Thomas Forsyth Torrance's Critique of Evangelical (Protestant) Orthodoxy

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about the Christian’s work regularly, comprehensively and perceptively. In these three articles their main emphases are summarised. Ordinary work is in fact the service of God; in some way it must serve one’s neighbour; it is to be regarded as one’s ‘calling’, and all jobs are of equal value in God’s sight; each person’s skills are their ‘spiritual gifts’; and work must be done with honesty and fairness to others.

John D. Morrison

Thomas Forsyth Torrance’s Critique of Evangelical (Protestant) Orthodoxy

Dr Morrison, who teaches at Liberty University, Lynchburg, is a keen student of the works of T. F. Torrance and offers an evaluation of his work as an evangelical critic of evangelical theology.

Central to Thomas Forsyth Torrance’s theological concern is his desire to restore modern theology in accord with the rationality of God as disclosed in the objective self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Torrance is convinced that post-Reformational developments in Western thought via the contributions of Descartes, Newton and Kant have revived a problematic dualism that has led to the modern inability to truly hear the address of the Word of God. As in previous eras, this revived dualism is found to lead to the re-entrenchment of theological dualism and problems regarding the actual redemptive knowledge of God within space-time human existence. While Torrance is thus critical of many nineteenth and twentieth century theological thinkers and movements because of their common theological dualism, several seem to be, for different reasons, negatively paradigmatic, even as St. Athanasius, Calvin and Barth are, for him, positive exemplars of faithful theological thinking after the Word of God. Along with destructive dualist developments from Schleiermacher and Bultmann, which are of major concern for him, Torrance also focuses critical ire on post-Enlightenment Protestant orthodoxy as represented in (e.g.) Carl Henry and Gordon Clark. In this way, he is also able to position his thinking within the whole of contemporary theology. This is not to say that Torrance’s theological position is at all far removed from the classical doctrinal concerns reflected in modern Protestant (‘evangelical’) orthodoxy (e.g., James Barr), indeed it is from just such ‘evangelical’ concern that he writes. As with his positive exemplars so it is with the negative, i.e., Torrance’s critical response to these is used not only for correction but to add clarity to his own substantial and constructive theological program which he intends to develop in line with the faith-ful theo-
logical thinking of the Fathers and Reformers, and in ‘fulfillment’ of Barth, as each of these followed after the objective self-disclosure of God in Jesus Christ.

It must be initially noted again that in examining Torrance’s theological agenda as it relates to ‘negation’ or criticisms deemed necessary to clear the way for ‘positive’ theological expression, that Torrance’s greater emphasis is given to his concerns with the views of Schleiermacher and Bultmann. Yet real understanding of Torrance’s Christocentric theological thinking requires that one effectively ‘place’ his theological position vis-à-vis the larger spectrum of modern thought. This requires an examination of Torrance’s reading of Protestant Orthodoxy. As will be seen below, Torrance’s criticisms of modern Protestant Orthodoxy are grounded in the same basic concern with the modern renewal of dualism (after Descartes, Newton and Kant) and the damaging effects of such to the theological task and centrally the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.

Torrance consistently desires to show that understanding of Christ and the gospel undergo confusion whenever it becomes entrapped within a dualistic framework of thought in which knowing and that which is known are split apart. As a result, human inquiries are detached from the coherent substructure or grounding of human thought in the apprehension of objective reality outside of the knower. He says that whenever such revival of dualism occurs there always arises in theological thinking rationalist and empiricist extremes as exemplified broadly in the docetism and ebionitism which emerged as the Christian gospel was interpreted within the dualist structures of Hellenistic thinking and culture. These two, docetism and ebionitism, are used to relate to Protestant Orthodoxy and liberalism which ‘have for so long afflicted modern theology, not to mention the host of pseudo-problems and continued solutions that constantly attend these extremes.’ As with ‘Neo-Protestantism,’ what gives rise to Protestant Orthodoxy is also said to be the break in the ‘ontological bearing of our minds upon reality and its intrinsic intelligibility in the field of inquiry, in science, theology, or philosophy.’ It is the ontological relation of mind and reality which Torrance desires to heal and to reaffirm. It is just this that Protestant

Orthodoxy, against its own desire, is found to still hold apart. While being ‘passionately dedicated to preserve the integrity of the biblical faith, Protestant Orthodoxy falls down, not so much at the one crucial place of the consubstantial relation’, but with the application of this in and through the Holy Scriptures.

