nevertheless the law is holy, given by God to give some knowledge of his will, to control society and help prevent disintegration and chaos.

Christ and law – atonement 'under the law' but 'apart from law'¹⁰

In that situation of sin, Christ is 'born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law'.¹¹ He enters into our situation under the law, taking upon himself the judgement of God under the law and at the same time fulfilling the law in a life of positive human righteousness.

In so doing, God redeems us from the bondage of the law to receive adoption as his children.¹² Although justification for Paul is under the law it is also 'apart from law',¹³ which does not mean that law is set aside, for it is completely fulfilled, but that we are freed to know God directly and no longer through the veil of the law.

Justification here is an act of 'substitutionary atonement' and an 'expiatory sacrifice'¹⁴ which means the interruption of the abstract moral order and 'the end of all abstraction in human relations with God'. It is the setting of human life 'on the wholly new basis of grace' in which in Christ we are brought into immediate relation to God in love and truth.¹⁵ It means the establishment of true ethics, for Christian life is life in Christ, in union with him through the Spirit where he lives in us and we begin to do the truth from the heart.



ATONEMENT

Torrance has a profound understanding of the meaning and mystery of atonement from its background in the Old Testament to the New Testament concept of it, the priesthood of Christ, and atonement as justification, reconciliation and redemption. He also understands atonement in its integral relation to both incarnation and resurrection. Just as the incarnation and the resurrection are creative miraculous acts of unearthly magnitude in which we cannot possibly understand *how* God became man or rose from the dead, but can begin with the incarnate and risen Jesus in his reality and think out *from* that reality to understand something of the meaning of the incarnation and resurrection, so the inner heart of atonement on the cross remains essentially a mystery. It is a profound act of God we can never plumb, in which he took sin and guilt on himself and undid them in the passion and resurrection of Jesus. But though we can never understand the inner mystery of atonement or have theories of the atonement as such, we may start *from* the accomplished reality of atonement and forgiveness in the death and resurrection of Christ and begin to understand something of their meaning and what was involved.

What then is Torrance's understanding of atonement? One way to attempt to summarise it is to distinguish and outline the various key elements which comprise it, even though they are inseparable and must all be taken together for any kind of adequate understanding.



INCARNATION, ATONEMENT, RESURRECTION

Jesus Christ in the wholeness of his person and work is *himself* our salvation

The fundamental fact here is that Jesus Christ, in the oneness of his divine-human person and the inseparability from his person of his whole work of reconciliation (from Bethlehem to Pentecost), is *himself* our salvation. So understood, Christ *himself* is our justification, reconciliation and redemption, all *in his person*. Salvation is to be found only in his person, is identical with his person, and is never to be found outside him in his person.

The oneness of Jesus in his person and work may perhaps be divided into four aspects, or two different dimensions and two linchpins. In the nature of the case, the four aspects are all continuously and inseparably involved together in the one person and event of our salvation.

Jesus Christ as God and man – the vertical dimension

In all that he does, Jesus Christ is God and man. He is God coming to man and man in response, God in revelation and reconciliation and man in receiving revelation and reconciliation. The whole person of Jesus in his life and work is to be seen not only as the act of God himself for our salvation but as the act of man in receiving salvation. The judgement of the cross is not only the judgement of God himself on human sin, it is man in obedient amen to the divine judgement. Throughout, Jesus in his person and work is very God and very man, the very act of God and of man, *of God as man*¹⁶ for our salvation.

Jesus Christ as the act of God and man in time – the horizontal dimension

If the vertical dimension is Jesus Christ seen as God coming down from above and man in response, the horizontal is the same Jesus seen as the whole act of God and of man *in time* from its beginning in the womb of Mary to its completion in the ascension and sending of the Spirit. The whole person and work of Jesus is to be seen as *one theological event* from beginning to end, completed in his person in the ascension and waiting to be finally completed in us and all creation at the parousia.

The unity of the vertical in the hypostatic union, the vertical linchpin of salvation

The union of God and man in the one person of Christ tells us that our salvation can no more be undone than the incarnation (worked out in life, death and resurrection) can be undone. The indivisibility of Jesus Christ as God and man in one person is the vertical linchpin of salvation.

The unity of the horizontal in the unity of person and work, the horizontal linchpin

The life of Jesus Christ tells us that who he is in his person is inseparable from his work of salvation; that from beginning to end he is one whole person-in-act, person-in-actual-deed; that from Bethlehem to Pentecost his person is inseparable from what he does, and that what he does is inseparable from who he is, in the one whole person-event of salvation which he is in himself. The indivisibility of the whole incarnate life of Jesus is the horizontal linchpin of salvation.

The unity of vertical and horizontal in the one-person-in-act of Jesus, the double linchpin

Put together, the indivisibility of the one person of Jesus Christ as God and man and the indivisibility of his person from his work tell us that he is *himself* our living, accomplished, unbreakable and eternal salvation. The indivisibility of the person of Christ as God and man and of his person from his work as God and man is the double linchpin of salvation.

The person of Christ can only be understood soteriologically and dynamically

In reading Torrance it soon becomes apparent that he understands the person of Jesus Christ ontologically (real God and real man) and dynamically (God in action and man in action), never statically. The incarnation is the beginning of atonement and salvation, but it has to be lived out ‘with strong crying and tears’¹⁷ throughout the life of Christ, must hold firm in the fearful passion and judgement of the cross and be finalised in resurrection.

