

The importance of the doctrine of justification in the theology of Thomas F. Torrance and of Karl Barth

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Abstract

This discussion of the interaction between Thomas F. Torrance and Karl Barth first highlights how and why the doctrine of justification binds them together theologically, since each theologian applies this doctrine relentlessly to all aspects of theology. The article then explores how their views of religion illustrate their thinking. Finally, it considers two areas of disagreement between Barth and Torrance regarding the issue of subordination within the doctrine of the Trinity and the possibility of natural theology.

Keywords: Karl Barth, justification, natural theology, religion, T. F. Torrance, Trinity

Thomas F. Torrance was introduced to the study of Barth in 1935 by H. R. Mackintosh, when he read and appreciated the first part-volume of the *Church Dogmatics* (CD) for its stress on 'the ontology and objectivity of the Word of God as God himself in his revelation, and by Barth's presentation of dogmatics as a science'.¹ Torrance was committed to a scientific theology that allowed all its thinking to be determined by the unique nature of the object that it was considering. He was driven in this direction as an undergraduate because he found that Friedrich Schleiermacher's approach lacked 'any realist scientific objectivity', and that Augustine's thought was controlled by 'powerful neo-Platonic ingredients' that caused Torrance to react in a manner similar to the way he reacted to Schleiermacher. Torrance was captivated by Barth's description of the trinitarian 'content, structure, and dynamism of God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, expounded in terms of the biblical roots of our Christian faith and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed'.²

Torrance especially saw in Barth how theology could be scientific in the sense that its approach and content needed to be shaped by the incarnate Word and through the Spirit who enabled creatures to relate with God and thus to know God in a way that avoided liberal and fundamentalist attempts to offer

¹ Thomas F. Torrance, 'My Interaction with Karl Barth', in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *How Karl Barth Changed my Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), p. 52.

² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

‘rationalizing variations on the ancient adoptionist and docetic heresies that kept passing over into each other in their betrayal of the gospel’.³ Torrance studied with Barth and proposed as his thesis to ‘work out a scientific account of Christian dogmatics from its Christological and soteriological center and in the light of its constitutive Trinitarian structure’.⁴ Barth thought this was too ambitious, and so they agreed that Torrance would explore for his doctorate how grace came to be understood in the second century, and this was subsequently published as *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*.⁵ Later, Torrance said that ‘Karl Barth was unquestionably the greatest theologian that has appeared for several hundred years’ and mentioned that ‘Pope Paul used to say that he was the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century.’⁶ Personally, Torrance was ‘absorbed’ by CD I/2 and believed that CD IV constituted ‘the most powerful work on the doctrine of atoning reconciliation ever written’.⁷ While many thought CD IV was the high point of the *Church Dogmatics*, Torrance maintained that Barth himself thought the high point had been reached in CD II.⁸

Implications of the doctrine of justification

For Torrance, ‘Justification means justification by Christ alone’: that ‘we look away from ourselves altogether in order to live out of him [Christ] alone’.⁹ This was in line with his reading of the *Scots Confession* (1560), which held that “‘we willingly spoil ourselves of all honour and glory of our own salvation and redemption, as we also do of our regeneration and sanctification’”. This entailed ‘the rejection of all forms of self-justification, and all forms

³ *Ibid.*, p. 53. He was referring to what Barth had categorised as Ebionite and Docetic Christologies that did not allow Jesus Christ himself to be their starting point and criterion.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁵ This was published in 1946 and reprinted by Wipf & Stock in 1996. Torrance’s original proposal finally was realised in his two monumental works on the Trinity: *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

⁶ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, pp. 1, 26. In an entry on Barth in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. 2, p. 68, James B. Torrance attributes the latter statement to Pope Pius XII.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, ‘Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life’, in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), p. 161. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: OUP, 1971; reissued Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. 63.

of justification by anything or out of any source other than Jesus Christ'.¹⁰ While Torrance noted that there is 'no separate article on justification' in the Scots Confession, and therefore that the doctrine 'has no place of its own', he held with Barth that justification belonged 'to the inner texture of the Gospel and becomes evident as its cutting edge' because it indicates 'the very essence of the Gospel of salvation by grace'.¹¹ This is why Torrance argued that it is only in and through our union with Christ that 'all that is his' in his divine-human action for us 'becomes ours'.¹² Because our justification is tied directly to Christ's resurrection and ascension, Torrance insists that

Justification 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. To be justified is to be lifted up above and beyond ourselves to live out of the risen and ascended Christ, and not out of ourselves.¹³

But it was crucial to maintain that this living in and from Christ took seriously Christ's own active and passive obedience. So, on the one hand, Christ actively fulfilled his Sonship for us by maintaining

a perfect filial relation to the Father . . . in which he perfectly fulfilled God's holy will and received and laid hold of the love of the Father. This active obedience was therefore his own loving self-offering to the Father in our name and on our behalf and also his own faithful appropriation of the Father's Word and will in our name and on our behalf.¹⁴

On the other hand, Christ submitted passively to the Father's judgement on our sin by assuming our sinful humanity and living a life of obedience by willingly accepting 'the divine verdict upon humanity'. This was manifested most clearly in his obedience to death on the cross. Nonetheless, this was a 'passion that began with his very birth, for his whole life, as Calvin says, was in a real sense a bearing of the Cross, but it was in the Cross itself that it had its *telos* or consummation'.¹⁵

¹⁰ Torrance, 'Justification', p. 161.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 150–1. See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, pp. 60, 69.

¹² Torrance, 'Justification', p. 151.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* This is why, following Calvin, Torrance insists upon our union with Christ as the factor that enables our justification and sanctification. 'Apart from Christ's incarnational union with us and our union with Christ on that ontological basis, justification degenerates into only an empty moral relation', such as he sees in the Westminster Confession, which claimed that 'we are first justified through a judicial

Importantly, then, Christ's active and passive obedience cannot be said to differ with respect to time since both 'extend to the very beginning of the Incarnation, to the birth of Jesus, and both reach out to its fulfillment in his death and resurrection'.¹⁶ And they cannot be said to differ with respect to the subject either, because 'they are both manifestations of the one obedience of the Son of God in our humanity'.¹⁷ Hence, both Christ's active and passive obedience are imputed to us, and this means that justification cannot be restricted to 'the non-imputation of our sins through the pardon of Christ' but must include the 'positive sharing in his divine-human righteousness'.¹⁸ What all of this suggests is that both objective and subjective justification have already taken place in Jesus Christ himself for us. He was and is our substitute and representative, both objectively and subjectively, because in him God was acting for us from both the divine and human side: 'He was the Word of God brought to bear upon man, but he was also man hearing that word, answering it, trusting it, living by it – by faith'.¹⁹

Crucially, this means that our sanctification is in no sense something that is left to us; rather it is a completed event in Jesus' own sanctification of our sinful flesh in what he did for us by vicariously believing in our place. Following the letter to the Hebrews, Torrance emphasises that Christ as our high priest 'consecrated himself for our sakes, and pointed out that he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all one'.²⁰ Consequently, it would be a mistake to think of justification and sanctification as different stages in a process of salvation, since 'Christ has already consecrated or sanctified himself for our sakes, so that we are already consecrated or sanctified in him'.²¹ Sanctification thus is imputed to us by his free grace, just as is justification. These are not to be seen as two different things, for though sanctification is associated more with Christ's priestly work than is justification, nevertheless both describe the 'same reality'.²² What all of this discloses is that Jesus fulfilled and embodied both God's own righteous and holy action and our human response of trust, faith and obedience towards God and in that way

act, then through an infusion of grace we live the sanctified life, and grow into union with Christ' (*God and Rationality*, p. 65).

