



# Thomas F. Torrance on the Holy Spirit

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I first encountered the work of Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance twenty years ago as a student pastor in seminary. At the time, my interest was in the areas of theology for which he is perhaps best known and most highly regarded: theological method and the dialogue with natural science. Over the years I have come to appreciate his significance as a trinitarian theologian and his work in the areas of christology and pneumatology.

This essay deals with three areas of Torrance's pneumatology or doctrine of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The first area is Torrance's evangelical and doxological approach to all theology, including pneumatology, which keeps theology closely connected to the life and ministry of the church.

## A PARTICIPATORY EVANGELICAL AND DOXOLOGICAL APPROACH

In Torrance's perspective, theology should never be an abstract intellectual process cut off from the evangelical and doxological life and ministry of the church in the power of the gospel and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Theology, for Tor-

<sup>1</sup>For a more in-depth discussion, see Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001) 211-241. Also see Gary Deddo, "The Holy Spirit in T. F. Torrance's Theology," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, ed. Elmer M. Colyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) 81-114.

*Thomas Torrance offers a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that is not abstract but evangelical and pastoral. In the Holy Spirit, the transcendent God is pleased to be closer to us than we are to ourselves, and all for our salvation.*

rance, is not first and foremost about carefully crafting and accurately organizing the theological symbols of Christian faith, as important as these activities are to the ongoing life and mission of the church. Theology is about *God* in God's redemptive self-revelation and self-communication to us through Jesus Christ and in the Spirit, a God who is inherently knowable and communicable because God is a Trinity in Unity or Being in Communion as God. The trinitarian persons know and are known and share love and life in God's own being and reality as God. All of God's relations with us in creation and redemption arise out of, and reflect the relations of, knowing and loving between the persons of the Trinity within the one being of God. Thus, God provides us not a set of propositions, but rather a trinitarian *self*-revelation and *self*-communication that is personal and transformative.<sup>2</sup>

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For Torrance our knowledge of *this* God cannot but be a participatory knowledge that is evangelical and doxological, for God comes to us through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit in a redemptive and reconciling self-communication that transforms us from ungrateful, unbelieving sinners into daughters and sons of God. We cannot really come to know God in an impersonal way and apart from God's purposes for our lives. We come to know the triune God of Christian faith by entering into a saving and intensely personal relation with the God of love through the grace of Christ in the communion of the Spirit.

This encounter with the living God through the gospel takes place within the day-to-day life and ministry of the church in the Spirit, as the church proclaims the gospel, engages in eucharistic worship, and manifests the love of God in Christ toward others.<sup>3</sup> Here in the fellowship of the church, as we hear the Scriptures read and proclaimed and study their evangelical presentation of Jesus Christ under the transforming presence of the Spirit, we come to know more of God in this informal manner than we can ever bring to theological articulation. Torrance regularly points out that as a child has spontaneously and informally learned more about the physical universe by the age of five than the child will ever be able to fully comprehend even if he or she becomes a brilliant scientist, so we come to know more about the love of God through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit within the fellowship and tradition of the church as the body of Christ than we can ever fully articulate in theological terms.<sup>4</sup>

In Torrance's perspective, theology is not some esoteric form of knowledge

<sup>2</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 13-18, 25-28, and 32-34.

<sup>3</sup>Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 8, 293.

<sup>4</sup>Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 89.

possessed only by an academic guild. Theology, including the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is always simply a rigorous refinement and extension of the knowledge of God communicated in the gospel and realized in the lives of ordinary Christians within the church. This means that theologians ought to be practicing Christians living in evangelical and doxological participation in the realities of the faith. It also means that theology is crucial to ordinary Christians, for it helps clarify and deepen their understanding of, and participation in, the gospel and its triune author. When we examine the doctrine of the Holy Spirit we are simply clarifying and deepening the knowledge of the Spirit mediated through the Scriptures within the church's evangelical and doxological life and ministry.

#### THE MUTUAL MEDIATION AND PERICHORETIC COACTIVITY OF JESUS CHRIST AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Our concern in this section is not with the activity of the Holy Spirit in creation, preservation, and all of human history, but rather with the new more intensely personal and intimate coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. In Torrance's theology, the Holy Spirit comes anew upon the church and all humanity in response to what God the Father has done through the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ our Lord. The new mode of the Spirit's activity at Pentecost is contingent upon and conditioned by the evangelical saving events of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit comes from the Father *through* the incarnate Son and actualizes within us all that God accomplished for us in Christ.

##### *Jesus Christ Mediates the Holy Spirit to Us*

In Torrance's theology, the earthly life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ cannot be understood simply christologically in terms of the activity of the Son of God incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. We have to view Jesus' entire life, ministry, death, and resurrection in pneumatological terms as well.