Torrance’s dynamic and soteriological understanding of Christology is perhaps seen most clearly in his teaching on Christ’s assumption and sanctification of fallen flesh. Christ assumes fallen humanity in the incarnation for that is what we are, and in the very act of assuming it and making it his own he sanctifies it, so converting it in himself back to true humanity. Torrance sees that dynamic conversion of our humanity in the life of Jesus as part of our salvation and one which means that the whole incarnate life of Jesus and not just his death and resurrection is of saving significance.

Jesus Christ in his humanity is real revelation, reconciliation and righteousness

The saving significance of Jesus' humanity is one of the most fundamental and distinctive themes in Torrance. If the fact that Jesus Christ is God means that God himself has come all the way to us and that God himself has revealed himself and justified and reconciled us, the fact that Jesus Christ became man and is man still means that in his humanity he has worked out our whole salvation for us. He is the new Adam, who has undone the sin of Adam by his obedience and who in his ever-living humanity is 'our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption'.¹⁸ The incarnation for Torrance means not just that God himself has come to take our place in judgement, forgive and reconcile us, but that in our place and for us as man he has said amen to the divine judgement and in his risen humanity *is* our forgiveness and reconciliation realised in himself.¹⁹ He is our human response to the Father, actualised in the humanity which he wears for us, the one who knows the Father and by whose own faith we live.²⁰

The significance for theology of Christ's human righteousness

The fact that Jesus Christ in his humanity is the righteous one, the one who throughout his life lived out a life of positive human righteousness, the one who sinlessly assumed fallen human nature, sanctified it in the very act of assumption, offered it up to God in atoning sacrifice and was raised from the dead in all the completed perfection of his human righteousness,²¹ all that means that in his risen human righteousness he is the positive content of justification. Justification for Torrance has an essential forensic element in the New Testament but can never be understood as being purely forensic without bypassing the resurrection and the significance of Christ's human righteousness.²² In real union with the risen Christ through the Spirit we are not simply declared to be righteous but though sinners in ourselves are united to him to participate in his human righteousness.

Torrance in *Atonement* weaves together all the different strands of New Testament teaching – priestly, sacrificial, substitutionary and representative, judicial and forensic – in an integrated understanding of the atonement as justification, reconciliation and redemption. He holds together the passive and active obedience of Jesus Christ, the

work of God and the work of man in his one person, the finished work of Christ and the gospel call to faith,²³ in a theological account of the incarnation and atonement which is profoundly enriching and challenging.

Notes

- ¹ Address at the Day Conference, St Andrews, 24th February 2010, to mark the launch of *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* by T. F. Torrance.
- ² Particularly that of the King James Version on which he was brought up.
- ³ See the biography of T. F. Torrance by his brother D. W. Torrance in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance* (ed. Elmer M. Colyer; Lanham, Md.; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), chap. 1, p. 4.
- ⁴ On the nature of dogmatics see further T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), chap. 8, pp. 128–49, “The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology”. For a summary of Torrance’s views on dogmatics 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), xxiii–xxix.
- ⁵ Col 1:17; cf. Eph 1:10 and Heb 1:2–3.
- ⁶ During his early career as a student, in the parish and in the Faith and Order Commission of the ecumenical movement, Torrance had read widely in the fields of biblical interpretation and word study (at New College for example he had taken all the classes he could in biblical studies [Hebrew and Greek and Old and New Testament] and had tried hard to be allowed to take the final honours examinations in New Testament as well as in Systematic Theology!), using modern writers such as C. H. Dodd or T. W. Manson and in particular the *Commentaries* of Calvin and Kittel’s multi-volume *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

- ⁷ T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 231 f.
- ⁸ Cf. Torrance, *Atonement*, 227 ff.
- ⁹ See further Torrance, *Atonement*, 110 ff.
- ¹⁰ See Torrance, *Atonement*, 115 f., 253 f.
- ¹¹ Gal 4:4–5.
- ¹² Gal 4:3 ff.
- ¹³ Rom 3:21; Torrance, *Atonement*, 116 ff.
- ¹⁴ Torrance, *Atonement*, 119 f.
- ¹⁵ Torrance, *Atonement*, 117 f., 253 f.
- ¹⁶ Cf. T. F. Torrance, “The Atonement and the Oneness of the Church” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7.3 (1954): 250 and the quotation on the same page from F. W. Camfield (reprinted in T. F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, vol. 1 [London: Lutterworth Press, 1959], 243 f.).
- ¹⁷ Heb 5:7 KJV.
- ¹⁸ 1 Cor 1:30.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Torrance, *Atonement*, 69 f.
- ²⁰ See Gal 2:20 KJV and on this verse see Torrance, *Incarnation*, 28 and footnote.
- ²¹ For an outline of Torrance’s account of ‘Christ’s faithful priestly mediation’ see Torrance, *Atonement*, 68–72.
- ²² Torrance, *Atonement*, 127 f., 222–27.
- ²³ For a summary of Torrance’s teaching on Jesus Christ as substitute and representative and on the relation between his faith and ours see Torrance, *Atonement*, lxxii–lxxix.