As with ‘liberalism,’ Torrance places the problems of Protestant Orthodoxy back in a pre-Christian model of thought according to which the proper objects of rational investigation are necessary, timeless and universal. This mode of thought had the effect of excluding the contingent from the province of genuine knowledge. For a millennium, he says, Augustinian and Aristotelian metaphysics combined to effect the controlling dualist framework of Western thought. When this tradition was brought together with that ‘axiomatic identification of the rational with the necessary, timeless, and universal,’ the human understanding of the world in its real contingency was obstructed or obscured and so too empirical science. Upon this line of disjunctive and alien thinking in the theological inquiry of post-Reformation Protestant Scholasticism, modern Orthodoxy has hardened into dualistic ways of thinking which have finally separated God from his revelation.

Like the rigid Newtonian cosmological dualism which was forced a priori upon the phenomena, Protestant Orthodoxy is seen to work with a rigid framework of established beliefs which have a transcendent origin and which are to be personally appropriated through encounter with God in his self-revelation. Protestant Orthodoxy has an objective pole of reference and control. But even as Newton’s abstracted a priori ideas were forced upon the phenomena, Protestant Orthodoxy has also failed to apply its beliefs in a way consistent with their dynamic origin and nature. Rather than being open to the objective pole of reference in the dynamic and continual self-giving of God and the revisability of theological statement under the control of God’s objectivity, orthodox beliefs are given a finality in themselves and then are, like the Newtonian idealizations, clamped down upon Christian experience and the hermeneutical relation to the divine revelation through the Holy Scriptures. Indeed these beliefs are said to be falsely kept from the Lordly questioning which must come from theology’s proper Object, the Word which is

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
5 Torrance, RET, p. 16.
6 Ibid.
identical with the very Being of God. Torrance pinpoints the dualism of Protestant Orthodoxy saying:

At this point the epistemological dualism ... (at the basis of Protestant Orthodoxy) cuts off the revelation of God in the Bible from God himself in his continuous self-giving through Christ and in the Spirit, so that the Bible is treated as a self-contained corpus of divine truths in propositional form endowed with an infallibility of statement which provides the justification felt to be needed for the rigid framework of belief within which it barricades itself.7

Revelation has been detached from God who is himself the revelation or Word.

The dualism of Protestant Orthodoxy has led back to the false method of abstracting the phenomenal surface of human experience from the intelligible or geometrical framework upon which the phenomenal is grounded (form-being). The phenomenal then disintegrates; it loses contact with objective structures which hold appearances in meaningful, coherent patterns. In theology, the Truth of God is God himself in his own Being as self-communicated in Jesus Christ. The Truth of God is not, it cannot be, human statements about God, not even human statements about God in Holy Scripture. Torrance states that such human statements may be ‘true’ but their ‘truth’ dwells not in themselves but in God who has revealed himself. In Christ and by the Holy Spirit one truly knows God, the triune God, as he is in himself out of his own objective movement of self-giving.8

But in the abstractionist and rigidified thought of Protestant Orthodoxy the practical and epistemological effects establish an infallible Scripture and a fixed set of beliefs which often exercise primacy over the active Word of God’s self-revelation which is mediated to a hearing person through the Scriptures. Thus, much as it is for Barth, Torrance maintains that this cannot be an intrinsic identification or participation. This is reinforced in orthodoxy by identification of biblical statements about the truth with the Truth of God itself to which the statements are meant to refer. This, says Torrance, is another example of failure to acknowledge the unique Reality of God in his transcendent authority and majesty over all of the contingent media used by God in his self-revelation to mankind.9

Torrance highlights his thinking here.

