



Thomas F. Torrance
Theologian of the Trinity

Paul D. Molnar

THOMAS F. TORRANCE

Paul Molnar is known for detailed and fair-minded reading of text by which he has established his reputation as one of the leading interpreters of Karl Barth. This volume on my father's theology exemplifies those practices of faithful reading. I believe Paul Molnar is profoundly right in identifying my father's understanding of the Trinity as the proper point of entry to his theology as a whole. My father's perception of the inner relations between the doctrine of God, of creation and the incarnation flow from this. The volume is meticulous, thorough and always clear. I thoroughly recommend it. Paul Molnar knew my father personally, talked to him, questioned him and understood him well.

*Iain Torrance, President of Princeton Theological Seminary and
younger son of Thomas F Torrance*

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of international interest in the theology of T. F. Torrance. In this landmark study, Paul Molnar offers a clear, comprehensive and perceptive account of his exposition of the trinitarian shape of the Christian faith. Providing a valuable and necessary point of reference, it deserves to be widely read by all students of Torrance's work.

David Fergusson, Professor of Divinity and Principal of New College, University of Edinburgh

The time is ripe for an appreciation of Torrance's constructive work as a Christian dogmatician, and Molnar's book offers its readers just that. Thoroughly informed, written with clarity and characteristic zest, and alert to Torrance's capacity to interrogate contemporary theological convention, this is a book which serves its subject well.

Professor John Webster, King's College, Aberdeen

No theologian in the second half of the twentieth century made a greater contribution to Nicene Christianity than T. F. Torrance. His writings will continue to be read for years to come, long after the work of some of his more illustrious contemporaries has faded away. Now Paul Molnar has produced a profound, detailed and comprehensive study, one that will surely become the definitive treatment of Torrance's trinitarian theology. For all who care about the future of generous orthodoxy in the church, this book is highly recommended.

George Hunsinger, McCord Professor of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary, USA

This is a masterful treatment of Thomas F. Torrance's trinitarian theology. Paul Molnar, a premier theologian in his own right, ranges over the primary materials and growing body of secondary literature on T. F. Torrance with a scholarly scrutiny and critical judgment that both illumine the trinitarian fabric of Torrance's theology and correct numerous misreadings of Torrance in the secondary sources. Molnar's grasp of Barth's theology in particular and trinitarian theology today and throughout the history of the church in general makes him one of the few scholars writing today who fully grasps the breadth and depth of Torrance's trinitarian theology, as well as its significance for the scholarly world and the church. This is one of the most significant works, if not the most significant, on Torrance's theology published to date. It is an indispensable guide for anyone who intends to seriously engage the thought of T. F. Torrance.

*Elmer M. Colyer, Professor of Historical Theology, University of Dubuque
Theological Seminary Dubuque, USA*

This book shows the inner connection of Torrance's approach to Christian dogmatics and ecumenical theology with his understanding of theology as a critical, reality-based scientific undertaking. What emerges above all from this study is the astonishing coherence of Torrance's thought on theological epistemology, method and subject-matter - a coherence that is not perhaps so apparent when one only reads some of his numerous books. As he himself never wrote out his own Christian Dogmatics, this book can give us a very good idea of what it might have looked like.

Alasdair Heron, Professor of Reformed Theology, University of Erlangen, Germany

Thomas F. Torrance

This book provides an important study of the theology of Thomas F. Torrance, who is generally considered to have been one of the most significant theologians writing in English during the twentieth century, with a view toward showing how his theological method and all his major doctrinal views were shaped by his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Torrance pursued a theology that was realist because he attempted to think in accordance with the unique nature of the object that is known. In holding to such a methodology, he drew an analogy between theology and natural science.

This book demonstrates how, for Torrance, God relates with humanity within time and space so that creation finds its meaning in relation to God and not in itself; this enabled him to avoid many theological pitfalls such as agnosticism, subjectivism and dualism while explaining the positive implications of various Christian doctrines in a penetrating and compelling manner. This book offers an important resource for students of theology and for scholars who are interested in seeing how serious dogmatic theology shapes and should shape our understanding of the Christian life.

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Thomas F. Torrance

Theologian of the Trinity

PAUL D. MOLNAR
St John's University, New York, USA

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Finally, I would like to thank Thomas F. Torrance himself. When I had the privilege of getting to know him during his visit to St. John's and my subsequent visit with him at his home in Edinburgh, as well as through correspondence, I experienced one of those rare opportunities where I actually was able to discuss theology in depth with a man whom I regarded then and now to be one of the truly great theologians of the twentieth century. His thinking has been a very positive influence on my own thought for many years now. As anyone will see from this book, Torrance not only was a masterful systematic theologian, but he was a truly humble minister of the Christian Gospel. His one compelling drive was to preach and teach about the centrality of Jesus Christ and thus also of the Triune God, in order to stress how important it is for people to lift up their minds and hearts toward God in grateful joy and happiness for the one who, in his Word and Spirit, loves us more than he loves himself. It is to Thomas F. Torrance and to his memory that I dedicate this book.

Chapter 1

Introducing T. F. Torrance

There is little doubt that Thomas Forsyth Torrance (1913–2007) is one of the most significant English-speaking theologians of the twentieth century. According to Alister McGrath, those outside of Great Britain generally regard Torrance “as the most significant British academic theologian of the twentieth century”¹ and, in his view, “one of the most productive, creative and important theologians of the twentieth century.”² In the estimation of George Hunsinger, Torrance’s understanding of the sacraments in particular represents a new synthesis of Calvin and Barth which improves on both and embodies “the most creative Reformed breakthrough on the sacraments in twentieth-century theology, and arguably the most important Reformed statement since Calvin.”³ Stanley Grenz notes that as early as 1984 the editors of the *Reformed Review* praised Torrance as “the leading Reformed theologian today in the Anglo-Saxon world” and “one of the most brilliant and seminal thinkers of our time.”⁴ Elmer Colyer believes there is a “growing consensus that Thomas F. Torrance is one of the premier theologians in the second half of the twentieth century.”⁵ Kye Won Lee calls Torrance “the most

¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (hereafter: *An Intellectual Biography*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. xi.

² McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 107.

³ George Hunsinger, “The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* (hereafter: *SJT*) Vol. 54, No. 2: 155–76, 160. See also George Hunsinger, “The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments”, pp. 139–60 in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance*, ed Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), and Torrance’s glowing response in the same volume (pp. 318–21). Hunsinger dedicates his recent book *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) to T.F. Torrance, noting that, of all the many important influences that have led him to write his book with a view toward ecumenical agreement on the Eucharist, T.F. Torrance towered above them all in providing him with many of the important themes that helped him move “from Karl Barth to something like the Catholic Evangelical Orthodox center” in his thinking (p. x).

⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Rediscovering the Triune God: The Trinity in Contemporary Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 201.

⁵ Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian & Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 11 and *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, p. ix.

consistent evangelical theologian in our times”.⁶ Most people today recognize that Torrance has made significant contributions to the discussion between theology and science. Daniel Hardy, for example, writes that Torrance “is virtually unique amongst theologians in the depth of his knowledge of the philosophy of the natural sciences”.⁷ And P. Mark Achtemeier believes Torrance’s contributions to the study of science and religion “are magisterial and highly original”.⁸ Alister McGrath also notes that Torrance authored, edited or translated a massive amount of material—more than 360 pieces before his retirement in 1979 and over 250 more after that date.

While Torrance’s writing covers a wide range of topics, he is perhaps best known for his study of science and Christian theology. McGrath notes wryly that many of those theologians he has studied did not seem bothered by the fact that they had no first-hand knowledge of the method and norms of natural science, but wrote about science nonetheless! But it is different with Torrance. “Torrance’s writings were, quite simply, of landmark significance.”⁹ While this book will consider Torrance’s contribution to the discussions between science and theology later in this chapter in order to give the reader some indication of his massive contribution to that area of study, we shall not focus on that contribution but will instead call attention to his dogmatic theology and how that theology informs all other aspects of his thought. Of course, even his dogmatic theology shows signs of his commitment to the scientific method, since every aspect of this dogmatic theology is marked by his belief that accurate thinking can only take place as thought conforms to the unique nature of the object being investigated. As the title of the book suggests, Torrance’s thinking is deeply structured around his understanding of the triune God. Not only all other doctrines, but even Torrance’s work toward ecumenical understanding between Orthodox and Protestants and Protestants and Roman Catholics is informed by his understanding of the Trinity. Interestingly, although he did not formally teach courses in the doctrine of God at the University of Edinburgh,¹⁰ he did write three very important books on the

⁶ Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union With Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2003), p. 1.

⁷ Daniel W. Hardy, “Thomas F. Torrance” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in The Twentieth Century, Volume I*, ed David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), pp. 71–91, 71.

⁸ P. Mark Achtemeier, “Natural Science and Christian Faith in the Thought of T. F. Torrance” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 269–302, 269.

⁹ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. xii.

¹⁰ Because John Baillie and later John McIntyre taught the doctrine of the Trinity, Torrance was denied that possibility at Edinburgh and was very disappointed about that (McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 91). Nonetheless, in his honors courses in dogmatics, Torrance was able to emphasize Christological and trinitarian themes, including the fact that the Trinity was the “ground and grammar of theology” in a dynamic and engaging fashion. He thus impressed upon his students the importance of the doctrine. I am

Trinity after his retirement and he personally was most pleased with his important book *The Trinitarian Faith*, which was published in 1988.¹¹ But before we get into the dogmatic material that will comprise the heart of this book, let us finish introducing the man himself.