Without ceasing to be true God from true God, the Son of God became what we human beings are, taking our *actual* sinful, diseased, and alienated humanity upon himself in the incarnation, healing, reconciling, redeeming, and restoring that broken humanity to a right relationship with God throughout his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Torrance sees Jesus Christ incarnating and effecting a "blessed exchange" in which Christ transfers what is ours (our sinful and dying humanity) to himself, while simultaneously transferring what is his (his filial relationship with God, his very life, and especially the gift of the Holy Spirit) to us. A significant part of this "blessed exchange" throughout Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection, Torrance contends, is that "the eternal Spirit of the living God has composed himself, as it were, to dwell with human nature, and human nature has been adapted and become accustomed to receive and bear the same Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 246.

Jesus, our brother, does all of this for us on our behalf and in our place in and through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is born of the Spirit. At his baptism, Jesus was anointed for us with the Spirit without measure, for he received the Holy Spirit into the very humanity Christ assumed in the incarnation. Jesus Christ lived out his entire earthly life and ministry in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. Everything our Lord did, he did in the communion of the Spirit, including his death and resurrection. So it is no isolated or naked Holy Spirit who comes upon the church at Pentecost, but rather the “Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7), the Holy Spirit who was fully engaged in the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord.

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Apart from Christ’s reconciling life and atoning sacrifice on the cross, we could in no way receive or endure the presence of the *Holy Spirit* in our sinful alienated humanity. The immediate and sublime majesty of the Holy One would only overwhelm and consume us in our sin. Torrance calls our attention to the suffering Christ endured in order to mediate the Holy Spirit to us: “[I]t was only at infinite cost that Jesus Christ gained for us the gift of the Holy Spirit, receiving him in all his consuming holiness into the human nature which he took from our fallen and alienated condition.”<sup>6</sup> Only after Christ’s reconciling and redeeming activity in life, death, resurrection, and ascension was completed (completed in and through the presence and power of the Spirit) could the Holy Spirit come upon humanity at Pentecost in the Spirit’s renewing and redeeming power.

#### *The Holy Spirit Mediates Jesus Christ to Us*

Thus, Calvary and Pentecost are profoundly interconnected in Torrance’s theology. Jesus Christ mediates the Spirit to us through his life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit comes upon us in order to mediate Jesus Christ to us. The Spirit comes to us at Pentecost and ever after clothed with Christ and all of Christ’s redemptive activity as our Savior and Lord.

So in Torrance’s perspective, we should not conceive of the coming of the Spirit as some kind of substitute for Christ, as if we have moved from the age of the Son into the age of the Spirit. Rather, the Spirit comes in the name of Christ and unites the church to the risen Christ because of Christ’s prior full identification with us throughout his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The Spirit unites us with Christ so that Christ himself comes to dwell in the church and the church dwells in Christ as his body.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the Holy Spirit is not directly cognoscible or perceivable in the Spirit’s

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 247.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 249-250.

own personal mode of activity as “Spirit.” Rather, the Spirit effaces the Spirit’s self and directs us to the one Word of God, Jesus Christ. The Spirit illumines Christ through the Spirit’s own transparent presence, as light illumines all things even though light is itself invisible. Torrance argues that we should view the Spirit as “the living personal Agent of Christ” who proceeds from the Father through the Son to lead the first disciples and us into the truth, Jesus Christ. The Spirit creates faith and understanding in us so that we can be Christ’s witnesses to the ends of the earth and the end of the age.<sup>8</sup>

So Torrance sees Jesus Christ and all of his benefits (justification, sanctification, the gifts of the Spirit, empowerment for ministry, etc.) flowing to us through union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. This means that the Pauline concept of our being “in Christ” and our “receiving the Holy Spirit” both point to the same evangelical and doxological participation in God’s reconciling and redemptive activity from the love of God the Father through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit. In the same way “Christ living his life through us” (Gal 2:20) and our “being filled with the Spirit” (Eph 5:18) also both indicate our participation in the same identical redemptive reality. We are simply looking at our evangelical and doxological participation in the gospel from its christological and pneumatological dimensions.

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Thus, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is not some afterthought, only loosely connected to the gospel, but belongs to the very center of the saving content of the gospel. For Torrance, at the core of the gospel is the mutual mediation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit throughout God’s *oikonomia* (economy, or the pattern of God’s saving activity in history, especially in Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost) and throughout the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation, or pattern by which God’s salvation or the gospel is realized in our lives in justification, sanctification, etc.). The Holy Spirit is the Lord and giver of life who proceeds from the Father, receives from the Son, sheds God’s love abroad in our lives, and unites us to Christ and through Christ with God the Father in worship and witness.