7 Ibid.
9 Torrance, RET, p. 17.

... particularly distressing for a genuinely evangelical approach is that the living reality of God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit is in point of fact made secondary to the Scriptures. Regarded from this point of view... (the position) appears to stumble also at the full consubstantiality of the incarnate Son and Word with God the Father, for it is evidently unwilling to acknowledge the identity in being between what God is toward us in his revelation in Jesus Christ and what he is in his living Being and Reality in himself.10

The decisive problem for Protestant Orthodoxy is not then so different from that in ‘Neo-Protestantism’ as both are seen to stop short of the fact that God himself is the absolute Judge of the adequacy or inadequacy, of all human statements about him. All human expression referring to the Being and Act of God, including Scripture, must submit to the judgment of God’s Truth, God himself as self-disclosed, and thus point the human subject away from the written statement to the Truth as it is in Jesus....

In Orthodoxy too, then, there is a problem concerning relation between truth of statement and truth of being; truths of created being and the Truth of the Supreme Being an interactive hierarchical relation which must be recognized. Protestant Orthodoxy too is understood to have dualistically interpreted the structure, attempting to subordinate the Supreme Truth God’s self-communication to the referential truths of creaturely statement whereby the preconceived, abstractive patterns are forced down upon the actual substance of the faith.11

A large part of Protestant Orthodoxy’s problem, says Torrance, derives from the failure to realize that ‘You cannot state in statements how statements are related to being’ or else the relation of statement to being is transformed into mere statements. In medieval thought it was believed that one could reduce to statement how statement was related to the Truth of God. This was a problem for both medieval realism and nominalism, according to Torrance. They identified statement with the truth. This is held to be the problem lying at the root of rationalistic Protestant Orthodoxy’s identification of truth with statements about it.12 This means then that the impact of dualistic Augustinian-Aristotelian and Augustinian-Newtonian modes of thought have problematically influenced understanding of language of the Bible leading to a damaged semantic relation. Protestant Orthodoxy’s formalistic handling of biblical language is a
rationalist separation of the Scriptures from the objective Truth of God independent of them. Protestant Orthodoxy maintains that biblical statements contain their truth intrinsically in their very syntactical relations. This results in flat, logically consistent structures and prescriptive systems of thought.13

In true Barthian fashion, then, Torrance desires that here there be a reversal in human thinking in the event of confrontation by God. In this way God is known objectively, for it is God who speaks and human beings who must repentantly hear. The Word is not human statements about God even if abstracted from his self-revealing Act. Such a perspective would center all in and from the human rather than the Word of God. If concern is with the Being and Act of God himself in space-time, then that cannot be known directly in the manner of Protestant Orthodoxy as if the Truth of God could be read off the page in the process of reflection.14 The evangelical position is said to have fallen prey to the temptation (as with all ‘scholasticism’) of its own subjectivities by converting the truths of the Word of God into rationalized objects. For all of its appearance of objectivity, Torrance finds that in fact Protestant Orthodoxy’s objective descriptions of the Truth are confused for the Truth and thereby do not submit to the questioning and judgment of the Word. Following Barth again, he concludes:

The great weakness of this orthodoxy . . . is not its supernaturalism. That is its strength. It is rather the fact that orthodoxy has a way of regarding some objective description of an element as the element itself. The Word of God does indeed convey to us objective truth which requires of us rational assimilation and articulation but it cannot be embodied in objective sentences, so to speak, for that would be to obstruct the objective truth by substituting a false objectivity in its place. Even as Truth the Word of God remains eternal Event and is ever again Truth for us in its living and active encounter with us, and is always sovereignly superior to our statements and conceptions of it, and can never be included in our systematic constructions. Our theological formulations, therefore, do not embody their own standard of reference . . . Rather do they themselves fall under the judgment of the Truth and testify to the Word of God as their sole and proper criterion.15

Protestant Orthodoxy has given itself to objectivistic thinking in its

focus on the human statements of Scripture and has thereby lost scientific objectivity.