¹⁶ Torrance, 'Justification', p. 155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, pp. 63, 84.

¹⁹ Torrance, 'Justification', p. 157. Torrance develops this thinking in detail in his *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), esp. pp. 76–7 and 121–2.

²⁰ Torrance, 'Justification', p. 157.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 157–8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

stood in for us offering his perfect trust, faith and obedience, which we are unable to do; he also 'appropriated all God's blessings which we are unable to appropriate'. Thus, it is through union with him that we share in these human actions and appropriate the Father's blessing, partaking also in his justification before God. Consequently,

when we are justified by faith, this does not mean that it is our faith that justifies us . . . it is the faith of Christ alone that justifies us, but we in faith flee from our own acts even of repentance, confession, trust and response, and take refuge in the obedience and faithfulness of Christ – 'Lord I believe, help thou mine unbelief'. That is what it means to be justified by faith.²³

Hence, we can say that justification 'has been fulfilled subjectively as well as objectively in Jesus Christ' in such a way that 'objective and subjective justification is objective to us'.²⁴ What does that mean? To Torrance it means that justification is

freely imputed to us by grace objectively and we through the Spirit share in it subjectively as we are united to Christ. His subjective justification becomes ours, and it is subjective in us as well as in him, but only subjective in us because it has been made subjectively real in our own human nature, in our own human flesh in Jesus, our Brother, and our Mediator.²⁵

In Torrance's view, Calvin and Knox did not need to stress our assurance of salvation as Luther did because our very act of faith was seen to rest 'upon Christ and his faith, not upon my faith or my need for this or that answer, and hence the assurance was unshakable, because it was grounded in the solid faithfulness of Christ'.²⁶ While Torrance has been criticised for stressing Christ himself in this way, so that one might argue that 'the vigorous affirmation of *solus Christus* may well threaten rather than validate man' with the result that faith may become 'a merely formal ratification of prior divine decisions and deeds', the reality is that this thinking strengthens

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

²⁵ *Ibid.* This shifts the emphasis away from a focus on our assurance, as happened with Luther, to the fact that what was done by Christ alone is and remains our objective and subjective assurance. Thus, as John Knox stressed, it is 'not by any act of ours, even if that act be an act of believing' that we are justified, since 'We believe in Christ in such a way that we flee from ourselves and take refuge in him alone' (*ibid.*).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

his theological anthropology and our distinction from and dependence on Christ in a way that gives our human freedom its true standing and worth.²⁷

Having said this, one can see quite easily why Torrance abhorred any idea of conditional salvation. Any notion of 'co-redemption' distorts and betrays the gospel because it is not only legalistic, but it teaches that 'people will not be saved unless they make the work of Christ real for themselves by their own personal decision, or that they will be saved only if they repent and believe'.²⁸ This thinking makes Christ's work 'conditional upon what the sinner does, and so at the crucial point it throws the ultimate responsibility for man's salvation back upon himself'.²⁹ Once that happens, we are utterly lost, because it is exactly our sin which makes it impossible for us to do anything to save ourselves. The message of the New Testament, Torrance rightly insists, is 'that Christ has died for us while we were yet sinners, and that His work is finished, and therefore it calls for repentance and the obedience of faith, but never does it say: this is what God in Christ has done for you and you can be saved on condition that you repent and believe'.³⁰

It should be clear by now that my reason for presenting Torrance's view of justification is that I believe one of the crucial factors that unite Barth and Torrance is their application of the doctrine to all aspects of theology. As Torrance himself claimed:

The theology of Barth can be described... as the application of justification to the whole realm of man's life, to the realm of his knowing as well as the realm of his doing. In that he has sought to follow through the radical consequences of the Reformation from which our forefathers resiled when they took refuge again, like the Romans, in the works of the natural man, for justification.³¹

The context of this statement is important. Torrance was speaking about natural knowledge of God and natural goodness, noting that both are the works of our sinful flesh, and that since we cannot separate our knowing from

²⁷ See John B. Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to his Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), p. 103. Webster here is referring to Jüngel's account of justification, but he references Torrance as a further example of this 'characteristic problem of Protestant theology' in footnote 52 (p. 160).

²⁸ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 58. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 36–7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 163. Torrance maintained that 'No one since the Reformation has applied justification by God's grace alone so radically and daringly to human theologizing as Karl Barth,' *God and Rationality*, p. 68.

our being, we must recognise that justification calls our whole being into question. Hence, as justification puts us in 'the right and truth of God', it also 'tells us that we are in untruth', so that while Torrance is perfectly willing to admit that we all have natural goodness and some natural knowledge of God, both of those are called into question because Jesus died for the whole person both with our good and our evil, as well as for all people, both good and evil. What both Barth and Torrance have in common then is their insistence that the whole of our natural knowledge and natural goodness is called into question by Christ, who says to us that we must deny ourselves and take up the cross and follow him, since 'no one goes to the Father but by him'.³² In connection with our human knowledge of God, both Torrance and Barth maintained that none of our concepts or analogies are true in themselves precisely because they both insisted that the truth of theological viewing and conceiving always is and remains grounded in God's own objective action in his incarnate Word and in the subjective action of the Holy Spirit uniting us to Christ and thus to the Father. In Barth's thinking this is meticulously argued in CD II/1, where he deliberately ties knowledge of God to the doctrine of justification:

If our views and concepts and words are of themselves too narrow to apprehend God, it does not follow that this sets a limit to God Himself, that it is impossible for God to take up his dwelling in this narrowness . . . It is not a question of a power to receive this guest being secretly inherent in these works of ours. They have no power to do this, just as all the heavens are not able to contain Him.³³

But Barth does not stop there, and says that God has the power to indwell our works in a way that cannot mean 'a magical transformation of man, or a supernatural enlargement of his capacity, so that now he can do what before he could not do'.³⁴ Barth insists that we have no such power afterward any more than before. Still, this very person is

taken up by the grace of God and determined to participation in the veracity of the revelation of God. In all his impotence he becomes a place where his honour dwells – not his own, but God's. As a sinner he is justified . . . The veracity of the revelation of God, which justifies the sinner in His Word by His Spirit, makes his knowledge of God true without him, against him – and yet as his own knowledge, and to that

³² Ibid., p. 163. See also *God and Rationality*, p. 71.

³³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), II/1, p. 212.

³⁴ Ibid.

extent through him. By the grace of God we may view and conceive God and speak of God in our incapacity. And we ought to do so. We must not neglect to make use of this permission.³⁵

Note how similar Torrance's thinking is on this point:

Theological statements do not carry their truth in themselves, but are true in so far as they direct us away from themselves to the one Truth of God. That is why justification remains the most powerful statement of objectivity in theology, for it throws us at every point upon the Reality of God and what He has done for us in Christ, and will never let us rest upon our own efforts.³⁶

Indeed,

justification by putting us in the right with the Truth of God calls in question all that claims to be knowledge of the truth on our part and calls into question our theological statements in so far as they claim to have truth in themselves, and directs them away from themselves to Christ as the one Truth of God. And yet in so doing justification establishes us in certainty through grounding and pivoting all our knowing and thinking and acting objectively upon the divine Reality in Christ.³⁷

It is worth noting that Barth himself was familiar with the Scots Confession and, commenting on the fact that Christ's bodily resurrection was a central part of the confession, he insisted that any qualification of the fact that this man really rose bodily from the dead 'would be equivalent to a denial'.³⁸ Without Christ's bodily resurrection there would be no revelation and 'no knowledge

³⁵ Ibid., p. 213.

³⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 68. See also and esp. Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1978), pp. 47ff. and 198ff.

³⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 201. While Torrance has been criticised for obviating Barth's stress on the constant need for God to actively disclose himself to us in and through our views and concepts – e.g., D. Paul La Montagne, *Barth and Rationality: Critical Realism in Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), pp. 176–7 – Torrance also insists on this very point when he argues forcefully that we cannot build up to a knowledge of Jesus Christ since that has to come to us as an act of God: *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes: Paternoster; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 2ff. and 36. The similarity between what Torrance says here and what Barth says in IV/2, pp. 119ff. is unmistakable.

³⁸ Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God According to the Teaching of the Reformation, Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen in 1937 and 1938*, trans. J. L. M. Hair and Ian Henderson (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), p. 87.

of the forgiveness of our sin or of our election or of God's gracious decision in our favour'.³⁹ Barth even says: 'Thank God that the Scottish Confession is a good confession at this point, and pray that the Church of Scotland to-day [1937–8] will affirm this.'⁴⁰ Interestingly, Barth goes on to assert that Jesus did not rise from the dead by the power of his humanity; hence there is no sense in saying that a dead person cannot become alive once again. Why? Because

what the Easter message asserts is not that He was able to do so as man, by virtue of some potentiality or other present in His humanity. On the contrary, it ascribes the fact that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead entirely to His divinity. But it certainly does mean that even in his resurrection Jesus Christ did not cease to be true man.⁴¹

What happened in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was indeed 'the realisation of a human life in eternal righteousness, innocence and blessedness, and eternal life not only for God but also now for man'.⁴² The content of the Easter message then 'is that He, being the same as we are, namely man, is God from eternity, and that message is a promise for all men, because it confers on them all – again for Jesus Christ's sake – the new robe of righteousness before God and with it eternal life'.⁴³ This leads Barth to conclude that justification does not only refer to forgiveness of sin but to righteousness as something positive; not just to 'freedom from guilt and punishment but something positive, freedom to be God's children; not only . . . comfort in the hour of death, but something positive, immortal life victorious over death'.⁴⁴ Barth concludes by saying that if the church did not proclaim this, that is, 'the justification of sinful man', the church would have nothing to proclaim at all. Indeed he maintains that the reason people think the church is weak and has nothing to say is because 'she has not the courage to say this'. In Barth's view, the church is really the true church when 'she truly proclaims justification and a false church when she does so falsely'.⁴⁵ There is no doubt that Barth would agree with Torrance's claim that a secularised Christianity that can be communicated directly to people without their having to give up all their self-reliance and turn exclusively towards Christ is a Christianity that 'has become a harmless superficial thing, capable neither of inflicting

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 88–9.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 89.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

deep wounds nor of healing them, for it has nothing to say to men which they do not already know The more the Church tries to get “with it” the more it makes itself an otiose relic of the past.’⁴⁶

It is important to realise, of course, that for Barth, ‘There never was and there never can be any true Christian Church without the doctrine of justification.’⁴⁷ Certainly, in Barth’s view, the doctrine proved to be useful to Augustine in opposing Pelagius and his followers who were obscuring the gospel message of free grace, as it was to Luther in his opposition to the abuses present in the medieval church, and again in the nineteenth century in opposition to the secularisation of the Enlightenment and the powerlessness of ‘post-Reformation orthodoxy’, and even in contemporary theology in opposition to ‘humanistic religiosity . . . , ecclesiasticism, sacramentalism, liturgism and even existentialism’.⁴⁸ Still, it is a mistake to make the doctrine itself that by which the church stands or falls. And that is the case because Barth believes that the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is ‘the confession of Jesus Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3); the knowledge of His being and activity for us and to us and with us’.⁴⁹ Because Jesus Christ is the centre, that is, the starting point and the conclusion of all Christian theology, Barth thinks it is unnecessary to give the doctrine of justification a monopoly in order to take it with the seriousness that is required.⁵⁰ In this both Torrance and Barth are one. One can see the implications of the thinking espoused here quite clearly in Barth’s view of faith expressed in his doctrine of God:

To believe means to believe in Jesus Christ. But this means to keep wholly and utterly to the fact that our temporal existence receives and has and again receives its truth, not from itself, but exclusively from its relationship to what Jesus Christ is and does as our Advocate and Mediator in God Himself . . . in faith we abandon . . . our standing upon ourselves (including all moral and religious, even Christian standing), . . . for the real standing in which we no longer stand on ourselves [including our faith as such] . . . but . . . on the ground of the truth of God . . . We have to believe; not to believe in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 71.

⁴⁷ Barth, CD IV/1, p. 523.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 527.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 528.

⁵¹ Barth, CD II/1, p. 159; cf. pp. 319–20. See also CD IV/1, where Barth carries this through, insisting that the necessity of faith is grounded in Christ and not in us: ‘it

Inasmuch as the gospel of grace is what shaped all of Barth's theology, we certainly can say that the doctrine of justification meant above all that the basis, meaning and goal of all theology is to be found only in Jesus Christ himself. And both theologians held this view with regard to our knowledge of God, so that their epistemologies reflected the fact that they believed that there were no concepts or analogies that were true in themselves, as noted above. They believed rather that our concepts or analogies had to become true again and again as they reflected the only reality that could make them true, namely, Jesus Christ himself, who, in the power of his Holy Spirit, enables the kind of belief that lives from a centre in Christ and thus only through union with Christ himself. Any other position in this matter could lead to legalism or to licence, which both theologians detested, since the former would mean using the law to avoid relying exclusively on Jesus, while the latter would mean relying on one's self-chosen agenda instead of freely and joyously obeying Christ in life and in death.

Perhaps even more clearly, the doctrine of justification also shaped each of these theologians' views of grace and revelation. That is why both of them frequently insisted that grace cannot be understood as something infused into people, because any such idea would have to mean detaching the gift (eternal life and knowledge of the true God) from the Giver and locating it directly in our human experience of faith. It is also why both Barth and Torrance repeatedly insisted that it is not our faith that saves us but the act of Christ himself as our representative and substitute. This can be seen very clearly in Barth's thought when he insists that our conversion has already taken place in Jesus himself, so that we participate in that objective act only through the Holy Spirit enabling us to share his perfect obedience of faith.⁵² Both theologians also tied reconciliation very clearly to their understanding of the incarnation, insisting that since the incarnate life of Jesus was fulfilled in his cross, and thus in his resurrection and ascension, therefore it is clear that the point of the incarnation was that God acted as man for our benefit and continues to do so through his Spirit even now. One of Barth's favourite verses came from the end of Matthew's Gospel where the risen Lord said to his disciples that he would be with them always even to the end of the world. This verse was a crucial one for Torrance as well, since he insisted that unless Jesus' command to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (a command also found at the end of Matthew's Gospel) were the words of the risen Lord himself, the church would be a self-grounded organisation

does not even remotely lie in faith in itself and as such. It is to be found in the object of faith' (p. 747; cf. I/1, pp. 222–3).