T. F. Torrance was born of missionary parents in Chengdu, in the province of Sichuan, West China, on August 30, 1913, and was named after his great-grandfather, Thomas Forsyth Torrance. From 1920 to 1927 he attended a school established by Canadian missionaries “at Lan Tai Tze on the campus of the West China Union University”,¹² which, according to Alister McGrath, was not quite up to British standards but was good enough for Torrance to dream of entering the University of Edinburgh to prepare himself for missionary work in Tibet. Because of growing hostility to missionaries in China, all women and children had to leave in 1927, and so Torrance returned to Scotland in the middle of the Depression. When things stabilized in China, his father returned there in 1928 and left his wife Annie to raise the family in Scotland. His father finally returned home to Scotland after retiring late in 1934 and lived there until his death in 1959. T. F. Torrance eventually attended the University of Edinburgh to study classics and philosophy and began to formulate some of his own realist views of philosophy, theology and morality; he also studied the philosophy of science.¹³ He began the formal study of theology in New College in the fall of 1934. At that time he read and was disappointed by Schleiermacher and developed an interest in the theology of the early church. In Torrance’s own words:

I was captivated by the architectonic form and beauty of Schleiermacher’s method and his arrangement of dogmatics into a scientific system of Christian

grateful to Professor Alasdair I.C. Heron of the University of Erlangen, Germany, for this information regarding Torrance’s teaching about the Trinity while at Edinburgh.

¹¹ The three books are: Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (hereafter: *The Christian Doctrine of God*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996); Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (hereafter: *Trinitarian Perspectives*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994); and Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (hereafter: *The Trinitarian Faith*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988). Torrance’s remark about *The Trinitarian Faith* appears in Michael Bauman, *Roundtable Conversations with European Theologians* (hereafter: *Roundtable Conversations*), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 117. For an excellent brief introduction to Torrance’s realist theology noting its trinitarian shape, see Robert J. Palma, “Thomas F. Torrance’s Reformed Theology” in *Reformed Review*, Autumn 1984, vol. 38, no. 1: 2–46.

¹² McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 13.

¹³ Torrance studied philosophy with Norman Kemp Smith, who was an authority on Kant and Hume, and A. E. Taylor, who taught moral philosophy and was an expert on Plato. According to his own recollections, he “had a very powerful training in philosophy”. See I. John Hesselink, “An Interview with Thomas F. Torrance” in *Reformed Review*, Autumn 1984, vol. 38, no. 1: 47–64, 52.

doctrine, but it was clear to me that the whole conception was wrong, for due to its fundamental presuppositions Schleiermacher's approach did not match up to the nature or content of the Christian Gospel, while the propositional structure he imposed upon the Christian consciousness lacked any realist scientific objectivity.¹⁴

Under the influence of his mother,¹⁵ his view of Scripture was both Christ-centered and opposed to any crude fundamentalism. Indeed, his mother had given him a copy of Barth's *Credo* that encouraged him to oppose not only rationalistic liberalism but fundamentalism and deterministic sorts of Calvinism as well.

Two professors at New College were to have a lasting influence on Torrance. Hugh Ross Mackintosh (1870–1936) stressed the centrality of Christ for the doctrines of revelation and salvation and also emphasized the connection between theology and mission,¹⁶ and Daniel Lamont (1869–1950), who succeeded Alexander Martin in 1927 and held the chair of “Apologetics, Christian Ethics and Practical Theology”, was interested in the relationship between Christianity and scientific culture.¹⁷ Mackintosh's thought was so influential for Torrance that he took extraordinarily detailed notes. Mackintosh's books, *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (1912) and *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (1927), remained the basic texts for divinity students at the University until the 1970s. Interestingly, two key points emphasized by Mackintosh were to be of long-lasting influence in Torrance's own thought. First, “No one knoweth the Son, save the Father; neither doth anyone know the Father save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son willleth to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). This classic text indicated for Torrance that our knowledge of God comes only in and through Christ himself and that “What Jesus was on earth God is for ever”.¹⁸ As we shall see, Torrance would later develop this into his important position that what God is toward us in Jesus Christ, he is eternally in himself. Second, Mackintosh was quite convinced

¹⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (hereafter: *Karl Barth*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), p. 121. See also Thomas F. Torrance, “My Interaction with Karl Barth” in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind* (hereafter: *My Interaction with Karl Barth*), ed Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 52–64, 52, and Hesselink, “Interview with Torrance”: 53.

¹⁵ Torrance once stated that, of the seven ministers in his family, including sons and brothers-in-law, his mother was “the best preacher” (Hesselink, “Interview with Torrance”: 50).

¹⁶ See David W. Torrance, “Thomas Forsyth Torrance: Minister of the Gospel, Pastor, and Evangelical Theologian” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 1–30, 7.

¹⁷ See David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock (eds), *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846–1996* (hereafter: *Disruption to Diversity*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 140.

¹⁸ Torrance's own recollections as quoted in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 31.

that the most important issue facing the Church in his time was the same truth that was central during the time of Nicaea, namely, “the cardinal truth of the Deity of Christ, the incarnate Son of God”.¹⁹ This same thought was repeated by Torrance many years later in his book *The Christian Doctrine of God*: “The Deity of Christ is the supreme truth of the Gospel, the key to the bewildering enigma of Jesus ...”²⁰ And, of course, Torrance developed this insight into his own insistence on the centrality of the Nicene *homoousion* for all theological loci.

Daniel Lamont helped to generate Torrance’s interest in science and in applying the scientific method to theology in the sense that knowledge was perceived to take place when thinking was conformed to the unique nature of the object being investigated. Some of this was presented in Lamont’s important book *Christ in the World of Thought*, published in 1934. This scientific thinking was to dominate Torrance’s thought in all areas, as we shall see. During his time as a student at Edinburgh, he had contact with John and Donald Baillie who were both critical of Barth in a way that Torrance considered inappropriate. He himself believed that John Baillie’s thinking in particular suffered from what he called an epistemological dualism. This meant that Baillie tried to establish “a method of inquiry apart from the subject-matter of his inquiry” on the one hand, and, on the other, “he worked out a theory of religion from its roots in the human soul and the moral claims of God upon it, without really taking divine revelation into account”.²¹ It is certainly not too much to say that Torrance became a lifelong opponent of subjectivism because such an approach to objective knowledge essentially cut one off from the truth as it exists independent of the subject. At this point in his career, he was following the thought of his teachers Mackintosh and Lamont and argued that “it is impossible for man to gain knowledge of God ‘by digging into himself’”.²² Barth’s theology was becoming popular in Scotland in the mid 1930s and Torrance became more interested in Barth’s thinking at that time. H. R. Mackintosh had introduced him to Barth’s “Theology of the Word” and Torrance himself read Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* I/1 as soon as the translation by G. T. Thompson appeared in 1936. Torrance was particularly intrigued by Barth’s understanding of dogmatics as a science, by his view of the objectivity of God’s self-revelation and by his trinitarian doctrine.²³ It is no wonder that Torrance was to become famous as the key person to introduce Barth’s theology to the English-speaking world. Torrance’s book *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910–1931* was to dominate the received view of Barth in the English-speaking world until 1995 when Bruce

¹⁹ Torrance’s own recollections, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 31.

²⁰ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 46.

²¹ Torrance’s own recollections, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 37.

²² Torrance’s own recollections, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 37.

²³ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 121.

McCormack questioned his thesis that Barth turned from dialectic to analogy after reading Anselm.²⁴

In 1936 Torrance was awarded the Blackie Fellowship which allowed him to study in the Middle East. He traveled to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon as well as Bethlehem, Nazareth and Iraq. When he arrived at Basra, the city was still under martial law because a revolt had recently taken place against the Baghdad government. He was accused of being a spy and actually sentenced to death by hanging. Happily, he was able to persuade the authorities that he was just a theological student from Edinburgh and was allowed to travel to Baghdad and on to Damascus. Interestingly, Torrance retained some Arabic throughout his life. He also remained fluent in Chinese, Greek, Latin, German and French. When he returned to Scotland he graduated *summa cum laude* having specialized in systematic theology. It was at this time that he was awarded the Aitkin Fellowship which allowed him to engage in postgraduate study at Basel with Karl Barth. After studying German in Berlin and Marburg, he enrolled in Barth's seminar for the academic year 1937–1938. There were about fifty students in the seminar, but Barth also selected around twelve students to meet once a week at his home, based on the results of an examination he gave them. Torrance was among them. During the semester, in addition to the weekly meetings at Barth's residence where the group studied Wollebius' *Compendium Theologiae*, Torrance heard Barth lecture four times a week on what would later become *Church Dogmatics* II/1. They were studying Vatican I's teaching on natural theology at that point. Even as late as 1990 Torrance indicated that he considered *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and II/2—Barth's Doctrine of God—to be the high point of Barth's dogmatics. As far as Torrance is concerned, the second volume of the *Church Dogmatics* "surely ranks with Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, Augustine, *De Trinitate*, St Thomas, *Summa Theologiae*, and Calvin, *Institutio*, as a supremely great work of Christian theology".²⁵ Torrance originally wanted to write his doctoral thesis

²⁴ See Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). McCormack also claims that Barth himself was mistaken when he attributed his own theological change to his encounter with Anselm and thus to his Anselm book as when he wrote that in his book on Anselm [*Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*, trans. Ian W. Robertson (London: SCM Press, 1960)] he was "working with a vital key, if not the key, to an understanding of that whole process of thought that has impressed me more and more in my *Church Dogmatics* as the only one proper to theology" (*Fides Quaerens*, p. 11). See McCormack, pp. 421–2. McCormack's downplaying of the importance of Barth's Anselm book for his thinking has now been questioned by Timothy Stanley ("Returning Barth to Anselm" in *Modern Theology* 24:3, July 2008: 413–37, especially 426ff).

²⁵ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 124. In an interview in 1990, Torrance said that Barth was "perhaps the most powerful theological mind we've had for many centuries. He was steeped in the Bible, and he was able to put things so clearly, ontologically and dynamically. He also had such a light-hearted godliness about him. I am persuaded that his *Doctrine of God*

on “the scientific structure of Christian dogmatics” but Barth told him he was too young for that and he settled on “The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers”.²⁶ Because other events intervened, he was not actually able to finish his doctoral dissertation and take his doctoral exam until 1946, the year he became engaged to and married Margaret Edith Spear. It was during his engagement that he finished his doctoral requirements and was awarded his doctorate *magna cum laude*.²⁷ Torrance’s dissertation was published that same year and established his reputation in historical theology.