Having then lost the hierarchy of truth and the relation of truth to the Truth of God, statement to God’s Word and Being, Protestant Orthodoxy is found guilty of a ‘nominalist’ approach to the knowledge of God in which statements and concepts about the truth are identified with the Truth of God itself ending in nominalistic detachment, i.e., ‘truths’ which claim an independent status for themselves. This leads to a ‘flat’, formal, logical interconnection which exists as separated from the actual content of the faith, the revelation of God, and apart from any control by means of that objective reference beyond it.16 In resolving the Truth of God entirely into statements about it, Protestant Orthodoxy is said to be concerned about that which is not ultimate as though it were ultimate and thereby detaches the Word of God from God.17 Within an interesting section related to the larger question of the truth and authority in the Church, Torrance develops his important theological principle.

... one way of becoming a nominalist is to become an extreme realist (not Torrance’s understanding of “realism” which is a “critical” realist position informed by idealism at points). If our statements are absolutely adequate to the object, how can we distinguish the object from statements about it? This was, of course, pointed out long ago by Plato, with rather different language, in the Cratylus. Assuming that language has a real (physi) and a mimetic relation to reality (aletheia ton onton), the more our terms (onomata) become exact images or replicas (eikon) of the reality of things, the more inevitable it is that they should be mistaken for that reality and become substitutes for it. Thus if they are

13 Torrance, RET, p. 68.
17 Torrance, TCFK, p. 304.
to perform their denotative function adequately, directing us to reality beyond themselves in such a way that there takes place a disclosure (delos) of reality, they must have, as it were, a measure of inadequacy in order to be differentiated from that to which they refer. In other words, the (properly) realist (physi) relation of language to being (αθεια τοντων) requires to have at least a dash of conventionalism (a relation thesi), or perhaps even nominalism, about it, in order to be truly related to the truth. For true statements to serve the truth of being, they must themselves fall short of it and be recognized as such, for they do not possess their truth in themselves but (on the “higher level”) in the reality they serve. 16

Protestant Orthodoxy’s dualistic identification of conceptual representation of the Truth with the Truth of God in Christ itself, the verbal sign with the Reality of the Word, has founded then a ‘nominalist’, detached relation of truth to Truth. It has also brought its notion of the Word (like Bultmann’s Newtonianism) into conflict with modern realist science and scientific methodology out of the proper object, in this case the Reality of God in his Word. This is not and cannot be dualistically detached from God but is the eternal triune God in his own dynamic, economic self-giving to be known in Jesus Christ. 19

For Protestant Orthodoxy then, theological statements are said to be treated as logical propositions to be analyzed and interpreted in the syntactical and coherent interrelations. It is falsely concerned with the relation of statement to statement, and not of being, pointedly the Supreme Being of God. Or as Torrance says, . . . in

16 Ibid., pp. 319–320. At this point Torrance’s principle here must be observed and explicated more fully. In ibid., pp. 320–321, Torrance develops this both in negation and in affirmation when he says, ‘... I take up again the need for different levels of truth and concept which had been projected in the thought of Anselm and Duns Scotus and set out their transcendental relations and hierarchial structure, within which questions of analogy and truth are to be elucidated. The basic distinctions to be observed are those between the levels of truth of statement and the truth of created being, and then between these and the Supreme Truth which is God in his self-substantial Being and in his own transcendental Reality. These levels cannot be flattened out without loss in objective depth and in universality of range . . . as having to do with relations in concepts themselves but with their referring back to, or their intending, the reality of God beyond their power to grasp it.’

19 Torrance, RET, p. 70. On ibid., p. 60, Torrance adds to this as follows: ‘... who wants to take seriously the relation of the Holy Scriptures to the Word of God nevertheless think of the Word of God as contained in the Bible, which imports into their interpretation of the Bible a strangely damaging understanding of the relation of form and content, and leads to the nominalist identification of biblical statements with the truths to which they refer.’

which theological doctrines—as they disintegrate in their detachment from the empirical and objective ground in the acts of God, are thereby made void of material content. 20 They are meaningless. As with Schleiermacher and Bultmann, Torrance finds that Protestant Orthodoxy lacks a real conception of the intelligibility of reality whereby thoughts and statements come from no objective source and point to nothing beyond themselves, i.e. anthropology. 21