⁵² See e.g. Barth, *CD IV/1*, pp. 92, 122, 130 and 492.

and would lose its true meaning as the earthly historical form of Christ's continued presence in history in the time between the resurrection and the second coming.⁵³

Barth and Torrance on religion

While some consider Barth's consistent and pervasive critique of religion in CD I/2 jarring, his position develops directly from his understanding of justification. He begins §17 by noting that God's revelation as 'the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the judging but also the reconciling presence of God in the world of human religion, that is, in the realm of man's attempts to justify and to sanctify himself before a capricious and arbitrary picture of God'.⁵⁴ Then he writes, 'The Church is the locus of true religion, so far as through grace it lives by grace.'⁵⁵ That is a loaded statement, of course, because what he goes on to say is that the church is not the locus of true religion in itself, but only insofar as those who believe in Christ live from him alone. In other words, for Barth we must seek both the reality and possibility of revelation 'only in God',⁵⁶ and in this Torrance followed him, insisting that the reality of revelation comes first, that its possibility for us lies only in that reality.⁵⁷ Thus, revelation cannot be thought of as 'an interplay between God and man, between grace and nature', because this event, which includes both the objective and the subjective element in revelation, 'is the being and action of the self-revealing God alone'.⁵⁸ In that sense revelation, which includes us in the action of the Holy Spirit, is 'a self-enclosed circle'.⁵⁹

When Torrance read Barth and then read scripture in light of 'the startling questions he asked about the strange new world within the Bible and the dynamic nature of the Word of God', his own study of the Bible 'changed into a higher gear'.⁶⁰ Torrance realised that the Bible gives us no rest because the very Word of God – 'not the Word of God as man utters it, but the *Word*

⁵³ See e.g. Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 7; cf. p. 120, where Torrance refers to Barth's statement that 'The Holy Spirit is the awakening power in which Jesus Christ has formed and continually renews his body, i.e. his own earthly-historical form of existence, the one holy catholic and apostolic Church' (Barth, CD IV/1, pp. 643ff.). Cf. also Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 25 and Barth, CD IV/2, pp. 614ff.

⁵⁴ Barth, CD I/2, p. 280.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 83, and *Theological Science*, pp. 25ff.

⁵⁸ Barth, CD I/2, p. 280.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 83.

of God as God himself utters it, in fact the Word of God which God himself is, for he is identical with his Word' – is the strange new world of God himself that makes the Bible such an extraordinary book.⁶¹ Torrance maintained that Barth's focus on revelation, that is, upon God himself not only revealing himself but acting as the Reconciler and Mediator, was the basis of his 'consistent rejection of natural theology as some possible alternative way to knowledge of God', and that that was the very reason why 'he has been the most consistently biblical theologian of our day'.⁶² There can be no doubt that he was influenced by Barth's antipathy towards religion as the human attempt to reach God without God and even against God, unless that attempt is corrected by revelation, which does not just link up with our religious consciousness but which justifies and sanctifies it in the truth. Listen then to the words of Torrance about religion: 'when justification by grace is taken seriously the ground is completely taken away from your feet, and away with it there goes your own "religion" and the "prop-God" that belongs to it'.⁶³ Indeed, 'human religion has no worth or truth in itself. Since in and through Jesus Christ a way really has been opened up into the presence of God for worship in spirit and in truth, all previous religion, or religion outside of Christ, is displaced and relativized, and robbed of any claim to truth in its own self-grounded existence'.⁶⁴

Torrance went on to say that justification discloses to us the fact that religion 'can be the supreme form taken by human sin, and be, as it were, an inverted form of atheism'. Indeed, for Torrance, this 'applies no less to the Christian religion in so far as it becomes autonomous, or indeed secular' and to that extent an attempt by human beings to secure themselves before God. History shows, Torrance tells us, that the Christian religion may become

a form of man's cultural self-expression or the means whereby he seeks to give sanction to a socio-political way of life, and even be the means whereby he seeks to justify and sanctify himself before God. As such [since that is an expression of our self-will] it is called completely into question along with every non-Christian religion through justification by grace alone.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 94.

⁶³ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 74. Torrance means by 'prop-God' the act of using God as an 'external prop' in service of one's own self-justification rather than receiving God as the One who confronts us in judgement and grace.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 68–9.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 69.

Torrance notes the connection between this thinking and Barth's approach, which, because it applied the doctrine of justification, led to an

attack upon nineteenth-century religion and the whole conception of theology as the science of religion, as well as his attack upon all self-centred, self-conscious pietistic religion . . . [religion can become] the chief means by which sin so insinuates itself into human existence that self-understanding becomes man's ultimate concern and the human subject sets himself on the throne of the divine Subject.⁶⁶

Torrance is careful to mention that it is specifically this kind of religion and the God worshipped by this type of religion that collapses in the face of the doctrine of justification.⁶⁷ And so Torrance says we are summoned to 'a religion of grace in which we live out of God and not out of ourselves, in which everything in religion is justified by reference to Jesus Christ because it can have no justification by reference to itself'.⁶⁸

Because Christianity has its truth only in the righteousness of God, any attempt to fabricate a 'Christianity without Christ' can, in Torrance's words, 'only vegetate as a religious but empty form of atheism'.⁶⁹ Accordingly, 'The Christian religion has its justification either in the name of Jesus Christ or not at all. It is certainly abolished when everything is made to pivot upon man's own self-understanding.'⁷⁰ Justification calls for a 'relentless objectivity in which you do not love your neighbor because love is a form of your self-fulfilment'; instead, by thinking from a centre in the incarnate Word, we are, according to Torrance, summoned 'to leave all and follow Him' and so we 'do not pray or worship God in [our] own name . . . but only in the name . . . of Jesus Christ . . . [we] do not baptize [ourselves] but are baptized out of [ourselves] into Christ . . . [we] do not feed upon [ourselves] but feed only upon the Body and Blood of the Lord'.⁷¹

The similarity here between Barth and Torrance is unmistakable. Listen to the words of Barth: 'The justification of the Christian religion is a righteous acquittal. It rests entirely on the righteousness of God. It is not in any way conditioned by the qualities of the Christian religion. It cannot, therefore be understood in any way except as an act of forgiveness of sin'.⁷² Further,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ According to Torrance (ibid.), it was this that Bonhoeffer meant when he called for a 'religionless Christianity'.

⁶⁸ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 70.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 354.

Barth insists that 'in its historical form, as a mode of doctrine, life and order, the Christian religion cannot be the one to which the truth belongs *per se* – not even if that form be the Reformed'.⁷³ There is only one thing that could make the Christian religion true, and that 'one thing is the name of Jesus Christ . . . the truth of the Christian religion is in fact enclosed in the one name of Jesus Christ, and nothing else'.⁷⁴ Indeed, that 'there is a true religion is an event in the act of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. To be more precise, it is an event in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. To be even more precise, it is an event in the existence of the Church and the children of God.'⁷⁵ In Barth's view:

If the Christian religion is the right and true religion, the reason for it does not reside in facts which might point to itself or its own adherents, but in the fact which as the righteousness and the judgment of God confronts it as it does all other religions, characterising and differentiating it and not one of the others as the right and true religion.⁷⁶

This means that if we were to look at the Christian religion in itself and as such, 'we can only say that apart from the clear testimony of the fact of God some other religion might equally well be the right and true one. But once the fact of God is there and its judgment passed, we cannot look at the Christian religion in itself and as such.'⁷⁷