From 1938 to 1939 Torrance taught theology at Auburn Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian seminary in upstate New York. He was actually recommended for the job by John Baillie who was not exactly thrilled with Torrance’s theology but nevertheless respected him personally and as a theologian. Baillie had received an urgent request for help from the President of Auburn, a school with a reputation for being liberal, after one of their key professors suddenly departed for the Pacific School of Religion in California. Torrance initially had preferred to return to Basel to complete his doctorate but eventually agreed. As a new professor, he worked hard on his lectures at Auburn. They showed the influence of both Mackintosh and Barth, stressing the fact that one cannot really understand the person of Christ apart from his work and also emphasizing that what God reveals in Christ and the way in which he reveals it can never be separated. At this stage of his career Torrance basically agreed with Barth’s critique of natural theology. Later he formulated his own “new” natural theology which he viewed as a bridge between theology and natural science in the sense that both sciences operated in ways that undermined dualistic ways of thinking about reality and tended to reinforce the idea that accurate thinking could only occur when ideas were thought in accordance with the nature of the reality being investigated. Torrance’s “new” natural theology was, of course, controversial. We shall consider Torrance’s “new” natural theology and his divergence from Barth on this subject in its proper place.²⁸ Other areas where Torrance eventually disagreed with Barth concerned 1) Barth’s view of the

is simply the best thing of its kind” (T.F. Torrance in Bauman, *Roundtable Conversations*, p. 112).

²⁶ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 46. Interestingly, both Mackintosh and a retired professor at New College named H.A.A. Kennedy strongly influenced his view of grace. See Hesselink, “Interview with Torrance”: 53.

²⁷ Interestingly, Torrance’s oral exam at Basel was difficult because he was put through “a terrible ordeal”, partly because Martin, the son of his examiner, Karl Ludwig Schmidt, was being examined at the same time, as was Christoph Barth, Karl Barth’s son. Torrance believes that K.L. Schmidt wanted his son to do better than Christoph and him. As it turned out, both Christoph and T.F. Torrance were awarded their degrees *magna cum laude* while Martin Schmidt received his degree *insigne cum laude*. Karl Barth wrote to Torrance telling him he was disappointed in the outcome and that if he had been present he would have received his degree *summa cum laude*. See Hesselink, “Interview with Torrance”: 57.

²⁸ See below, Chapter 3.

sacraments, which Torrance considered to be a reversion to a dualism that Barth had rejected earlier in the *Church Dogmatics*; 2) Barth's failure to emphasize sufficiently Christ's high priestly mediation later in the *Church Dogmatics*, which for Torrance accounted for difficulties in Barth's treatment of the ascension in the *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, "in which Christ seemed to be swallowed up in the transcendent Light and Spirit of God, so that the humanity of the risen Jesus appeared to be displaced by what he called 'the humanity of God' in his turning toward us";²⁹ 3) what he deemed to be an "element of 'subordinationism' in his doctrine of the Holy Trinity"³⁰ which was linked to the *filioque* clause because, for Torrance, the addition of the *filioque* and the Eastern emphasis on the procession of the Son from the Father alone were responses to an "incipient subordinationism in the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity" which should never have arisen and could easily be overcome if theology were to stick to the teaching of Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen and Cyril of Alexandria and admit that the Spirit proceeds from the being of the Father and not just the person of the Father and thus through the Son; 4) Torrance also wondered whether Barth's treatment of creation was as thoroughly trinitarian as it might have been; he was also critical of the fact that Barth limited his treatment of creation to "*man* in the cosmos" and did not treat the cosmos itself except in his discussions of time and providence.³¹ According to Alister McGrath, Torrance regarded Barth's most serious weakness as his "failure to engage with the natural sciences", and, for McGrath, this fact "offers a significant criterion of dissimilarity between Torrance and Barth".³² It is interesting that McGrath links this issue to the interpretation of natural theology offered by both Torrance and Barth. We shall consider this in its proper place in Chapter 3.³³

Torrance also accentuated the importance of the doctrine of the atonement and eschewed any superficial attempt to explain atonement with some sort of liberal "moral influence theory". Some students reacted interestingly; one strongly objected to belief in Christ's divinity and let Torrance know about it—Torrance

²⁹ Torrance, *My Interaction with Karl Barth*, p. 62.

³⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, pp. 131–2. See also Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (hereafter: *Divine Freedom*), (New York/London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2002), pp. 323–4.

³¹ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 132.

³² McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 198.

³³ According to Alister McGrath, Torrance was also critical of Barth's reading of Calvin's doctrine of election, Barth's treatment of the Holy Spirit and at an earlier point in Barth's theology what he considered to be Barth's failure to emphasize our living union with Christ. See McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 197. It might be mentioned that Torrance presents an essentially positive treatment of Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit in *Karl Barth* (pp. 208–12) and that he also believed that Barth finally did properly emphasize our union with Christ: "Barth's own thinking was governed by the dimension of the union of God and man in Christ" (Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 22).

informed him that it was not the case that he *could* not believe in Christ's divinity but that he chose not to. The student spent three days and nights without sleep and finally returned to tell Torrance that he was right, that is, if Jesus really is the Son of God, then one has no alternative but to follow and obey him. They had dinner together and all was quiet again. In addition to lecturing on Christology, Torrance lectured on grace, theology and philosophy, theology and psychology, theology and science, the doctrine of God and especially the doctrine of the Trinity. During his stay in the United States, Torrance was offered a job at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago but declined because he hoped a better offer might come from Princeton University. And it did. But that it did was somewhat surprising to Torrance because during the interview he was told that at Princeton they did not want theology taught in a confessional way but in "a dispassionate way as one of the liberal arts, rather than as in a theological seminary", without proselytizing.³⁴ Torrance indicated that he would teach theology as science and explained that such thinking would not be based on free choice but would take place under the compulsion of the nature of the object being investigated. For Torrance, the rigorous method of scientific inquiry understood in this way could be applied also to Christian theology with due respect, of course, to the fact that the object of Christian faith is an utterly unique object that cannot be directly observed within the created realm. Torrance did not say that he would be dispassionate and also indicated that he could not guarantee that no one would be converted through his lectures. To his surprise, he was offered the job, but because of the impending war in Europe he decided to return home to Scotland immediately and had to decline the offer. That was one of the two most difficult decisions of his life. The other one, as we shall see, was when he turned down the offer to succeed Barth in Basel.

When Torrance returned to Scotland he enrolled at Oriel College, Oxford, from 1939 to 1940, where he continued to work on his dissertation. He became involved in student life while there and also got involved in discussions of philosophy and theology with other well-known figures at Oxford including Austin Farrer, Raymond Kilbansky, Eric L. Mascall and Donald MacKinnon. Torrance had finished his ministerial studies while at Edinburgh and only needed a call to a local parish at this point to become a minister. He was ordained as minister at Alyth Barony Parish Church on March 20, 1940. His father attended and presented him with a full set of Calvin's commentaries which proved useful to Torrance in preparing his sermons.

His sermons during his time at Alyth were both pastoral and theological in emphasis. For instance, in explaining the meaning of "grace", Torrance said, "GRACE, from its very nature, has only one direction which it can take. Grace always flows down." He was, of course, referring to the love of God revealed in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ: "Grace is the love of God in princely

³⁴ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 57–8. See also Hesselink, "Interview with Torrance": 54.

condescension. It is the love of God to those who do not deserve his love, the indifferent and disloyal, whose only claim is their need.”³⁵ This thinking is certainly in line with the main ideas expressed in his doctoral dissertation as when Torrance writes:

Grace means the primary and constitutive act in which out of free love God has intervened to set our life on a wholly new basis, but also means that through faith this may be actualised in flesh and blood because it has been actualised in Jesus Christ, who by the Cross and the Resurrection becomes our salvation, our righteousness, and our wisdom. Thus any attempt to detach grace in a transferred sense from the actual embodiment of God’s grace in Jesus Christ is to misunderstand the meaning of the Pauline *charis* altogether ... Paul deliberately avoided using *charis* in the sense of an energising principle, though that is the way in which *charis*, due to Hellenistic influences, came to be used in later Christian literature.³⁶

For Torrance,

Christ Himself is the objective ground and content of *charis* in every instance of its special Christian use ... [in the New Testament] *charis* refers to the being and action of God as revealed and actualised in Jesus Christ, for He is in His person and work the self-giving of God to men ... Grace is in fact identical with Jesus Christ in person and word and deed ... neither the action nor the gift is separable from the person of the giver.³⁷

The ideas expressed here were so decisively important that they were to affect all of Torrance’s theology throughout his career. In particular, because Torrance emphasized that grace is identical with the Giver (Jesus Christ) he opposed all attempts to detach grace from Christ acting among us and locate it within experience as a moral quality or something within our religious consciousness. It would not be too much to say that the doctrine of justification by grace and through faith is so decisively important for Torrance that one can easily see how the doctrine shaped much of what he thought and said as a theologian throughout his career. And, as we shall see, this doctrine takes shape in relation to Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Torrance’s preaching placed Jesus Christ at the center, as when he insisted that “When you look into the face of Jesus Christ and see there the face of God, you

³⁵ Torrance, sermon on 2 Corinthians 13:14, preached November 1940 as quoted in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 63–4.

³⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Pasadena/ Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1996), p. 33.