This is contrasted with his own position which emphasizes the trinitarian understanding of God himself out of God. The centerpoint of his trinitarian understanding of God, who interactively relates to and for us within the world, is the Incarnation in which God objectified himself for humanity in Jesus Christ. ‘God though he was, he came among us as man, and yet in such a way that he did not, as it were, resolve himself into man without remainder.’ 22 Against a Protestant Orthodoxy which is said to assert that the Word was inscripturated, Torrance is adamant in his Barthian emphasis that as the Word is properly or inherently God only, that in the incarnation the self-revelation of God took definitive and concrete, objective form. But this self-revelation does not simply reduce to this objective form (cf. extra-Calvinisticum). In Jesus Christ, God’s self-communication is enkindled in such an objective way that God remains Subject and the transcendent Lord who retains his own incomprehensible glory. God imprims himself to persons in Christ. The knowledge of God terminates actually by the Spirit in Christ on the Father. Therefore faithful thinking must answer the movement of God within the spatio-temporal realm. 23

Protestant Orthodoxy’s formalistic treatment of biblical language ends as the rationalistic detachment of the Scriptures from the objective Truth of God independent of them as though they contained their truth within themselves. Objective, realist theology posits the realist relation between language and things whereby real understanding occurs where biblical statements refer the knower to what is true independently of the statements. In this way, says Torrance, ‘genuine understanding begins where biblical statements leave off’ and exegesis becomes “theological”; i.e., one understands what Scripture says through its function as mediator of knowledge of the divine beyond the Scriptures, ‘truths which we must think out . . .


21 Ibid.

22 Torrance, RET, p. 165.

23 Ibid., pp. 166–167.
in terms of conceptual forms that arise as they press for recognition and realization in our minds.  

This means epistemologically that, against Protestant Orthodoxy’s dualistic lifting of the Scriptures above the reality of the self-revelation of God, the Holy Scriptures must submit to the judgment of the Truth of God incarnate. To be put in the truth with God means that ‘in ourselves we are in the wrong.’ Doctrinal beliefs as formulated in obedience to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ are themselves called into question by that very Word because the Truth itself lies not in these but in him to whom they refer. This is the essence of the test for this Orthodoxy, says Torrance. Whether or not it is genuinely ‘evangelical,’ he says, depends on its way consistent with their basis in God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. If true, human statements will be recognized as inadequate and deficient before Christ; and

acknowledgment of the transcendent Reality and Authority of the living Jesus Christ not only over the church and all its doctrinal formulations but over the Holy Scriptures themselves. This would involve a discovery that the Scriptures have an authority and compelling truth of a quite unfathomable kind, for they are grounded and anchored in the identity of God and his self-revelation to mankind through Christ and in the one Spirit.

An Example: Carl F. H. Henry. As contemporary examples of this position, Torrance will speak of or allude to several examples, though Gordon Haddon Clark and especially Carl F. H. Henry stand out as prominent. Yet his explicit reference is only occasional despite repeated references to their position. Henry has himself made much critical reference to Torrance’s essentially Barthian position.

Torrance says of Henry that he is a thorough rationalist and nominalist, ‘rejecting’ as he does the notion that biblical statements refer to reality or truth which is independent of them. Henry is said to have a nominalist conception of doctrine similar to that of Vatican I. Moreover, he says that Henry identifies logical relations with

relations in being. By way of example, Torrance explains that Henry, like Clark,

... thinks of divine revelation as the communicating of truths about God, not of God’s self-revealing—thus rejecting the epistemological importance of the Nicene homousion. Like Gordon Clark, Carl Henry identifies mathematical thinking and logical thinking with the mind of God, and thus cannot accept that the human reason comes under the judgment of the substitutionary death of Christ on the Cross. Behind all this, of course, lies serious defection from the evangelical and soteriological teaching of the Nicene Fathers and the Reformer.