One cannot fail to notice the correspondence between what these two theologians said about the fact that in knowing God there are no concepts that are true in themselves, and their belief that no religion, including the Christian religion, is true in itself. This crucial insight, which directs us away from all self-justifying attempts to control the truth by equating it with something that is historically, psychologically, etymologically, metaphysically or epistemologically available without faith in Christ, demonstrates that for Torrance and Barth discussion of truth is not to be thought of as a kind of vying for superiority of one religion over another. The issue cannot be settled by analysing religion at all, just because it has already been settled by God's own actions for all in Jesus Christ. This is a neuralgic point today, when many insist that, if all salvation is accomplished in the one man Jesus Christ, then all other religions are nil, and that this represents a kind of Christian imperialism or even Christo-fascism! This could only be true, however, if

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 353–4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

grace is equated with our human religiosity. But if grace cannot be detached from the Giver (Jesus himself), then recognising the truth of religion is not grounded in any human judgement at all but in the judgement and grace of God himself. This is why it is so treacherous for those who want to move away from what is often called an 'exclusivist' view of salvation in Christ towards a supposedly more open view: they end up stripping Jesus of his uniqueness in order to provide a more universally acceptable view of salvation in which there are many saviours.

While I could continue to show the similarities between Barth and Torrance as they apply the doctrine of justification to morality, politics and other areas, it is time now to consider some crucial differences between them. It must be stressed that these differences arise only because both theologians sought to be consistent in allowing Christ himself to dictate the truth of what they meant to say, and they did so by making sure that the doctrine of the Trinity was the basic ground and grammar of their theology. Let us begin with Torrance's questions concerning Barth's doctrine of the Trinity.

First area of disagreement: subordination within the Trinity

With regard to the earlier volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, Torrance was critical of what he perceived to be an element of subordinationism in Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. This was linked by Torrance to his view of the *filioque*. Without getting into a detailed development and discussion of their thought on this issue, there does appear to be a genuine divergence of views here because of Torrance's objection to a problem he detected already in the thinking of some of the Cappadocians. That problem concerned their introducing a notion of causality into the inner trinitarian relations, as when Gregory Nyssen (whose thinking Torrance finds helpful in a number of important respects) says that the Holy Spirit 'depends for his being on the Father as Cause, from whom he also proceeds', and that it 'is the identifying mark of his hypostatic nature that he is known after and with the Son, and that he derives his subsistence from the Father'.⁷⁸ Torrance believes that this move shifted attention away from the approach offered by Athanasius (and to some extent by Gregory Nazianzen), which had in its favour that it never even opened the door to the question of whether the Monarchy (or first principle) of the deity should be lodged in the Father or in the whole Trinity. Torrance freely admits that Gregory Nazianzen offered much the same teaching as the other Cappadocians, but he also points out that he is closest to Athanasius 'in affirming the identity of being, movement and will in God', and that 'he was more aware of the difficulties involved' in using causal language about

⁷⁸ Gregory/Basil, Ep. 38.4, cited in Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 238.

the Son and Spirit in relation to God, as when he wrote that he was ‘alarmed at the word “principle” (τὴν ἀρχὴν), lest [he] make him the Principle of inferiors’.⁷⁹ Importantly, Nazianzen also stated quite clearly that the Son’s relation to the Father meant that ‘He has His being from Him beyond all time, and beyond all cause’.⁸⁰

Thus Gregory Nazianzen also stressed that the unity of the Trinity was ‘complete not primarily in the Father but in each Person as well as in all of them’.⁸¹ And that was also a primary insight of Athanasius. Yet, according to Torrance, that very insight became unstable when the Cappadocians ‘cast the internal relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit into the consecutive structure of a causal series or a “chain” of dependence “through the Son”’.⁸² And this eventually led to what Torrance calls a notion of a ‘derived deity’, which then was ascribed to the Son and the Spirit in different ways. Gregory Nyssen, for instance, argued that everything ‘proceeds from the Father as the centre of unity, who is properly called “God” for it is in his *ὑπόστασις* that the *ἀρχή* of Deity is lodged’.⁸³ In that sense the Son and Spirit can be considered as ‘derived from and as causally dependent on the *ὑπόστασις* or *πρόσωπον* of the Father’.⁸⁴ This thinking creates the problem in Torrance’s view, because it is not from the person of the Father that the Son and Spirit derive their being since all three Persons are fully God in a perichoretic relation with each other from all eternity. Therefore it is a mistake to think that the begetting of the Son from the Father or the procession of the Spirit from the Father in some way suggests that they derive their deity from the Father. If that were the case, then some sort of hierarchy and subordinationism would have been introduced into the trinitarian relations, calling into question their essential equality and unity of being. Athanasius’ critical insight that ‘whatever we say of the Father we say of the Son and the Spirit except “Father”’⁸⁵ would be disrupted.

Whereas the term Father was classically used to refer both to the Godhead of God and to the Person of the Father within the Trinity without separating these two senses, Torrance thinks the Cappadocians completely conflated these two senses in which God is Father into one and left the church with

⁷⁹ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 239.

⁸⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, ‘Fourth Theological Oration’, XI, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, trans. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 313. Torrance notes this as well in *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 239.

⁸¹ Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 239.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

the problem 'as to the significance of the Fatherhood of God, and as to the oneness of the Trinity'.⁸⁶ There was an additional difficulty – they also shifted the emphasis from the *homoousios* 'as the key to the identity, intrinsic oneness, and internal relations of the Holy Trinity, to emphasis upon the three diverse *ὑποστάσεις* as united through the *Μοναρχία* of the Father and through having one being in common'.⁸⁷ This is the thinking that led to the perceived need for the *filioque* in the first instance. It is Torrance's view that, if Athanasius' insight that all three persons are fully divine in virtue of the *homoousion*, and yet are distinct by virtue of the order of relations, was followed, then this issue never would have arisen. And he has a point. The major problem here then concerns the fact that, even though the Father comes first in the baptismal formula, for instance, this refers to the order of the personal relations within the Trinity and must not be confused with the being of the Persons. When that confusion occurs, then some sort of subordinationism, modalism and or tritheism is introduced.

With these insights in place, perhaps we can see why Torrance would have objected to Barth's thinking even in CD I/1, when Barth rightly explains that reconciliation follows creation and that there is an order that cannot be reversed, and that this order mirrors the relation of the Father to the Son in the Trinity. In other words, God is first the Father in heaven who creates, and then in a free act, the incarnate Son who reconciles us to himself. There is therefore an order of creation and reconciliation. To this order Barth then claims

there corresponds christologically the order of Father and Son or Father and Word. Jesus Christ as the Reconciler cannot precede the Creator, 'our Father in heaven.' He stands to Him in the irreversible relation of following on Him and from Him as the son follows on the father . . . But again this subordination and sequence cannot imply any distinction of being; it can only signify a distinction in the mode of being . . . Here, then, sonship as well as fatherhood, in and with the *super-* and *subordination* expressed thereby, is to be understood as unrestrictedly true deity.⁸⁸

In light of what was said above, one can see that there is some ambiguity in this explanation of the matter, in the sense that Barth does not clearly indicate that the subordination of Jesus the incarnate Son to the Father is an act of economic condescension for our sakes and not a subordination within the Father/Son relation. In fact he has been and could be read

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 240–1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

⁸⁸ Barth, CD I/1, pp. 413–14; emphasis added.