³⁷ Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace*, p. 21.

know that you have not seen that face elsewhere, and could not see it elsehow".³⁸ Torrance's stress upon the once-for-all atoning act of God in Christ was disturbing then, as it is today. A number of his parishioners were upset enough to wonder whether or not Torrance meant by that doctrine that their own church work did not actually put them right with God. That is indeed what Torrance meant. Years later one could see the same issue occupying Torrance when he insisted that "the subtle Pelagianism of the human heart ... comes under the judgment of Christ's unconditional forgiveness", so that if divine forgiveness was thought of as "conditional on our responses, we would never be saved". That is why Torrance emphasized that "the gospel of unconditional grace is very difficult for us, for it is so costly. It takes away from under our feet the very ground on which we want to stand, and the free will which we as human beings cherish so dearly becomes exposed as a subtle form of self-will".³⁹

Torrance's work as a pastor did not keep him from writing and publishing journal articles and from getting involved in theological debate. He was invited to respond to a paper by H. A. Hodges that had been presented to a group of philosophers and theologians who regularly gathered for discussion, in which Hodges argued that it was the task of Christians to focus on those impulses in humanity that Christianity was meant to satisfy in order to demonstrate Christianity's relevance. Naturally, Torrance's response was critical because he saw Hodges espousing the idea that Christianity was somehow generally available within the range of human ideas and could be understood easily by understanding humanity and its ideas. For Torrance, of course, Christian truth was not so easily available, as it comes to us through an act of God revealing himself to us and justifying and sanctifying us. For Torrance, "Christian truth is not something that we already have, and to be looked for along the converging lines of human thinking; it is something which must be brought TO our thinking".⁴⁰ Torrance also strongly opposed any attempt to grasp Christianity by analyzing the human subject. Naturally Hodges was not thrilled with Torrance's paper; others who were involved found his style difficult as well. The group was pretty much dismissive of Torrance.

Although he wanted to become a chaplain, in 1943 Torrance took a position as head of "Huts and Canteens" which focused on providing pastoral and practical support to Scottish soldiers engaged in wartime service.⁴¹ His service brought

³⁸ Torrance's sermon on 2 Corinthians 13.14, quoted in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 64.

³⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 36–7. See also Thomas F. Torrance, "Preaching Jesus Christ" in Gerrit Dawson and Jock Stein (eds), *A Passion For Christ: The Vision that Ignites Ministry*, (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press and PLC Publications, 1999), pp. 23–32, 30.

⁴⁰ Torrance, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 67.

⁴¹ Daniel Lamont, one of Torrance's professors in Edinburgh, held this position in World War I. Lamont also was Moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1936.

him back once again to North Africa where he was involved in delivering needed supplies to soldiers in Tobruk and Tripoli who were preparing to invade Italy. As he later made his way through Italy providing food for the soldiers, he met a chaplain named J. K. S. Reid, in Rome, where they toured some important sites and Torrance was able to borrow some books from a college library and purchase sets of Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* for his brothers back home. Reid later joined Torrance as an editor of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* which was founded by Torrance in 1948. Torrance's service in Italy was not without its dangers. His brother David tells us that on one occasion he was with a forward patrol that crossed the German line and entered a farmhouse occupied by the Germans. After coming under fire, only he and one other returned. In another incident he was being shelled while in a ditch between two others. Both of them were killed but Torrance miraculously escaped unscathed.⁴²

He relished ministering to soldiers in the front line and telling them of the Gospel. One particular incident stuck with Torrance for life. In October 1944 after an assault on San Martino-Sogliano during which he served as a stretcher bearer under fire, he came upon a mortally wounded 20-year-old soldier named Private Philips who was lying on the ground and clearly did not have much time to live. As Torrance bent over him he said, "Padre, is God really like Jesus?" Torrance assured him that he was and while he prayed with the man he passed away.⁴³ But this question raised an important issue for Torrance himself: what had gone wrong in Christian theology that could lead someone to think in such a way that a wedge was driven between Jesus and God? This was the damage done by natural theology because it left the impression that there was a God "behind the back" of Jesus himself. Years later, Torrance's wonderment was only confirmed once again when an elderly lady in his parish in Aberdeen asked a similar question to that of the soldier on the battlefield: "Dr Torrance, is God really like Jesus?" And again Torrance was troubled and asked, "What have we been doing in our preaching and teaching in the church, to damage in the faith of our people the relation between their faith in Jesus Christ and God?"⁴⁴

Just before Torrance was to give a series of lectures at Assisi, the war ended. One of his surviving lectures gives a clue to the centrality for Torrance of the atonement in its connection with the incarnation.. He observed:

Put God in heaven and Jesus on the cross allowed to die, and you destroy your faith, for you cannot believe in a God who allowed that ... *But* (and this is the gospel) *put God on the cross* and you alter the whole situation, for then the cross is not the picture of God's unconcern or careless disregard. Rather it is the

⁴² David W. Torrance, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 16–17.

⁴³ Torrance, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Torrance, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 74.

picture of God's utmost concern, nay, a picture of his actual intervention in the affairs of men ...⁴⁵

Years later Torrance would tie the atonement together with the incarnation in a decisive way that would exemplify why it is so important to him to respect Christ's uniqueness in all areas of theology:

After all, it was not the *death* of Jesus that constituted atonement, but Jesus Christ the Son of God offering Himself in sacrifice for us. Everything depends on *who* He was, for the significance of His acts in life and death depends on the nature of His Person ... we must allow the Person of Christ to determine for us the nature of His saving work, rather than the other way round.⁴⁶

This led Torrance to oppose any idea that Jesus' death should be seen as "an example of heroic self-giving love, the kind of behaviour which he intended to inspire in his followers".⁴⁷ Any such thinking would undermine the real significance of the cross which was that God himself in his sovereign love had condescended to experience our sin and alienation in order to redeem us from them.

After the war Torrance returned to his parish at Alyth, even though he had an opportunity to become the minister at St Columba's Church in Oxford. On his way home he stopped, prayed and gave thanks at St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, a place he would visit later whenever he was in London. In addition to founding the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Torrance founded the Scottish Church Theology Society in 1945 and the Society for the Study of Theology in 1952. In 1949 Torrance's book on Calvin's theological anthropology,⁴⁸ which represented his attempt to mediate between Barth and Brunner, was published. Barth himself said he wished he could agree with him but could not because, in Barth's view, Calvin did not allow his understanding of sin to be exclusively dictated by what was revealed in Christ himself.⁴⁹

In 1947 Torrance became minister at Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen where the first minister had been his former professor, Hugh Ross Mackintosh. Beechgrove paid almost twice what the parish at Alyth paid and this was helpful since his family was growing. Thomas Spear Torrance, who is now an economist and philosopher of science at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, was born

⁴⁵ Torrance, cited in McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 75.

⁴⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 64.

⁴⁷ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 76.

⁴⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949; reissued Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 2001).

⁴⁹ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols in 13 pts (hereafter: *CD*). Vol. IV, pt 1: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1974), p. 367.

July 3, 1947. Iain Richard Torrance, now the President of Princeton Theological Seminary and Professor of Patristics, was born January 13, 1949. Alison Meta Elizabeth Torrance, born on April 15, 1951, is a medical doctor in general practice in Edinburgh.

Torrance was happy at Beechgrove and firmly believed that his pastoral work helped him in his theological pursuits, but it was also clear that his calling was to an academic career in theology. And when a position opened in 1950, he became Chair of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Edinburgh. This was not his chosen field, but within two years he succeeded G. T. Thomson as the Chair of Christian Dogmatics, a position once held by his beloved teacher, Hugh Ross Mackintosh. Moving to the area of dogmatics was not without its intrigue since, as we have seen, John Baillie was not exactly in sympathy with Torrance's theology, which was strongly influenced by Karl Barth, and realized that Torrance could be more influential at Edinburgh teaching dogmatics than he was teaching church history. Torrance made the transition in spite of Baillie and then became just as influential in the 1960s and 1970s as Baillie was in the 1940s. Because Baillie continued to teach courses in "divinity", which included the doctrine of God, while Torrance taught Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology and sacraments, Torrance was unable to teach the doctrine of the Trinity. This was a major disappointment to him but one which was certainly remedied by the publication of his two books on the Trinity during his retirement. Torrance also lectured on Barth's theology and the theology of science.

As noted above, one of the two most difficult decisions of his life faced Torrance when he was invited to succeed Barth at Basel in 1961. Barth himself wanted Torrance to succeed him, and Oscar Cullmann wrote to him asking him to consider taking the chair that would become vacant upon Barth's retirement at the end of the summer term in 1961. Both Torrance and his wife loved Switzerland and certainly Torrance considered it a privilege to succeed Barth at Basel. While he was proficient in German, he would have had to lecture four times a week in German and that was a demanding task. And his school-age children did not speak German. Torrance felt that their education would suffer from such a move and with sadness he declined the offer which eventually was accepted by Heinrich Ott. Life certainly would have been different had he succeeded Barth at Basel. He may never have become Moderator of the Church of Scotland and he may never have had the opportunity to pursue his special interest in studying the natural sciences. In any case, Torrance never regretted staying at Edinburgh and he never gave serious consideration to other positions for the rest of his career there. According to McGrath, Torrance was offered the position of Principal and Dean of New College but because he saw himself as a scholar and teacher he declined the offer which was later accepted by John McIntyre. But this account is misleading because it could suggest that McIntyre was a kind of second choice as Principal whereas, according to Iain R. Torrance in his review of McGrath's book, his father "loathed academic administration" and never would have seriously considered the position in the first

instance.⁵⁰ While Alister McGrath claims that McIntyre moved the school more toward religious studies and away from traditional Christian dogmatics,⁵¹ this is decisively rejected by Iain R. Torrance.⁵² In any case, the Department of Christian Dogmatics eventually became the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. According to McGrath, T. F. Torrance was not happy with these developments which he believed tended to undermine the sense that the University of Edinburgh had become a center for the study of Christian theology under his leadership. And there is evidence in Torrance's own writing that he did not want to see Christian theology subordinated to religious studies.⁵³ Even so, after Torrance's retirement in 1979, James Mackey, "a radical Roman Catholic"⁵⁴ and a "laicized priest",⁵⁵ was appointed to the new Thomas Chalmers Chair of Theology and in effect succeeded Torrance at the University. Mackey's theology could reasonably be said to have been shaped more by a religious studies perspective than by a strictly theological perspective formed by the Nicene faith of the Church.⁵⁶ In that sense, one could conclude that the chair once occupied by T. F. Torrance had taken a turn away from what it had been under Torrance. According to McGrath, Mackey's appointment led to controversy within the school and in the Church of Scotland. And McGrath insinuates that, as University Principal, John McIntyre used his influence in the matter of Mackey's appointment. This too, however, Iain Torrance notes, is something that John McIntyre vehemently rejected. In any case, it should also be

⁵⁰ See Iain R. Torrance, review of *Thomas F. Torrance. An Intellectual Biography* by Alister McGrath, (T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999), in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. 73, pt 3 (2001): 285–88.