Torrance’s argument against Henry’s position is positioned on the grounds of the realist doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement as interpreted in the light of the transcendent act of God in the Holy Spirit, i.e. in an ‘Anselmian’ way, ‘out of itself’ or in its own terms, rather than in terms of logic:causal and moral relations in the fallen world. Like the theological ‘liberals’, Carl Henry and Protestant Orthodoxy are said to think of God’s act, for example, in atonement, as an external relation between God and mankind, whether it be as moral influence or forensic translation. Therefore, like the Arians, Torrance believes that Henry sins ‘against the all-important homousion.’

Summary of Torrance’s Criticism

Torrance has found in the post-Reformational developments in Western thought after Descartes, Newton and Kant, a revival of epistemological and cosmological dualism. As in the early Church and late medieval Christianity, this has led to the re-entrenchment of theological dualism and its damaging problems. This is particularly so, Torrance believes, in direct relation to the redemptive knowledge of God, ultimately the Trinity, in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit. In this discussion, emphasis has been placed on one of the emphases taken in Torrance’s theological exposition, a negative paradigm, in his process of clarification and expression. Torrance often speaks of theologians of the past (e.g., Athanasius and Calvin) as having to ‘clear the ground’ negatively in order to ‘make room’ for new ‘positive’ assertion and affirmation before the Word of God. He finds the same is true now for in the face of the ‘third major renewal’ of the ancient problem of ‘dualism’ as it so injuriously affects theology, the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ is directly affected. We have thus

24 Torrance, RET, pp. 68-69.
25 Ibid., p. 18.
26 Ibid., p. 19.
28 Ibid.
29 Thomas F. Torrance in personal correspondence, January 30, 1990.
30 Ibid.
examined another side of Torrance’s criticisms of what he regards as modern disjunctive, dualistic theological thinking as reflected here in post-Enlightenment Protestant Orthodoxy. Torrance finds this ‘Orthodoxy’ to affirm theologically and confessionally the primary content of the faith of the Church, but there is a problem. What Protestant Orthodoxy affirms rightly about God and his redemptive purposes in the world it affirms for the wrong reasons. Torrance therefore distinguishes his own Reformed-Evangelical Protestantism, a position which he believes to be truly and historically orthodox, from this ‘late’ developing theology of rationalistic Enlightenment thought. Protestant Orthodoxy is therefore directly connected with Protestant Scholasticism. This position, Torrance points out, manifests the problematic, dualistic and anthropological thinking prevalent in modern theology, though here it is more implicit than explicit. In particular Torrance finds ‘propositional revelation’ as given in the Holy Scriptures to be a clear manifestation of Nominalism. In this way the Word or Truth of God, which Torrance emphasizes to be God himself in his own coming, is cut off from God. God rather is himself the Word; he is his own Word, his own Truth. Therefore to assert, that Scripture’s text and textuality is in itself Word of God, rather than that through which the Word breaks and is known by the Spirit, is to separate God from his Word and to make the human, into the divine. In this way, Protestant Orthodoxy is more in accord with ‘Neo-Protestant’ tradition than is usually believed.

Concerns Regarding Torrance’s View of Revelation

Thomas Torrance’s theological position as a whole and his understanding of revelation in particular is deeply rooted in the thought of both Soren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. Both of these thinkers have been misunderstood by many, notably by evangelicals. But neither is an irrationalist and neither is a subjectivist. Both were concerned to set forth the objectivity of God’s gracious self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. For both Kierkegaard and Barth, and thereby in Torrance, it is crucial that the revelation of God in Christ be truly historical. All must agree that this is indeed essential. I would also agree with much of Torrance’s criticism of Protestant Orthodoxy’s tendency to separate Scripture as Word (that which is revealed) from Christ the Word and the disclosive Act of God in Jesus Christ (the revealing). But the particular ‘historical’ God-world-human relation, as embodied in the thought of Kierkegaard, Barth and Torrance, is necessarily unique and possibly problematic as formulated by them. For all three, the truly Christian reckoning of faith hinges upon that which was neither anticipated nor understood as such. Faith in ‘the god in time’ can only be ‘the happy understanding of difference.’ The alien nature of grace, which is yet to and for us, as centered in the Incarnation, lies in its being an historical event which is contrary to the very nature of the historical. One can only receive in the realization of the utter incapacity of the human and the otherness of grace. In this way one is confronted not only and above all by the coming Word which is beyond all worldly particularities and generalities, but in the actuality and particularly of Jesus Christ one is led to the epistemological boundary of human understanding. By way of his lineage in Kierkegaard and Barth, despite advances made, Torrance too underlines the difference of two realities, the inherent dissimilarity, which must be overlapped by the final acceptance of the boundary before the otherness of God who is still other even as ‘the god in time.’