here to be ascribing subordination to the eternal Father/Son relation.⁸⁹ While Barth goes on to indicate with clarity and precision that, as Son of the Father antecedently, Christ's deity is basic and not derivative in any sense,⁹⁰ this ambiguity seems to be exactly what Torrance was objecting to in the reasoning of the Cappadocians briefly discussed above. To put this in Torrance's words: 'the subjection of Christ to the Father in his incarnate economy as the suffering and obedient Servant cannot be read back into the eternal hypostatic relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity'.⁹¹ Here one must distinguish clearly between the order of the persons within the Trinity and their being – the Father is first in order – but Father, Son and Spirit 'eternally coexist as three fully co-equal Persons in a perichoretic togetherness and in-each-otherness in such a way that, in accordance with the particular aspect of divine revelation and salvation immediately in view, as in the New Testament Scriptures, there may be an appropriate variation in the trinitarian order from that given in Baptism'.⁹² Nonetheless, according to Torrance, 'both Athanasius and Basil counselled the Church to keep to the order of the divine Persons given in Holy Baptism, if only to counter the damaging heresy of Sabellianism'.⁹³

Again, without getting into a full discussion of this issue, it will suffice to note that this problem became even more pronounced in CD IV/1 where Barth overtly read a subordination and obedience back into the immanent Trinity as a presupposition for God's actions within the economy. Barth was no subordinationist of course. But by introducing these notions into the immanent Trinity, he tended to blur the distinction between the processions and missions. Gregory Nazianzen for instance stated that 'in His character of

⁸⁹ It has been observed that Barth 'distinguishes between two forms of subordination within the Trinity'. First, 'Subordination (*Unterordnungsverhältnis*) regarding their deity' (CD I/1, p. 393), which Barth unequivocally rejects and second 'the relation of subordination (*Unterordnungsverhältnis*)' (*ibid.*, p. 413), which Barth favours as 'a matter of the distinction and relationality between the various modes of being of the one essence'. Adam J. Johnson, *God's Being in Reconciliation: The Theological Basis of the Unity and Diversity of the Atonement in the Theology of Karl Barth*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2012), pp. 73–4, n. 37. Johnson concludes by saying that 'Barth reaffirms and more fully explores the nature of this Trinitarian subordination in CD IV/1, 200–10', *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁹⁰ Barth, CD I/1, p. 415.

⁹¹ Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 180. In *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) Torrance says 'the subordination of Christ to the Father in his incarnate and saving economy cannot be read back into the eternal personal relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity' (p. 67).

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

the Word He was neither obedient nor disobedient . . . But, in the character of the Form of a Servant, He condescends to His fellow servants . . . and takes upon Him a strange form, bearing all me and mine in Himself.⁹⁴ Torrance flatly opposed reading back such elements of the economy into the immanent Trinity when he wrote:

the principium of the Father does not import an ontological priority, or some prius aut posterius in God, but has to do only with a 'form of order' (*ratio ordinis*) or 'arrangement' (*dispositio*) of inner trinitarian relations governed by the Father/Son relationship, which in the nature of the case is irreversible, together with the relationship of the Father and the Son to the Spirit who is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son.⁹⁵

This statement stands in stark contrast to Barth's view that while it is a difficult and tricky or elusive thing to speak about an 'obedience that takes place in God himself', still, it is necessary to argue that 'obedience implies an above and a below, a prius [before] and a posterius [after], a superior and a junior and subordinate'.⁹⁶ From Torrance's perspective this thinking illegitimately reads back elements of the economy into the immanent Trinity and thus introduces hierarchy or some sort of subordinationism into the trinitarian relations.

Why does Barth think he must introduce superiority and subordination into God's inner life to make the same point that Torrance makes – namely, that God acts as man in the incarnation so that God suffers both as God and as man for us in order to destroy sin, suffering, evil and death – while thoroughly rejecting any attempt to introduce superiority and subordination into the immanent Trinity? Both theologians firmly rejected the modalist idea that God the Father suffers eternally even while they accepted that there was an element of truth in the erroneous position of Patripassianism.⁹⁷ And Barth also wrote that 'If revelation is to be taken seriously as God's presence, if there is to be a valid belief in revelation, then in no sense can Christ and the Spirit be subordinate hypostases'.⁹⁸ With Barth, Torrance believes that what God is towards us, he is in himself; and he also holds firmly to the principle that there is no

⁹⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, 'Fourth Theological Oration', p. 311.

⁹⁵ Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives*: p. 66; cf. also pp. 28–36, 118–20 and 133.

⁹⁶ Barth, CD IV/1, p. 195.

⁹⁷ See e.g. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 199, and *The Doctrine of Jesus Christ*, pp. 146–7 and 163; Barth, CD IV/2, p. 357. Both theologians agree that 'it is God, really God in Christ, who suffers and bears the sin of the world – that is the particle of truth . . . as Karl Barth once said, in the Patripassian heresy' (*Doctrine of Christ*, p. 167).

⁹⁸ Barth, CD I/1, p. 353; emphasis added.

God behind the back of Jesus Christ.⁹⁹ But, unlike Barth, never once does he attempt to ground these assertions in a superiority and subordination within the immanent Trinity; nor does he claim there is a *prius* or a *posterius* in God's inner being.¹⁰⁰

The answer to this disagreement, I suggest, lies in the fact that Torrance did not confuse the order of the Persons with their being, while at least in this particular instance that is what Barth seems to have done. The implications are far-reaching because, against his own best instincts, Barth is led to believe that 'In His mode of being as the Son He fulfils the divine subordination, just as the Father in His mode of being as the Father fulfils the divine superiority.'¹⁰¹ But that kind of statement simply illustrates the problem I have just indicated: the eternal Persons within the being of God do not need to fulfil anything even according to Barth's own understanding of the Trinity. The only way this statement could make sense is if Barth clearly had stated at this point that what the Son fulfils in his mission is the eternal divine decree to be God for us, and thus to act as our Reconciler. To assert simply that the Son fulfils his subordination and that the Father fulfils his superiority within the immanent Trinity inadvertently implies that God needs some sort of fulfilment, which perhaps then is finally realised in his actions within history for us. But it also introduces a superiority and inferiority into the Trinity, thus compromising the divine unity.

That this remains an important issue even today can be seen in a recent article that attempts to resolve the problem of how to think properly about the divine monarchy by appealing to Torrance and then using Barth's thinking to correct Torrance's. I will just note one problematic conclusion to make my point here. The author writes:

The Father and the Son, together God and servant, origin and consequence, begetting and begotten, majestic and humble, are never apart from one another, and the dynamics of their interrelationship, free,

⁹⁹ See e.g. Torrance, *Karl Barth*, p. 201, and *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ In the rare instance where Torrance speaks of 'a "before" and an "after" in the life of God' he attempts to make sense of the fact that the incarnation was something new even for God. See Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, p. 69, and *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 241; and Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 253–9.

