



# Conformed to the truth

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I regard the years 1968–71 that I spent in New College as the time when my faith found understanding. Like many others I believed long before I understood the things I believed. As a child I said my prayers and worshipped on Sundays. As a young man I was comfortable with my claim to be a Christian. I believed that I experienced the nearness of God in my life and that Jesus Christ was my Saviour. When I became a candidate for the ministry, I felt that the Spirit was at work in me directing and empowering me. This was faith before New College. But it was in this place that ‘faith found understanding’ and it is to one teacher especially that I owe that understanding. For it was Tom Torrance more than any other who opened up for me the meaning of what I already believed and led me to believe so much more.

I came from a career in electrical engineering – a most practical of disciplines. When I designed a circuit board or planned the installation of a piece of electrical switchgear, there was little room for my opinion or scope for theorising. There was a way for things to be. There was an order and dependability about the nature of electrical power and the laws that governed its behaviour. I was daily constrained, if you like, by ‘the truth of the reality’ whose power I wished to utilize.

The models I constructed were based upon that truth; the specifications I drew up for tender had to be consistent with the known characteristics of the power I was dealing with.

You will understand then why Tom’s approach to theology appealed to me. From him I learned what in part I already knew about knowing but had not yet related to my Christian faith. There is a way for things to be – ‘truth is in being’ – my words, models and thinking are only true in so far as they are grounded in the nature of the reality I seek to understand, and this is true for our understanding of God no less than it is true of our understanding of creation.

Furthermore, if the presupposition of all scientific enquiry is that the universe itself is an ordered, dependable, rational entity, accessible to human reason then it was highly improbable that God our creator in his own nature and acts towards us, could himself be a chaotic and irrational being.

Nor could his nature be simply a matter of opinion, or the truth about him be the outcome of our imagining or the conclusion of our reasoning, unless of course that reasoning and imagining were themselves informed by his own nature. Our knowledge of him is only valid and our statements about him only true when they conform to the reality of how he really is in himself. Here then, I felt under Tom, that I was subject to a discipline I already understood from my background in science. Truth resides in the object of our enquiry – in being – and only when my words and thoughts are conformed to that truth can they claim to be true.

This understanding of how truth is known has served me well and, I believe, the people I have ministered to for nearly forty years.

It gave to me, and through me, to others, a certain confidence: the conviction that it is a reasonable thing to believe and that there are sound reasons for believing. Just as all scientific endeavour demands humility before the object of our enquiry, allowing the object of our investigation to shape the questions we ask and disclose its truth to our minds, no less does our search for God demand the same rigorous, scientific discipline of mind.

For knowing God or knowing his creation is no different in this respect: it is the same people with their human intellect who seek to know and all true knowing must be controlled by the reality we seek to know. For the Christian then, it makes sense to claim that the Lord we know is also the Lord of our knowing, and that he remains throughout the subject of our knowing.

In the parishes in which I have ministered, Elgin in Morayshire, Girvan in Ayrshire, and Giffnock in Glasgow, I have frequently found a lack of confidence among people who believe and, not infrequently, a certain embarrassment about their belief. There has often been a conscious separation in their minds between Christian faith and science, believing that knowing in faith is different from knowing in

other ways. Tom's insights have enabled me to reassure the faith of the faithful, and to persuade them that belief is okay, that they do not have to suspend their intellect to be Christian, that faith is a rational response to God's revelation to us in Christ, a respectable scientific response to the truth that is in God and, after all, if this were not true, what would it mean to love God with our mind as with our heart and soul?

I know that for many people today it is not theologically respectable to say that you are sure, or claim that you know something or that you are certain about matters of faith. Vagueness, doubt, uncertainty, the unknown, unanswerable questions, living with mystery, poetry rather than facts, are the order of the day. Anyone who says they know is suspect. Yet in my own ministry I have found that people need to be reassured; to be persuaded that the Gospel is true, that God does love and does understand and does forgive, that he will provide, that he will direct, that death has been overcome, that his grace is sufficient for all our need. This God is not some vague, uncertain, ultimately unknowable distant deity but one who has come close to us in Jesus Christ whose own holy nature is plain to see in him, and who always acts towards us as he promised he would.

The language of God as some 'mysterious presence in absence', who leaves us to work out some understanding of his nature, and our own human nature, for ourselves, could not be more different from the theology I learned here. Here I learned of the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who has acted decisively in history, in this world of space and time, within which all human knowing takes place. He disclosed himself to us in his Son, is not different from the Son, and by his Son has reconciled a fallen world to himself.

If through the years I have been able to instil confidence in the hearts of faithful people or bring comfort to the troubled, persuade the doubter, or help the puzzled to understand, it is only because in this place, and through Tom, that I came to understand the faith of the church and all the inner connections within that faith. It all made such sense and good reason and, most wonderful of all – it was not the conclusion of my reason, but a truth that commended itself to me with such power simply because it was true.