While acknowledging, then, differences and advances in the line of thought from Kierkegaard through Barth to Torrance, there occurs at the critical point of historical relation by the self-disclosure of God in Christ in human existence an implicit need in the moment of encounter, in ‘contemporaneous/meeting, to negate the human-historical actuality and to de-temporalize in the transcendentized coming of the Word in a Christ-mystical ‘Word event.’ Though healing much of Barth’s bifurcated notion of time, Torrance has taken this line of theological thinking over as central to his own development of the objective reality of revelation to the end that, in Christ and by the Spirit, one may have realist knowledge of God. Torrance has fallen into the same difficulty whereby, in the ‘moment,’ one is said to be brought to mystical and non-discursive cognitive encounter with the Word who ‘jumps’ the gulf or difference, thereby negating all historical distinction in that ‘contemporaneously’ achieved in the coming of the Word and ‘lifting’ of the Spirit. In this way the knowing subject’s historical existence and humanity as such seems lost or reduced when lifted up to the Word as transcendentally beyond the historical domain of the existing self. Thus Torrance’s purpose to establish ‘theologically’ the Barthian synthesis of ‘God’s Being in his Act and his Act in his Being,’ while extremely helpful and substantial in affirming the oneness of God’s redemptive self-revelation with his eternal Being (cf. the crucial homousian doctrine), is not fully and ‘economically’ adequate. Likewise I am largely in agreement with Torrance’s concern with the evangelical tendency to conceptually separate Scripture as Word from the Word who became flesh in the redemptive movement of God to and for us in the world. But the totality of his formulation does not finally reflect the desired asymmetrical God-world, God-human relatedness, the openness of contingent creation to the
Creator in real grace-established interactivity, or the real trinitarian nature of God’s self-revelation to be truly known as he is really as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**Toward Possible Correction in the Light of Torrance’s Theological Purpose**

Torrance admits much difficulty on the issue of the actual knowing of God or of the human historical relation to God’s self-disclosure. God is unapproachable and inaccessible in his divine, intelligible Light, in the sheer invisibility of his uncreated Light and Rationality and transcendent beyond fallen creaturely capacities. Indeed, on the one hand Torrance wants to follow faith-fully and think after the real interactive relation and self-revelation of God to, in and for the world as Lord, whereby God’s revelation can be redemptive as truly within his theological thinking so that a gulf is found finally to exist between the divine and the human at the point of space-time relation in the world. This demands that existential Word-event (or ‘Christ-event’) for theological ‘knowledge’ and faith-ful response in the task of doing what he terms ‘mystical theology.’ So while Torrance endeavors to follow the inherent rationality of theology’s proper object of knowledge in all of its real objectivity and dynamism, in the ‘theologic’ of the Word which will not fall prey to the static forms of formal deduction which are impotent before the Truth which has moved into time as event, he has not been able to overcome what Kierkegaard and Barth left disjoined. This final disjunction between the divine, history and the human occurs because disjunctive assumptions have thwarted a final interrelatedness which is absolutely necessary for Torrance’s asymmetrical, unitary theological whole as a disclosure model of God’s lordly creative-recreative relation to the world and persons therein as centered and founded in the real historicity and Mediation of the Word made flesh. Putting the point in patristic terms it may be said that Torrance is ‘Alexandrian’ in his theo-logico goals in and from the incarnate Word, but finally ‘Antiochene’ (even Nestorian?) at the crucial point of real historicity and historical relation in the manifestation of the Word.