¹⁰¹ Barth, *CD IV/1*, p. 209. Here Barth was inconsistent in distinguishing without separating the processions and missions, the immanent and economic Trinity, while Torrance consistently maintained that 'the incarnation was not a timeless event like the generation of the Son from the Being of the Father, but must be regarded as new even for God, for the Son of God was not eternally Man any more than the Father was eternally Creator'. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 144.

loving and mutual are fulfilled, perfected and brought to completion by the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰²

Here we have an almost perfect illustration of the problem I have discussed. This statement does not clearly distinguish the fact that the persons of the Trinity do not need to be perfected and brought to completion in their eternal being and action because each is fully divine in perichoretic relation to the other; what needs perfection and completion is God's work of salvation within the economy for us. Failing to make this distinction here, the author ends up introducing a kind of subordinationism back into the immanent Trinity in exactly the way Torrance rightly sought to avoid. We are told that 'the Father contributes or lends his personal property of rule and authority to the Godhead'.¹⁰³ But this is exactly the kind of derived notion that a properly conceived doctrine of the Trinity, according to Torrance, would avoid espousing because the power and authority to rule are intrinsic to all three persons of the Trinity and are not on loan from one to another.¹⁰⁴

Second area of disagreement: natural theology

Given the fact that Torrance relentlessly applies the doctrine of justification to his epistemology, it may come as a surprise to discover that he wishes to advance what he calls a 'new' natural theology. It is perhaps in this pursuit that we may see a notable difference between Torrance and Barth.¹⁰⁵ One may also wonder whether or not Torrance himself was entirely consistent with his own theological presuppositions in his search for a 'new' natural theology. Why? Because according to his own thinking, which asserts that even natural theology must function within revelation in order to lead to true understanding of God,¹⁰⁶ he would have to conclude that by nature,

¹⁰² Benjamin Dean, 'Person and Being: Conversation with T.F. Torrance about the Monarchy of God', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 15/1 (Jan. 2013), p. 69; emphasis added.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁰⁴ See Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 175; see also Paul D. Molnar, 'The Obedience of the Son in the Theology of Karl Barth and of Thomas F. Torrance', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 67/1 (2014), pp. 50–69.

¹⁰⁵ For a thorough discussion of Barth and Torrance on natural theology see Paul D. Molnar, 'Natural Theology Revisited: A Comparison of T. F. Torrance and Karl Barth', *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie* 21/1 (2005), pp. 53–83. While Torrance seeks to offer 'a viable reconstruction' of natural theology 'in something like its traditional form' – *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1980), pp. 86–7 – Barth insisted that 'Christian theology has no use at all for the offer of natural theology, however it may be expressed' (CD II/1, p. 168).

¹⁰⁶ See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, pp. 133–4, *Ground and Grammar*, pp. 92–3, and *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), p. 34.

since the fall, we are not only unable to know God accurately but we are alienated from God – we have ‘estranged ourselves from Him by resisting His will and taking the way of self-will’.¹⁰⁷ We try to control God in his revelation by fitting him into what we already know or think we know. As we have already seen, Torrance unequivocally rejects any such possibility in his dogmatic theology. And this is a crucial insight, because for Torrance, as for Barth, none of this can be known apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. God’s coming to us in the incarnation discloses to us that

we need to be reconciled and adapted to that object [God] if we are to have true knowledge of it . . . our possibility of knowing God is grounded not only in His adaptation of Himself to our humanity in the Incarnation, but in the corresponding adaptation of our estranged humanity to the Word and Truth of God in Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁸

This estrangement must be overcome. And it is exactly because God becomes objective to us in Jesus Christ that ‘the latent tension between us is revealed and brought out into the open where we actively resist and oppose Him, and indeed crucify Him’.¹⁰⁹ This finally reveals from our side that our ‘disposition toward God and toward the Grace and Truth He manifests towards us in Jesus Christ’ is one of hostility.¹¹⁰ It is this hostility that God himself suffers and overcomes in reconciling us to himself out of love in the incarnation of the Word. And we therefore can have fellowship with God only as we are united to Christ through his Spirit and only as our minds and hearts are healed and bent back to God by God himself. This is why Torrance speaks of theological knowledge as involving repentant thinking.¹¹¹

Let it be granted that Torrance opposes natural theology as an independent discipline that can lead to knowledge of God, or that natural theology can form a prolegomenon to genuine knowledge of God within revelation, or that we can in any way construct a logical bridge from creation to the Creator. Still, while Torrance claims that Barth agreed with him that natural theology is natural to its object when it is faithful to revelation, there is something of a chasm between their viewpoints here, because Barth was adamant when he said that ‘even if we only lend our little finger to natural theology, there necessarily follows the denial of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. A natural theology which does not strive to be the only master is not a natural

¹⁰⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ See e.g. *Theological Science*, p. 161 and *God and Rationality*, pp. 178ff.

theology'.¹¹² In other words, if, as in Torrance, a proper natural theology really does function exclusively within revelation, then, if we follow what Barth is saying, it is no longer natural theology. So to call it a 'new' natural theology is confusing, since by definition natural theology is the attempt by nature to know God who, because of his transcendence and because of human hostility towards God, can only be known by grace and through faith.

Torrance is right to suggest that Barth did not wish to reject 'the place of a proper rational structure in knowledge of God, such as natural theology strives for'.¹¹³ Yet when Torrance claims that natural theology provides the epistemological 'intra-structure' of our actual knowledge of God from revelation, we get a real glimpse of what he's after.¹¹⁴ But we may also see the problems embedded in his description of this as 'new' natural theology. If one's epistemology is shaped by the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ, then it is not natural theology. It is not a 'new' natural theology either, because while it makes use of the same concepts employed before thinking from within faith, as both Barth and Torrance would agree, it is a knowledge that can only come to us as God himself through his Spirit empowers us to know him.¹¹⁵ And that this happens here and now is, according to both Barth and Torrance, the miracle of justification and sanctification being actualised in us; that is, it is a special, new, direct act of God that simply cannot be explained from the human side but can only be acknowledged and then understood.¹¹⁶

To put this another way, in Barth's perspective our old sinful selves have been done away with in Christ; they haven't simply been adapted to a new object of understanding, as if human beings, who in themselves really are hostile towards God, can be pictured as merely operating with an incomplete form of knowledge and somehow come to realise this incompleteness by coming under what Torrance calls an 'imperious constraint from beyond'.¹¹⁷ Such a constraint, in Torrance's view, suggests that even though created intelligibility does not carry its own ultimate explanation within itself and must point beyond itself for a sufficient explanation, still 'the fact that the

¹¹² Barth, CD II/1, p. 173.

¹¹³ Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, p. 91.

¹¹⁴ See Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), p. 40.

¹¹⁵ See e.g. Barth, CD IV/4, pp. 27–8, and II/1, pp. 70ff.

¹¹⁶ See Barth, CD II/1, p. 207, and Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 26. This is why Torrance speaks of the incarnation and resurrection as ultimates that cannot be verified apart from the grounds they themselves provide.

¹¹⁷ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 54; *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 26.

universe is intrinsically rational means that it is capable of, or open to, rational explanation – from beyond itself.¹¹⁸ And this intelligibility of the universe

suggests, or directs us to, a transcendent ground of rationality as its explanation. It is the objective depth of comprehensibility in the universe that projects our thought beyond it in this way . . . To be inherently reasonable the universe requires a sufficient reason for being what it is as an intelligible whole.¹¹⁹

In the process of reasoning, then, as we come under this imperious constraint from beyond, this ‘would seem to suggest that there is an active agency other than the inherent intelligibility and harmony of the universe, unifying and structuring it, and providing it with its ground of being’.¹²⁰

Drawing an analogy with geometry, Torrance thinks that Euclidean geometry cannot function properly apart from four-dimensional geometry, but it can be bracketed from it.¹²¹ And if it is, it remains ‘incomplete without physics’ because properly understood it must function as the ‘epistemological structure in the heart of physics’.¹²² It is this analogy that misleads Torrance, because by then thinking that his ‘new’ natural theology can be bracketed from revelation (as he says for purposes of clarification¹²³), he obviates his own insistence that we can only think properly about God in relation to the world when our minds are healed through God’s actualisation of reconciliation in us through the Spirit. In other words, any bracketed natural theology is not just incomplete, as Torrance claims,¹²⁴ but is rather a residue of the old natural theology that does not take sin seriously and obscures the need for reconciliation that comes to us in the incarnation as the only possible avenue to knowledge of God. It undercuts Barth’s insistence that natural theology is not benign, but, as the activity of sinners, must be done away with, as sin was done away with in Christ.