⁵¹ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 104.

⁵² According to Iain Torrance, John McIntyre himself had seen an earlier draft of his review and rejected as erroneous Alister McGrath's suggestions that he pursued an agenda that would steer Edinburgh away from Christian dogmatics and toward religious studies. Torrance helpfully notes that a number of Scottish Universities (Aberdeen, Glasgow, St Andrews and Edinburgh) moved toward religious studies in those years because funding was no longer determined by block grants but rather by student numbers. So this was not a singular pursuit arranged by McIntyre at Edinburgh for philosophical or theological reasons. It also should be noted here that Iain Torrance thinks highly of Alister McGrath's biography of his father and is only critical of his treatment of that episode at New College.

⁵³ Years later in *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism*, ed Alvin F. Kimel, Jr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), "The Christian Apprehension of God the Father", pp. 120–43, Torrance traced attempts to substitute some different formula such as "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer" for "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" to what he called "the lapse from definitely Christian theology into what is called 'religious studies', in which Christianity is robbed of its uniqueness through being subjected to interpretation in terms of timeless universal religious ideas" (pp. 142–3).

⁵⁴ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 105.

⁵⁵ Wright and Badcock, *Disruption to Diversity*, p. 181.

⁵⁶ See, for example, James P. Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth: A Contemporary Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 190ff.

mentioned here that, as Iain Torrance remarked, Reformed doctrine continued to be taught “without a break” at the University of Edinburgh “by such distinguished players as David Fergusson, Bruce McCormack and Gary Badcock”. And both John McIntyre and T. F. Torrance were delighted that David Fergusson “now succeeds them both in the new single chair of Divinity”.⁵⁷

T. F. Torrance has been very influential in ecumenical relations. After the formation of the World Council of Churches in 1948 he represented the Church of Scotland in conversations with the Church of England between 1949 and 1951. He also wrote a number of important works that explored the kind of theology necessary for ecumenical dialogue. He addressed issues concerning atonement, ministry, sacraments and order and disorder in the church.⁵⁸ Torrance addressed issues with Anglicans concerning ministry and catholicity, explaining what Presbyterians think; he offered what he called a “new approach” to unity which sought to avoid the Docetic idea that the two Churches could have a mere “spiritual” unity without visible unity.⁵⁹ Torrance stressed the need for “Intercommunion” and insisted on practical moves toward unity, so that, for example, Episcopalians and Presbyterians “both are to seek together fuller obedience to Christ in the light of what He has taught and now teaches both of them”.⁶⁰ Neither church would be asked to give up its order or structure but both would be open to elements of difference such as the episcopate and would incorporate these in ways that would not compromise their own received view of the church.

Torrance also addressed specific problems with regard to Roman Catholicism such as the doctrines of the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption. Torrance rejects the former doctrine on Christological grounds: “The Roman Church repudiates the idea that in the Incarnation the Son of God assumed our fallen humanity, and it has barricaded itself behind this aberration from the Apostolic and Catholic faith by the dogma of the immaculate conception.”⁶¹ He linked the issue of Intercommunion with the Roman Catholic teaching concerning Mary’s assumption, arguing that “The physical assumption of the virgin Mary means that she is taken up into the divine sphere, and that it is there that she belongs rather than to the Church that waits to see its Lord ...”⁶² This breach of biblical eschatology means not only that Mary can be seen as “co-redeemer” with the One Mediator, Jesus himself, but it means a denial of the need to await Christ’s second advent. And this, in Torrance’s view, has ominous implications for the Roman Catholic view of priesthood because it implies that the priest has the power over the Eucharist,

⁵⁷ Iain R. Torrance, review of *An Intellectual Biography*.

⁵⁸ See Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church, Vol. I, Order and Disorder*, (hereafter: *Conflict and Agreement I*), (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996). This was originally published in 1959.

⁵⁹ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement I*, p. 138.

⁶⁰ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement I*, p. 140.

⁶¹ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement I*, p. 149.

⁶² Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement I*, p. 160.

whereas, for the Evangelical Church, the ministry respects the fact that it is the Holy Spirit alone, over whom no one has control, who “makes Christ present in its midst”.⁶³ Torrance’s ecumenical stress was on the eschatological nature of the church and upon the fact that when sacraments and ministry in particular are understood within a dualistic perspective, then either God is excluded from the picture by those who would focus exclusively on the human element of the church, sacrament or ministry, or God is brought under control of the church in such a way that the those in authority become the criterion of truth in place of the coming Lord who is present now in his Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ Because the nature of the church’s unity had to be understood eschatologically, Torrance insisted that while it was understandable that when the early church faced the danger of Gnosticism it might appeal to “an actual succession of bishops to attest the historicity of its claims”, this could not mean that this “chronological precedent can be transmuted into a theological principle”.⁶⁵ Torrance also applied this eschatological thinking with great effect to the Eucharist.⁶⁶

He was also in dialogue with Roman Catholicism with respect to the doctrines of justification and the Trinity. For Torrance, justification is central to the whole of the Reformation itself but not as a principle because the primary function of the doctrine is to direct “us to Jesus Christ and his mighty acts”⁶⁷ as the one who determines the truth of all theology. Torrance believes there is no separate article on justification since it does not stand alone, but rather it belongs “to the inner texture of the Gospel and becomes evident as its cutting edge”.⁶⁸ Justification illuminates

⁶³ Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement I*, p. 161. This issue is discussed in Chapter 8.

⁶⁴ In his discussion of eschatology, Torrance rejects what he calls the Copernican world-view that anticipates only an earthly future and he also rejects the Roman Catholic view that the church was impregnated with the Kingdom so that its real existence can be read off its earthly pattern. For Torrance, “it is by thinking election and eschatology into each other that the Reformers found their answer to Romanism on the one hand and to Copernicanism on the other. Predestination does not mean that there is a predetermined pattern which can be read off the structure of the Church on earth, but that the whole of the story of the Church like nature is contingent on the will of God, and that while the pattern is discernible in principle, as it were, in Christ in the Word of The Gospel, it remains essentially a *mysterium* and cannot be known in advance, but only from the final end, by apocalyptic manifestation at the advent of Christ.” Thomas F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church: A Study in the Theology of the Reformation* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), pp. 4–5.

⁶⁵ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 98.

⁶⁶ See Thomas F. Torrance, “Eschatology and the Eucharist”, *Conflict and Agreement Vol. II, The Ministry and the Sacraments of the Gospel* (hereafter: *Conflict and Agreement II*), (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), pp. 154–202.

⁶⁷ Torrance, “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 150–68, 150. This was originally the Presidential address delivered to the Scottish Church Theology Society on January 18, 1960, and printed in *SJT* 13.3, 1960.

⁶⁸ Torrance, “Justification”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 150.

the essence of the Gospel of salvation by grace. Here Jesus Christ is central as the one in whom God became one with us and enabled our unity with him. “Therefore it is only in and through our union with him, that all that is his becomes ours. It is only as such, that is in the Name of Christ, that we appear before God, and as such that he regards us—in Christ.”⁶⁹ As we shall see later in Chapter 5, Torrance associates justification with Christ’s resurrection and ascension, arguing that it is not only forgiveness of sins but the conferral of a genuine righteousness “that derives from beyond us”. Yet, it is “not the beginning of a new self-righteousness, but the perpetual end of it, for it is a perpetual living in Christ, from a centre and source beyond us”.⁷⁰

This important point of seeking our righteousness only in Christ also became determinative for Torrance’s view of the Trinity itself, as when he argued, following Athanasius, that “It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name God from his works alone and call him Unoriginate”.⁷¹ To be sure, this vital point led Torrance to argue, with great effect, that we must think from a center in God and not from a center in ourselves if we are to think accurately about God in his relations with us, as those relations have been established and are maintained by God himself in the incarnation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That is why Torrance will typically insist that “we are summoned to live and act . . . not out of a centre in ourselves but out of a centre in the Lord Jesus”⁷² in order to stress that we must begin with the economic Trinity (God’s actions as Creator, Savior and Redeemer in history) to know of our relations with the immanent or ontological Trinity (God as he exists eternally in himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and as he would have continued to exist even if he had not loved us and acted graciously toward us in Christ and the Spirit) as these have been established and maintained by God’s self-communication in grace. Torrance was hopeful that “the Nicene–Constantinopolitan Creed and the Trinitarian Faith it proclaims” could help bring the Church of Scotland closer to both the Roman Catholic Church and to the Greek Orthodox Church.⁷³ Torrance saw the Christocentric emphasis of the Second Vatican Council and the distinction between the “substance of Faith and dogmatic expressions of it” together with the idea of “a hierarchy of truths” that would consign some truths to the periphery as occasions for closer relations between the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church.⁷⁴

With respect to the doctrine of justification, Torrance insisted that the expression “by grace alone” protects the Gospel from distortion by “Evangelicals”, “Liberals”

⁶⁹ Torrance, “Justification”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 151.

⁷⁰ Torrance, “Justification”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 151–2.

⁷¹ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 49.

⁷² Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 88.

⁷³ The Very Rev. Professor T.F. Torrance, “The Deposit of Faith” in *SJT*, 36, 1 (1983): 1–28, 28.