Torrance seems to have two basic choices for potentially overcoming the difficulty of a disclosive Word which remains problematically beyond any participation in the historical and beyond human knowledge, contrary to his own intent. Much like his theological forebearers (Kierkegaard and Barth), Torrance’s view causes God to ever recede from the truly historical into the non-historical or non-objectivity of another ‘time’ at the critical point of disclosive participation. Torrance might go the way of Paul Tillich or the way of John Calvin. It is especially Tillich’s understanding of the revelatory role of historical religious symbols which could be helpful to Torrance for they do not merely mediate the wholly separate divine but actually participate in Being itself while not being confused with it. Tillich would provide not only a way of real divine-human-world differentiation but importantly a form of divine-human-world unitary relation. But while Torrance will rarely admit having more affinity to Idealism than usually acknowledged (especially in his later writings where he speaks of the necessity of Idealism, in part, in coming to truth), it is also clear that Torrance would find Tillich’s thought too Hegelian and necessitarian to fit his concern with the actual, personal and particular self-revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Torrance would also find Tillich’s ‘Son’ and ‘Spirit’ relegated to mere moments in the self-realization of the ‘Father’ in contrast to his own Nicene trinitarianism.

Therefore it may be in Calvin’s theological and historical ‘textuality’ where one may find a more historical-human anchorage for the divine-human relation necessary for real theological connection. This may give to Torrance’s Barthian understanding of ‘the Being of God in his Act and the Act of God in his Being’ and the simultaneous authority and humanity of Scripture, which Torrance seems to indirectly acknowledge, another needed and completionary dimension. Following Ray Anderson, it might be said that Scripture is the one pole of transcendence (‘historical transcendence’) which, in and from God through Christ and by the Spirit, confronts the existing person as part of and as participating in the revelation of God in history, with all of the limitations and conditions which history imposed upon the Word itself in becoming flesh. The ‘transcendence’ of Scripture is not then its fleeting existential role in the ‘moment’ of the hearer wherein it then becomes disposable as creaturely and historical. It rather is to be found in the human and historical world of Scripture itself as an indispensable pole of ‘historical transcendence’ within which the objective Reality of God places the believer in

Jesus Christ. This would also more faithfully reflect Torrance’s own strong trinitarian position by giving a more economically critical place to the pneumatological in the self-disclosive movement of God in the world. But more, the revelation of God must not be understood merely as a contingency of pure Act united tenuously with humanity, but as the eternal Word of God which has truly and factually entered as Lord into real human history and into a specific human time and culture, taking shape in a context of interaction, real presence, real participation and real response. Again, following Anderson, ‘the Word acquired a history in which the verbal and written response became part of the transcendent act itself.’ In principle, Torrance would seem to want this, seeing the need for interpretation as necessary for real, conceptual revelation, but this becomes disjoined in his theology from the real, objective revelatory movement of God in the world, and therefore the Word remains finally beyond the human as human and creaturely, and outside of contingent, human history in a ‘time’ of its own. Given Torrance’s strong Barthian sense of the ontological divide between the divine and the creaturely, human terms, creaturely communication of the Truth of God, can only mediate but cannot participate as part of the redemptive coming and self-giving of God for humanity in history. But does the redemptive movement of the grace of God in history in Jesus Christ include and actually participate in the finite, the contingent, the historical, the human, and the pain of human estrangement or not? If not, where is redemption? While the Scriptures do point beyond themselves to Christ the Word (cf. Jn. 5:39), this very ‘pointing beyond’ to Christ the Word is the very capacity given only in participation in the movement of God’s self-disclosure and cannot be finally external to it.

Abstract

Within Thomas Torrance’s larger criticism of the destructive re-entrenchment of philosophical dualism in theology, he also gives briefer criticism to what he sees as the dualism of ‘modern Protestant (evangelical) orthodoxy’. Its ‘nominalistic’ separation of the Word of God as Scripture from God in his objective economic self-disclosure falsely disjoins the Word from God. While acknowledging the propriety of much of Torrance’s concern, this article endeavours to show a problematic disjunction in Torrance’s own thought at this very point and to suggest a way of recovery that will enhance Torrance’s own profound and constructive Christocentric-Trinitarian theological purpose.

34 Ibid., p. 220.