I said earlier that here I learned that God can be known and that he

remains the subject as well as the object of our knowing – the Lord of our knowing. It always makes sense to me that if we are to know God, it can only be because he gives himself to be known and consequently, any notion that we can access knowledge of God apart from his own disclosure, is ruled out. Arguments for the existence of God, or a God who is no more than the conclusion of our own reasoning, or imagining – a God subject to our intellect or at the mercy of our minds, is no longer possible. For uniquely in Christ Jesus, God has chosen to reveal himself. There is no other God at the back of Jesus, as Tom would say, and no other way of finding God other than through him who came to find us. The utter centrality of Christ was crucial to the faith I learned here, both for revelation and for redemption. Again and again through the years I have pointed people to Christ, both to understand God (his nature) for he is the Son of God, and also to understand ourselves (our nature) for he was also the Son of Man. To him I have directed them when they have raised questions of guilt, forgiveness, suffering, death and life. I have persuaded them that who Jesus was is the key to what he did, and what he did and promised to do was worth believing because of who he was. For in him, person and act, word and being are one, as you would expect from one who is himself the truth. He is both the message and the messenger. It is this understanding of the centrality of Christ for everything about our faith that has become for me the most important aspect of Tom’s teaching for my own parish ministry.

The Gospel is not well understood. It is not well understood, because many faithful people carry burdens that they need not carry. Christian people are not always known for their happiness, for their peace of mind or the freedom with which they live – but they ought to be. The idea that we still need to merit God’s favour, that we still need to qualify or somehow measure up and succeed, is deeply rooted in the lives of many believers. They do not understand the Gospel. They have not understood the vicarious nature of Christ’s ministry. That it was for us and in our place and in our stead that he lived and died and rose again and evermore pleads our cause before his Father in heaven.

So many do not understand what we were privileged to discover and learn under Tom, that we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ and consequently we can come boldly before the throne of his

grace without fear of condemnation. For his birth and baptism, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, his righteousness, his faith, his obedience were all for me and for you. This surely is the heart of the Good News, of the message that sets us free and unburdens us and makes us glad and confident as Christians. This is the indicative of faith, which must always take precedence over faith's imperatives: for there is nothing prior to grace or more important than grace or more amazing.

After a lifetime of preaching and teaching the Gospel, I find that I feel I still fail to appreciate the true place and priority of grace in the Gospel message. At a recent Christmas Eve service in Giffnock South, I preached what can only be described as a 'stormer' of a sermon with which I, for one, was extremely well pleased. Christmas Eve can be a real evangelical opportunity because people who rarely darken the door of the church are present that evening. So I preached a stirring and challenging word and everyone was invited to meet the challenge of the Christmas story. At the close of the service, I stood at the church door to greet the congregation as they left. A woman shook my hand, looked me in the eye and said, 'Mr Simpson, if you only knew what was going on in my life just now, you would know that the last thing I needed here tonight was another challenge.' She was right. She needed to hear the good news of God's grace instead of which, I laid yet another burden upon her, albeit a call to commitment and faith.

When I completed the essay "The relationship between incarnation and atonement", little did I understand at the time how practical was that theology. But I have proved it many a time since. Christ in us, and ourselves as we are found in him, seems to me to sum up all that constitutes the good news of the Gospel.

And here, I think lies the explanation of why Tom's theology has been so important and influential in my own ministry as I'm sure it has been in the ministries of all who benefitted from his teaching.

It is immensely practical. If memory serves me correctly, Tom had a bit of a problem with the concept of 'practical theology'. I am sure he once said, 'What other kind of theology is there?' As time passed I found that the theology I learned under Tom has been more practical than any I learned in practical theology. What are the issues which matter to people in our parishes today? They are issues of survival,

just keeping it all together; issues of worry or of fear, issues of ‘what is it all about?’ The confusion and complexity of life and our world; issues of what matters most; issues of regret, of guilt, of personal identity, of death. In all of this the theology of which we are thinking today speaks directly; not as a demand but as a promise. It speaks of God who acts. It was Roland Walls, not Tom, who said that the most important question people ask today, indeed the only question that matters to them, is this, ‘Does God do anything? Does God make any difference to us?’

I have recently been reading Alan Lewis’ book *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. Alan was a fellow student and friend during the years 1968–71. Sadly, he died in 1994 when only fifty years old but not before he finished the book he was writing, a book which he considered to be the culmination of his life’s work. I read it because Tom himself described it as ‘the most remarkable and moving book I have ever read’. When I read the book, I immediately understood its appeal for Tom and it appealed no less to me. It is a book of profound theology and certainly could not be described as a casual read, but from start to finish this is a book about what God does. It is a book about what God has done, is doing and will yet do. Its theology, like that of Tom’s, is wonderfully practical because it touches upon the human condition and tells us that we are not alone; that we are not alone, neither in life nor in death. In Christ Jesus, his Son, God has joined himself to us, to our human nature, in a way that can never be undone. Having reconciled the world to himself and swallowed up our death, he has made space for us within his own divine life. It has been my privilege, as well as my responsibility, to bring to the people of the parishes in which I have served, the practical consequences of this truth for us all.