Here we might say Barth is more consistent in applying the doctrine of justification to his epistemology, as he insisted that, ‘Quite apart from grace and miracle, has not man always had what is in relation to the being of the world the very “natural” capacity to persuade himself and others of a higher

¹¹⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 52.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹²² Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 33. See also *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 39ff.

¹²³ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 42.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

and divine being? All idols spring from this capacity.¹²⁵ Tellingly, Barth once responded to a question about Karl Heim's thinking in relation to science and philosophy by asking 'is the presupposition true, that at the end of our thoughts we will always meet God? After all, it may be the devil!'¹²⁶ Barth simply would not approve of those elements of natural theology in Torrance's thinking that suggest that the intelligibility of creation represents 'something like the signature of the Creator in the depths of created being',¹²⁷ with the implication that this poses a question that can only be answered from beyond the universe. As we have just seen, this leads Torrance to claim that 'we are aware of coming under an imperious constraint from beyond'.¹²⁸ And this then suggests that 'there is an active agency other than the inherent intelligibility and harmony of the universe . . . providing it with its ground of being'.¹²⁹ Indeed, in Torrance's estimation one could say that the universe seems 'to cry silently for a transcendent agency in its explanation and understanding'.¹³⁰ This thinking is problematic because Torrance himself says the universe is dumb and can only be brought to expression by human beings acting as priests of creation.¹³¹ And such thinking unfortunately encourages exactly the kind of thinking that Torrance and Barth both theoretically reject; that is, the attempt to build a logical bridge from creation to the Creator.

Theoretically, Torrance would agree with Barth, as can be seen in a very interesting article on 'Faith and Philosophy', published in the late 1940s, in which he argues that philosophers have always been in search of objective truth but always fail to achieve that end without faith because faith alone allows philosophers to discover the real solution to the problem of evil and sin.¹³² So for Torrance 'faith is reason behaving itself in terms of the self-revelation of God', such that in faith 'man realises he does not possess the Truth in himself and cannot autonomously give it to himself'.¹³³ Indeed Torrance insists that

¹²⁵ Barth, CD II/1, p. 84. In our discussion of Torrance's view of religion, we saw that he would agree with Barth on this point as he also applies the doctrine of justification. But the question here concerns one of consistency.

¹²⁶ John D. Godsey (ed.), *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1962), p. 20.

¹²⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine and Contingent Order* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), p. 73.

¹²⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, p. 54.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹³¹ Torrance, *God and Rationality*, p. 41. See also *Ground and Grammar*, pp. 5–6.

¹³² See T. F. Torrance, 'Faith and Philosophy', *Hibbert Journal* 47 (Oct. 1948–July 1949), pp. 237–46.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

in the act of receiving it [the Truth] it must reorientate the natural configuration of his reason . . . faith gives man to know that he is actually in the wrong and needs to be put right with the Truth before he can know. That is why the New Testament thinks of faith always in terms of *μετάνοια* (change of mind), and justification, i.e. being put in the right with God or the Truth . . . faith discovers to a man that far from having the condition of Truth in himself, as Socrates thought, in his naturalistic state, a man is at enmity to the Truth and needs to be reconciled to it . . . As he is, man is unable to behave in terms of the Truth, therefore unable to be rational.¹³⁴

I take it that this is what Torrance was after with his ‘new’ natural theology. Given what I have just discussed, however, it seems clear that the main difference between the two theologians on this issue is that Torrance allows a residue of the old natural theology to drive his thought in certain ways (i.e. bracketing natural theology from revelation and claiming that there is something like the signature of the Creator in creation), especially in his attempt to overcome dualism in science and theology, while Barth really will not lift his little finger to support any such thinking. There is a price to pay when one advances even a ‘new’ natural theology which does not clearly and consistently eliminate any possibility of moving from creation to a genuine knowledge of the triune God, even though the intention may be to advance only a theology of nature.

This can be seen very clearly when one observes how Alister McGrath’s attempt to construct a natural theology within the ambit of revelation, while claiming to follow Torrance, falters precisely because of its apologetic intent and goes beyond anything Torrance himself would countenance, especially when McGrath turns to Pannenberg to present a ‘public theology’ that appeals to those with or without faith in the Christian God.¹³⁵ Strangely, McGrath argues that the apologetic value of a ‘legitimate natural theology’ will allow us to see that ‘the Christian evangelist will have a number of “points of contact” for the gospel within the created order’,¹³⁶ and he believes that all acts of understanding are based upon some pre-understanding,¹³⁷ so that ‘the human mind possesses the capacity to recognize this work of creation as such, and to draw at least some reliable conclusions concerning the nature

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 244–5.

¹³⁵ See Alister E. McGrath, *A Scientific Theology*, vol. 1, *Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 264–305.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

and character of God from the created order'.¹³⁸ Torrance firmly rejects all three of these ideas in his theology. But, the residue of the old natural theology embedded in his 'new' natural theology clearly misled McGrath into thinking that Torrance would countenance a move from the created world to the triune God, even though Torrance never attempts such a move in his own dogmatic thinking. This suggests that most of the difficulties evident in any attempt at a 'new' natural theology could perhaps be avoided by consistently maintaining with Torrance that theology and science not only should not be opposed to each other today, but that a proper dogmatic theology should be able to offer a theology of nature that takes proper account of what contemporary scientists discover as the open intelligibility of the universe, as this can be explained ontologically and epistemologically from within faith. In that case, however, one would not refer to this endeavour as a 'new' natural theology but more accurately as a theology of nature.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to see the enormous contributions that Karl Barth and his student and colleague, Thomas F. Torrance, have made to the study of theology, and how important it was to each of them to delve deeply into the issues we have discussed here. Specifically, we have seen how the doctrine of justification shapes every aspect of theology for both men. This has been discussed especially in Barth's and Torrance's thinking about knowledge of God and religion and its practice, with far-ranging implications for the doctrines of reconciliation and sin.

Yet, as we have also seen, each of them argued for certain theological points of view that would not be easily accepted by the other. In discussing the element of subordination in Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, and Torrance's efforts to establish a 'new' natural theology, we have seen areas of disagreement which, while problematic, did not separate them fundamentally because both theologians still sought to allow their views of the various dogmatic loci to be determined by who God is both in himself and for us in his Word and Spirit. Put another way, Torrance's 'new' natural theology never played a significant role in his dogmatic thinking; it functioned mainly in his attempts to discuss the relationship between theology and science. And the problems Torrance identified in Barth's doctrine of the Trinity did not alter the fact that in very many ways it was Barth's trinitarian theology that led Torrance to think that Barth was among the greatest theologians in history. The purpose of noting such disagreements

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

has been to stress the positive purposes they each pursued, despite what we have seen to be some serious theological challenges.

My hope is that the work of modern theologians will build upon the masterful legacies that Barth and Torrance have provided, and thereby enrich our study and our faith in the living Christ.