⁷⁴ Torrance, “The Deposit of Faith”: 28.

and Romans alike.⁷⁵ We will not go into the details of Torrance's view here but it is worth mentioning his attempt to dialogue with Roman Catholic theologians. Torrance did not set the Reformation exclusively against Roman Catholicism but insisted that because justification is by grace and thus in and through Christ alone, therefore the Word had to be acknowledged as supreme over all tradition. This called for "repentant rethinking of all tradition face to face with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ" and this "applies no less to the Reformed and Evangelical tradition; to our Presbyterian tradition as well as to the Roman tradition".⁷⁶ In this regard, Torrance expressed astonishment at how close the Church of Scotland itself actually had come to the Roman position at the time that he wrote *Theology in Reconstruction*. This was especially the case with respect to the fact that tradition rather than Scripture was allowed to function as the criterion of what was thought and said.⁷⁷ He spoke forthrightly of the fact that the Reformed quarrel with Rome concerned the centrality of Christ himself, which he considered to have become obscured by "Roman doctrines of merit and tradition, and above all by Mariology".⁷⁸ He also opposed what he called "Roman sacerdotalism" because the doctrine of justification teaches that "Jesus Christ is our Sole Priest".⁷⁹ This must be the center for ecumenical discussion; all questions concerning mutual recognition of "orders" must be subordinated to this. Torrance insisted that whenever Christ's true humanity is obscured or depreciated, "then the need for some other human mediation creeps in" with the result that the human priesthood came to displace the sole Priesthood of Christ representing us before God.⁸⁰ Torrance also criticized

⁷⁵ Torrance, "Justification", *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 162.

⁷⁶ Torrance, "Justification", *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 164.

⁷⁷ Torrance argues against allowing the Westminster Confession to function as a criterion of biblical truth because he believed in the primacy of Scripture over all tradition. For Torrance, this confession "constituted a *system of doctrine* organised on extraneous lines in which sets of statements were put forward for belief, but they were statements governed by the specific form in which they were cast" ("The Deposit of Faith": 23–4).

⁷⁸ Torrance, "Justification", *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 165.

⁷⁹ Torrance, "Justification", *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 166. Torrance's book, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (hereafter: *Royal Priesthood*), (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) first published in 1955, presents a powerful biblical and patristic argument for the idea that ministry consists in participating by way of service in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ himself. Torrance argued for a theology of ordained ministry that included women. In the new 1993 edition, he noted the changes in the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II and he approved its economic and patristic understanding of the Eucharist, together with its linking its celebration with Christ's High Priesthood with the words "through whom, *with* whom and in him" (p. xiii). Still, he continued to note that unfortunately both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches continued to distort the true meaning of ordained ministry with their "sacerdotalisation of the priesthood", which to him meant the confusion of Christ's sole Priesthood with the activity of the church's ordained ministers.

⁸⁰ Torrance, "Justification", *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 166.

what he called “Protestant sacerdotalism” which allows the minister to become the focus of the congregation in its worship and in the whole life of the community. Both sacramental and psychological sacerdotalism obscure the fact that Christ alone is the one who mediates between us and the Father; for Torrance, it is neither the personality of the minister nor the sacramental *res* or *potentia* that does this mediating.

As we shall see, Torrance forthrightly addressed Roman Catholic theology on these issues.⁸¹ He opposed impersonal notions of grace, together with the idea that grace was “a detachable quality which could be made to inhere in creaturely being”.⁸² He was hopeful that Reformed and Roman Catholic theology could find agreement on a Christological basis: by applying the *homoousion*—that is, the doctrine that Jesus is one in being with God the Father from eternity by nature as the Son, and with us by virtue of the incarnation—one could see that grace cannot be in any way detached from Christ himself as God communicating himself to us. Yet this is exactly what happens with the concept of *created grace*, according to which there are many different kinds of graces. Torrance is particularly helpful in his discussion of the sacraments, especially the Lord’s Supper, by showing that much of the disagreement between Reformed and Roman Catholic theology lay in terminological misunderstanding, which he believed could be cleared away by properly focusing on Christ himself and by seeing that true ecumenical theology must find its basis and meaning in Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. This can happen, Torrance believed, when “each side is ready to let itself be called into question by the other, and each is ready to examine itself to see whether what it holds to be error in the other may not have a place within itself even if under quite a different guise”.⁸³ We will, of course, discuss these details in their proper place. At present it is important to note that Torrance himself served on the Reformed–Roman Catholic Study Commission on the Eucharist which met at Woudshoten, in the Netherlands, in 1974⁸⁴ and forged a personal relationship with Yves Congar in the process. Torrance was also present at the World Council of Churches meeting in Evanston, Illinois, in 1954.

With respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, Torrance led a colloquy in Switzerland in March 1975 which discussed Karl Rahner’s work on the Trinity⁸⁵ because he believed that Rahner’s work offered “the possibility of some real ecumenical convergence between East and West, Catholic and Evangelical Christians”.⁸⁶ He believed that Rahner’s basic approach to understanding God from God’s saving

⁸¹ See Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace from the Point of View of Reformed Theology”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 169–91.

⁸² Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 182.

⁸³ Torrance, “The Roman Doctrine of Grace”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 191.

⁸⁴ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 101–2.

⁸⁵ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁸⁶ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 77.

revelation of himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the economy made the economic Trinity the criterion for all speech about God. This, Torrance thought, helped to overcome the isolation of the treatise on God's oneness from the treatise on his triunity so that there could be agreement between: 1) systematic and biblical theology; 2) Latins and Greeks by shifting away from abstract thinking to thinking that is bound up with piety shaped by the biblical message; and 3) Roman Catholic and Evangelical theology, especially as represented by Karl Barth and Karl Rahner with their emphasis on God's self-revelation in Christ. Torrance was certainly optimistic that real agreement could be reached between Reformed and Roman Catholic theology and between Reformed and Eastern Orthodox theology with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity. He was aware of difficulties in Rahner's thought, but he nonetheless believed that if those difficulties were cleared away, then perhaps there might be real agreement.⁸⁷ Torrance, however, was not naïve and so he also left open the possibility that Rahner might still be a "prisoner of a scholastic metaphysical framework" to a certain extent. Still, he hoped that Rahner intended the same as did Athanasius and Barth, namely, that all theological thinking would begin with God's self-communication in Christ and thus would recognize that what God is toward us in the economy of salvation he is eternally in himself. We will not get into the specific areas of agreement and disagreement between Rahner and Torrance here. We simply note in this context that Torrance saw the *homoousion* as the basis for genuine agreement between Reformed and Roman Catholic theology as it is tied to Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Torrance was also instrumental in the development of the historic agreement between the Reformed and Orthodox Churches on the doctrine of the Trinity when a joint statement of agreement on that doctrine was issued between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Church on March 13, 1991. This was the culmination of discussion initiated by Torrance himself in 1977 when he proposed to the Ecumenical patriarch and others that the Reformed and Orthodox should enter into discussions toward agreement concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. This was truly historic because, as Torrance himself noted, it "overcomes the entrenched divisions of the Orthodox and Reformed Churches".⁸⁸ There was in fact basic agreement on three key issues. First, the formula "one Being, three Persons" must be understood in a completely personal way in order to avoid the idea that the one Being of God that is common to all three Persons is not personal. Any such notion rests on a preconceived idea of God's oneness and not on his self-revelation and obscures the fact that "the 'One Being' of God does not refer to some abstract divine essence, but to the intrinsically personal 'I am' of God".⁸⁹ Second, concerning God's monarchy, it was agreed that all three divine Persons share equally as the one ultimate principle of Godhead so that any idea of subordination at all is totally excluded. This includes any notion of degrees of Deity "such as

⁸⁷ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 80.

⁸⁸ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 111.

⁸⁹ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 112.

that between the ‘underived Deity of the Father’, and the ‘derived Deities of the Son and the Spirit’”.⁹⁰ Third, relying on the twin doctrines of the *homoousion* (the identity of Being of the three Persons) and *perichoresis* (the fact that the three Persons interpenetrate each other within the indivisible eternal Being of the Trinity), the agreement affirms that the procession of the Spirit from the Father must be understood “in the light of the indivisible unity of the Godhead in which each Person is perfectly and wholly God. The effect of this is to put the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit on a fully Trinitarian basis”.⁹¹ The result is an advance beyond the disagreement over the *filioque* because it can then be seen that the Holy Spirit ultimately proceeds from “the Triune Being of the Godhead”⁹² and not from the Father in a way that could open the door to some sort of subordinationism. By stating that the Spirit proceeds from the Being of the Father and not simply from the Person of the Father, the agreement effectively overcame the Western need to say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son and the Eastern need to stress that the Spirit proceeds only from the Father. An indication of the high regard in which Torrance was held by the Orthodox Church is the fact that in 1973 he was consecrated a Protospesbyter in the Patriarchate of Alexandria by the Archbishop of Axum at a commemoration of the death of Athanasius the Great in 373 and a celebration of an agreement between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian Christians which was initiated by Torrance in 1954.⁹³

Torrance was also Convener of the Church of Scotland Commission on Baptism from 1954 to 1962. He was instrumental in publishing the interim reports from 1955 to 1959 and the final report in 1960. The Secretary of the Baptism Commission was John Heron. He was one of the original directors of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* and his son Alasdair Heron, Professor Emeritus of Reformed Theology at Erlangen, was for many years co-editor of the journal with T. F. Torrance’s son Iain. Torrance established a reputation as a leading representative of the Reformed tradition. From 1976 to 1977 he was Moderator of the Church of Scotland—a position later held by his son Iain from 2003 to 2004 prior to becoming President of Princeton Theological Seminary. Iain Torrance continues as co-editor of the *Scottish Journal of Theology* with Bryan Spinks of Yale University.

In recognition of his extraordinary contributions to the study of the relationship of science and Christian theology, Torrance received the Templeton Foundation Prize for Progress in Religion in 1978. As noted above, Torrance is highly regarded for this area of scholarship. Few in the twentieth century can claim to have contributed to this subject as much as Torrance himself. In the words of Christopher B. Kaiser, “If Einstein is the ‘person of the century’ in the judgment of secular media, Torrance’s interest is enough to qualify him as ‘theologian of

⁹⁰ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 112.

⁹¹ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 112.

⁹² Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*, p. 113.

⁹³ McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 102.

the century' in the eyes of many science-minded people".⁹⁴ Torrance was well aware of the fact that natural science could not tell us about the ultimate origin of the world of nature and that it was limited to studying nature "out of itself" as it were. He maintained that it was the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* that allowed scientists to "understand nature only by looking at nature and not by looking at God". In fact, "God means us to examine nature in itself ... We know God by looking at God ... But we know the world by looking at the world ..."⁹⁵ Hence, there is a distinct difference between a philosophy of religion and a philosophy of theology. In his groundbreaking book *Theological Science*, Torrance argued that theological and natural science held in common the same need to understand reality *through* our thoughts by pointing beyond ourselves and not letting our subjective experiences and knowledge distort the objective reality we are attempting to conceptualize.⁹⁶ Theology and science should be seen as "allies in a common front where each faces the same insidious enemy, namely, man himself assuming the role of Creator ..."⁹⁷ As long as the dialogue is conceived to be between *science* and *religion*, Torrance contended, "we shall not escape from romantic naturalism". Instead, he insisted that we must focus on the dialogue between *science* and *theology* and thus between the "philosophy of natural science" and the "philosophy of theological science" because these two methods have in common the "struggle for scientific method on their proper ground and their own distinctive fields".⁹⁸ Hence, as Torrance himself indicated in an address given on March 11, 1978, upon his reception of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion at Guildhall, London:

⁹⁴ Christopher B. Kaiser, "Humanity in an Intelligible Cosmos: Non-Duality in Albert Einstein and Thomas Torrance" in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 239–267, 240.

⁹⁵ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 39.

⁹⁶ For an extremely clear and instructive account of just how limited human reason is when it comes to knowing God and why the rationality of faith requires allowing God in Christ to be the one who enables such knowledge, which is the opposite of "irrationality", see the very interesting exchange of letters between Thomas F. Torrance and Brand Blanshard in *The Scotsman* from April 1952. Blanshard was a Yale philosopher and at the time the Gifford lecturer addressing the theme of natural theology, who accused Torrance, Barth and Brunner of "irrationalism" because they refused to allow human reason independent status in determining what could be regarded as true. Torrance responded claiming that Barth was simply arguing, with Anselm, that human rationality must find its true meaning outside itself and neither in any sort of idealism such as the one apparently espoused by Blanshard nor any sort of existentialism which he believed was espoused by Rudolf Bultmann, whose interpretation of the Bible Torrance regarded "as a menace to the Christian Gospel" (Torrance's letter to Brand Blanshard of April 11, 1952, published in *The Scotsman* on April 14, 1952).

⁹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. xiii.

⁹⁸ Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. xiii.

... theological science and natural science have their own proper and distinctive objectives to pursue, but their work inevitably overlaps, for they both respect and operate through the same rational structures of space and time, while each develops special modes of investigation, rationality, and verification in accordance with the nature and the direction of its distinctive field. But since each of them is the kind of thing it is as a human inquiry because of the profound correlation between human knowing and the space–time structures of creation, each is in its depth akin to the other ... natural science and theological science are not opponents but partners before God, in a service of God in which each may learn from the other how better to pursue its own distinctive function ...⁹⁹

Torrance read widely in the area of science, both ancient and modern. He believed that the physicist and theologian John Philoponos (490–570), who was mistakenly labeled a “monophysite” and was condemned as a heretic in 680, properly held a non-dualist /non-monist view of science and theology and so offered a worthy critique of Plato and Aristotle that has proven valuable to modern scientists in their unitary thinking of the universe. Torrance believed that when, in the ninth century, Photius confirmed the anathema against John Philoponos based on his own “Aristotelian rationalism”, he “retarded scientific development for a thousand years and contributed to the domination of Aristotelianism in the West. That was one of the greatest tragedies in the history of thought”.¹⁰⁰ The tragedy, in Torrance’s mind, lay in the assimilation of Aristotelian notions of space and the unmoved mover along with Neoplatonic ideas, which had been theoretically demolished by Philoponos, into Christian doctrine.¹⁰¹ Influenced by the thought of James Clerk

⁹⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (hereafter: *The Ground and Grammar*), (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1980), pp. 6–7. Torrance was very clear that while ancient materialism was obsessed with “perceptible and tangible magnitudes as the exclusively real” as opposed to “the imperceptible, intangible magnitude of the space–time metrical field, in which structure and substance, form and being, are inseparably fused together”, that did not mean that what is experienced as imperceptible in natural science could or should be identified with “the experienced imperceptible in theology” since that reality is identical with the triune God who transcends space and time as “the source of all form and being”. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (hereafter: *Theology in Reconciliation*), (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), p. 282.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, “John Philoponos of Alexandria—Theologian & Physicist”, pp. 1–18, 2, a paper sent to me by T.F. Torrance in 1997. See also Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, p. 61 ff., and Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), Chapter 6, “John Philoponos of Alexandria: Sixth Century Christian Physicist”, pp. 83–104, and Chapter 7, “The Relevance of Christian Faith to Scientific Knowledge with Reference to John Philoponos and James Clerk Maxwell”, pp. 105–11.

¹⁰¹ We shall see below how the container concept of space, for instance, adversely affected both Christology and the church’s view of the sacrament.

Maxwell, Albert Einstein and Michael Polanyi, Torrance argues that just as there would be no real science without belief in God the Creator and thus belief in a genuine contingent universe with its own created intelligibility, so theology can learn from contemporary and ancient scientists to think in unitary ways that do not separate the spiritual from the material or the intelligible from the sensible.

Torrance is especially indebted to Einstein for re-establishing a unitary view of reality that cuts across Kantian and Cartesian dualist conceptions; this also affects biblical interpretation, because when Einstein overcame epistemological dualism with his relativity theory, he cut the ground out from under those who separated form and being in their interpretation of Scripture. That is to say, those who think proper scriptural interpretation is based solely on observation of phenomena as they appear to us, and thus on our deductions from those phenomena, are forced to argue for a kind of interpretation that leaves out theological observation based on the deep reality that is before us.¹⁰² In Christology, for instance, it is assumed, from within the Kantian dynamic, that “it is impossible for us ever to know anything of Jesus Christ as he is in himself, for we are restricted to Jesus as he appeared to his contemporaries—and indeed to the impression he made upon them as it is mediated through the structures of their consciousness, by which they made him an ‘object’ of their faith and knowledge”.¹⁰³

Any such thinking, of course, not only opens the door to a type of Ebionite Christology, in which Christ’s authentic and definitive Deity is grounded in the experience of the community and thus stripped of its reality, but leads to the idea that the task of historical criticism is to clarify how Jesus made this impression on

¹⁰² Torrance gives a very clear and succinct understanding of his approach here by distinguishing three interrelated modes of thought, namely, 1) the way of the Greeks which means the way of vision or seeing things or observation; 2) the way of the Romans which stressed law and order and emphasized also control and management of “resources, armies and supplies, and of public life. These Latin modes of thought have left their mark in the legal structures, and social and political institutions of the West”; and 3) the way of the Hebrews which primarily involved hearing, especially hearing the Word of God and “letting it speak out of itself and upon obedience of the mind in response to it”. This was later applied to science in an effort to let nature offer its own secrets without “attempting to force our own patterns upon it” (Torrance, “Theological Education Today”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 13–29, 14–15). Each of these ways of thinking needs to be held together and allowed to operate while understanding that the emphasis changes when the object of knowledge changes. Thus, in some types of knowledge, observation and description are paramount, while in others control is important. And yet these approaches could cause problems in our knowledge of God since God cannot be controlled and certainly cannot be directly seen or observed since, as noted above, God is “imperceptible” to phenomenological observation. See also Torrance, “The Church in the New Era of Scientific and Cosmological Change”, *Theology in Reconciliation*, Chapter 6, pp. 267–93. See Chapter 2 below, pp. 44ff. for an application of these insights to Torrance’s trinitarian thinking.

¹⁰³ Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, pp. 28–9.

his followers, and use that clarification as a basis for biblical truth.¹⁰⁴ For Torrance, this undercuts the theological content of the New Testament because the one who gives meaning to the New Testament witness is Jesus himself and thus all biblical statements have to be rooted in him as he was and is, namely, as the incarnate Son of God. Torrance thus relies on the kind of scientific thinking employed by Einstein in order to stress that our knowledge must be governed by reality distinct from our own knowledge and experience.¹⁰⁵ Consequently, Torrance opposed “existentialism” and “nominalism” or any philosophy of linguistic science that does not allow the underlying reality, namely, the reality that gives meaning to language to determine thinking. Hence,

¹⁰⁴ Torrance therefore firmly opposed any attempt to base Christology on a “scientific investigation of the historical Jesus” because this involved and involves “a phenomenalist bracketing off of the evangelical material from any realm of things in themselves or their internal relations, so that it is approached merely as a collection of appearances relative to observers and detached from any objective sub-structure” (Torrance, “The Church in the New Era”, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 280). Translation: Jesus cannot be understood properly by starting only from his humanity or only from his divinity because he is the Word of God incarnate and must be understood “conjunctively ... as God and man in the one indivisible fact of Jesus Christ” (Torrance, “The Church in the New Era”, *Theology in Reconciliation*, p. 281). And this is grounded neither in the community’s experiences nor in its ideas about Jesus but only in Jesus himself as he really was and is and is to come.

¹⁰⁵ In fact, Torrance follows Einstein’s account of knowledge given in his essay *Physics and Reality* to elaborate what he calls the “stratified structure” of our knowledge as it begins in experience and proceeds in different levels until it reaches the highest level. This applies both to science and to theology. And Torrance explains how applying this to theology leads from an experiential encounter with Jesus Christ in the community to the theological level where we come up with our basic concepts of Father, Son and Holy Spirit based on God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and finally to the higher level of scientific knowledge of God, that is, to knowledge of the immanent Trinity. Torrance makes the all-important point that while we may speak of moving from lower to higher levels of knowledge from an epistemological perspective so that the higher level (the immanent Trinity) actually controls our thinking, “in reality the Economic Trinity and the Ontological Trinity are identical, for there is only one divine Reality of God in himself and in his saving and revealing activity toward us in this world ... In the strictest sense the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is *theologia*, that is, theology in its purest form, the pure science of theology, or *episteme dogmatike*. I myself like to think of the doctrine of the Trinity as the *ultimate ground* of theological knowledge of God, the *basic grammar* of theology ...” (Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, pp. 158–9). Torrance gives a detailed account of this matter in his important book *The Christian Doctrine of God* (pp. 84ff.) and indicates that he is also indebted to the thought of M. Polanyi in his book *The Study of Man* for this way of thinking. It must be remembered, however, that Torrance does not use the thought of Einstein or Polanyi prescriptively for his theology, but only insofar as their thinking enables him to clarify the object of theology which he believes can be known with clarity only from revelation and through faith.

... while scientists have moved on, far beyond the narrow mechanistic determinisms of the Laplacians or the Marxists, to a profounder and more unitary grasp of the intelligible connections in the contingent order of the universe, theology tends, for the most part, to remain stuck in obscurantist modes of thought that have their roots in the radical dualisms of the past.¹⁰⁶

This was no abstract insight for Torrance because he saw in the dialogue between natural science and Christian theology the possibility for theology to overcome “dualist, phenomenalist and mechanistic habits of thought”¹⁰⁷ in a way that would be helpful toward dialogue between Reformed and Roman Catholic theology on the substance of the Christian faith. As Torrance saw it, the Roman Catholic Church faced a “strange impasse” after Vatican II. While there was a genuine deepening of its understanding of the “heart and substance of the Christian faith” in the areas of Christology and soteriology and their impact on liturgy and mission, still the Roman Catholic Church, according to Torrance, “remains trapped in obsolete dualist structures of thought which derive from mediaeval roots but still govern its epistemology and canon law”.¹⁰⁸ Unless this is cleared away, Torrance thinks, the renewals of Vatican II will be met by resistance and misunderstanding which is evident in the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Küng, “both of whom appear to be still tied to dualist and phenomenalist, if not also mechanist, habits of thought, and who therefore are unable to integrate empirical and theoretical ingredients in their understanding of Jesus Christ at the very heart of the Faith”.¹⁰⁹ Translation: Schillebeeckx and Küng were unable to present a unified view of Jesus Christ as truly divine and human and thus as the One Mediator because their thinking was not consistently determined by who Jesus really was in the depth of his being as the incarnate Word. And this is important because they are not alone in being unable to distinguish the substance from the formulations of the faith without themselves falling into the relativistic idea that all doctrinal formulations of our knowledge of God are relative.

The error here, in Torrance’s view, is one that is widespread also in the social sciences: “relativity is confounded with relativism”. Torrance believes that theological misunderstanding can be cleared away easily with the help of natural science with its emphasis on unified thinking in accordance with the nature of reality. And, ultimately, if such misunderstanding can be cleared away, this would open the door to basic agreement between Evangelical and Roman Catholic theology. Hence, he insists that in both natural science and in theological science “we must be faithful to the reality we seek to know and must act and think always

¹⁰⁶ Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Transformation & Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (hereafter: *Transformation & Convergence*), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. xii.

¹⁰⁸ Torrance, *Transformation & Convergence*, p. xiii.

¹⁰⁹ Torrance, *Transformation & Convergence*, p. xiii.

in a relation of relentless fidelity to that reality”.¹¹⁰ For that reason, theological and natural science cannot be opposed to one another but must be seen as “applying the one basic way of knowing faithfully to their respective fields”.¹¹¹ Torrance’s conception of the relationship between science and theology today can be summarized in his own words expressed when he received the Templeton Prize:

... the new science gives ample room for the human sciences and the sciences of the spirit, and for all sciences concerned with living connections, within the framework of an open-structured dynamic universe in which the human person is not suffocated, but can breathe freely transcendent air, and yet be profoundly concerned with scientific understanding of the whole complex of connections that make up our universe ... It is more and more clear to me that, under the providence of God, owing to these changes in the very foundations of knowledge in which natural and theological science alike have been sharing, the damaging cultural splits between the sciences and the humanities and between both of these and theology are in the process of being overcome, that the destructive and divisive forces too long rampant in world-wide human life and thought are being undermined, and that a massive new synthesis will emerge in which man, humbled and awed by the mysterious intelligibility of the universe that reaches far beyond his powers, will learn to fulfill his destined role as the servant of divine love and the priest of creation.¹¹²

Although Alasdair Heron has observed that Torrance’s vision of science and theology working together as expressed here may or may not be fully realized in the future, however desirable it may be in principle, and that it may appear to some to be utopian, while to others he may place too much stress on pure science or understanding,¹¹³ the truth is that, in the years since that address, Torrance did much to move theology and science closer together without confusing the distinctive tasks of each as prescribed by the unique nature of the objects investigated by natural science and theological science. And he did so precisely by emphasizing what theology and science have in common: “... they operate within the same rational structures of space and time and have in common the basic ideas of the

¹¹⁰ Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, p. 10.

¹¹¹ Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, p. 10.

¹¹² Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, pp. 13–14. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), “Man’s Priestly and Redemptive Rôle in the World”, pp. 128–42, for a full understanding of what Torrance means by the phrase “priest of creation”.

¹¹³ Alasdair I. C. Heron, *A Century of Protestant Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 213.

unitary rationality of the universe—its contingent intelligibility and contingent freedom, contributed by Christian theology to natural science ...”¹¹⁴

The purpose of this chapter was to present not only a biographical sketch of T. F. Torrance but also a survey of the broad theological landscape to which he dedicated his life, teaching, preaching and writing. As noted above, the emphasis of this book will be on Torrance the theologian of the Trinity, in order to show how his dogmatic theology is deeply shaped by his view of trinitarian theology and why that must be considered a scientific theology. We will not specifically concentrate on Torrance’s contributions to the discussions of natural science and the relation of natural science to theology; that is one reason why, as mentioned above, my account of Torrance’s thinking on this subject moves a bit beyond introduction to exposition. His view of natural science affected his view of theological science, but always with a view toward distinguishing the unique objects of reflection that determine each. Therefore, Torrance’s keen insight that theology must be scientific as it allows itself to be conformed to the unique nature of the object being investigated will continue to illuminate the chapters ahead. It is important here to note that Torrance pursued this scientific theology within a particular context.

The historical context within which Torrance developed his scientific approach to nature also shaped his scientific approach to theology. Scientifically, his goal always was to “discern the nature of what is being investigated”, by adapting both his questions and the manner of posing his questions to nature so that all preconceptions might be set aside in order to “know what is there as it ought to be known”.¹¹⁵ Torrance therefore strongly opposed the thinking of John Wren Lewis who believed that it was the task of the scientist to move from pure science to technology and thus to impose some order upon nature rather than discovering the order created by God that is in nature itself.¹¹⁶ In Torrance’s mind, such thinking ignored the doctrine of creation and confused God with nature, thus obscuring any possible scientific understanding of the world as created by God.

Torrance saw the thinking of John A. T. Robinson as the theological and therefore the “artistic” corollary to this unscientific approach to understanding nature. Instead of allowing God the Creator and Redeemer to be God in his own right and to act for us within nature and history, Robinson, in his famous

¹¹⁴ Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar*, p. 107. For a clear and illuminating discussion of just how Christian theology contributed these ideas to science, see *The Ground and Grammar*, Chapter 3. For further information about Torrance’s understanding of the relationship between natural science and theology, see also McGrath, *An Intellectual Biography*, Chapter 9; P. Mark Achtemeier, “Natural Science and Christian Faith in the Thought of T.F. Torrance,” in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, pp. 269–302; and Colyer, *How To Read T.F. Torrance*, Chapter 9.

¹¹⁵ Torrance, “Theological Education Today”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 15.

¹¹⁶ See Torrance, “Theological Education Today”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 16ff. and “Epilogue: A New Reformation?”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, pp. 259–83, 275ff.

book *Honest To God*, imposed his own creative and pictorial images “upon God”, understood vaguely as the “ground of being”, and then portrayed God as “helplessly involved in the toils of our own processes of life and thought”.¹¹⁷ This God, Torrance insisted, was “unable by definition to stoop down to us and to intervene creatively and redemptively in our need and condition”. Consequently, “Like the God of Schleiermacher, he is a God without pity and mercy, and like the God of Bultmann, he is present and active in the death of Jesus Christ in no other way than he is present and active in a fatal accident in the street”.¹¹⁸ Here we see that Torrance’s scientific theology was aimed at overcoming the sort of projectionism he saw in the work of someone like John A. T. Robinson, as well as the existentialism he saw in the work of Bultmann and the Protestant modernism he perceived in Schleiermacher. Torrance just as strongly opposed the thinking of Paul Tillich for similar reasons.¹¹⁹ We shall see specific examples of this as the work proceeds. All of Torrance’s thinking, including his approach to the Bible, as already mentioned, depended on this scientific understanding of theology which refused to allow creatures to set the agenda for the truth of theology precisely because God alone was the one who set that agenda by his own actions as Lord, Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. In a very similar way, Torrance turned to the early church fathers for theological reasons and not merely for historical ones, and so he also found himself opposed to those who, like Maurice Wiles, used history at times to undermine the very theology Torrance sought to espouse. For instance, as we have already noted, Torrance insisted on the deep ontological meaning of history which was tied to the fact that God himself was active in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus within the structures of space and time reconciling the world to himself, justifying the world by his grace as is evidenced in the miracle of Jesus’ resurrection. Maurice Wiles, however, rejected the idea that God himself could intervene within world history and saw biblical miracles as symbolic of Christian life rather than as signs of God’s direct actions within history.¹²⁰

Our special concern in the rest of this book will deal with just how one must approach the triune God, and how a properly conceived trinitarian theology must therefore inform every other theological pursuit for T. F. Torrance. Though formally unable to lecture on the Trinity at Edinburgh, the doctrine shaped all that Torrance taught then and thereafter. As we shall see, for Torrance, the theology of the Trinity was always shaped by that unique object to which all theology must conform itself in acts of free obedience. We turn our attention now to this task.

¹¹⁷ Torrance, “Epilogue”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 277.

¹¹⁸ Torrance, “Epilogue”, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 277.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Chapter 5, below, pp.172ff.

¹²⁰ See Maurice Wiles, *The Remaking of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978).