In fact, in Torrance’s theology we must view this mutual mediation of the Son and the Spirit in terms of *trinitarian perichoretic coactivity*. *Perichoresis* refers to the personal relations between the trinitarian persons who mutually indwell, coinhere, inexist, and wholly contain one another within the one being of God. The doctrine of *perichoresis* articulates the living, dynamic, and personal “eternal movement of Love or the Communion of Love which the Holy Trinity ever is within himself, and

<sup>8</sup>Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 65.

in his active relations toward us.”<sup>9</sup> Perichoretic coactivity signifies the dynamic, personal mutual indwelling and coinhering of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in each other, not only in the one *being* of God, but also in all of their divine *activity*. It is the kind of coactivity described above in the mutual mediation between the Son and the Spirit.

Indeed, it is as impossible to separate the *activities* of the trinitarian persons as it is to separate the *persons* themselves in their dynamic unity, mutual love, coexistence, and “in-each-otherness” in the one being of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit always and everywhere act together in their distinctive activities and incommunicable properties. These activities and properties both unite and distinguish the trinitarian persons as a Trinity in Unity/Unity in Trinity.<sup>10</sup>

All of Christian life and Christian ministry always and everywhere involves Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in perichoretic coactivity and mutual mediation. Torrance’s doctrine of the Holy Spirit greatly deepens our understanding of the profound interrelations between the persons and activities of Christ and the Spirit.

#### THE DEITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND FREEDOM OF THE SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is not simply a divine energy or presence somehow separable from God. Rather, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is the coming of the very God who acts directly and personally and gives God’s very self to us ever anew as God’s beloved children redeemed through Jesus Christ. In the evangelical and doxological life and faith of the early church, reflected in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is everywhere integrally interrelated with the Son and the Father, so that the gospel itself is trinitarian, as we saw in the previous section.

This trinitarian frame of the gospel came to theological articulation in the Nicene Creed through the application of the *homoousion* (oneness of being) first to the incarnate Son (the Son is *of one being* with the Father) and then later to the Holy Spirit. That Jesus Christ is *homoousios* (of one being) with God the Father “affirmed in the strongest way possible that what Jesus Christ is and has done in his life, death and resurrection for the salvation of the world, God is and has done for the salvation of the world.”<sup>11</sup> This point is absolutely crucial pastorally, for it signifies the fact that we need never fear that there is a *Deus absconditus* (a dark inscrutable deity) behind the back of Christ our Lord, for Jesus Christ reveals God to us and is God for us. This is the most basic foundation of our freedom and confidence as Christians *coram deo* (in the presence of God).

However, the affirmation of the *homoousion* (oneness of being) in relation to Jesus Christ could not but raise the same question for the church regarding the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost: is the Holy Spirit *homoousios* with God? If the Spirit is not equally and as fully divine as the Father and the Son, how could the Holy Spirit mediate Christ to us or pour into our hearts and lives the love of God,

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 171.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 194-199.

<sup>11</sup>Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance*, 296.

the love that God is? Here again, the early church felt that the very truth and efficacy of the gospel was at stake, for what the Spirit is and does for the salvation of the world as *the Lord and giver of life*, God is and does for the salvation of the world. In Torrance's words: "*What Jesus Christ does for us and to us, and what the Holy Spirit does in us, is what God himself does for us, to us, and in us.*"<sup>12</sup>

Thus the *homoousion* (oneness of being) applied to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is no speculative theological concept, but a fertile and faithful exegetical distillation of the most basic relations in God's redemptive activity in the gospel. It deepens and refines our understanding of *how* the Triune God accomplishes our salvation and *who* this God is. The *homoousion* enables the church to move from the evangelical Trinity, the self-revelation and self-communication of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the gospel, to the theological or ontological Trinity, to what God is in God's own eternal life and being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In so doing, it affirms in strong terms the full deity of the Spirit.

Torrance argues that "Spirit" is used of God in Scripture and the history of the church in two senses. Spirit is used to designate God's very nature as God. In this sense, Spirit refers to the one being (*ousia*) of God and is applicable to the Father and the Son. Here "Spirit" designates God's eternal, immaterial, invisible, transcendent nature in sheer contrast to the contingent, mutable, material, finite, creaturely character of the created order, including humanity.

Of course, in the relative or specific sense of the term, "Spirit" refers to the person (*hypostasis*) of the Holy Spirit as distinct from the Father and Son, though not separate from them in being or activity. Whenever "Spirit" is used in Scripture in this particular sense, Torrance notes that Spirit is qualified in some way, as in *Holy Spirit, Spirit of Jesus, Spirit of God, the Spirit, etc.*<sup>13</sup>

That the Holy Spirit is God and God is Spirit each stress the ineffable, spiritual, transcendent freedom and glory of God, which we can only approach in a reverent and spiritual manner. It is no coincidence that in the history of the church the Spirit is most frequently designated the *Holy Spirit*.

Here Torrance is especially concerned that we not domesticate the Spirit by identifying the *Holy Spirit* with the human spirit, with humanity's own inward natural vitality, spirituality, or morality. We must not even identify the *Holy Spirit* with an ecclesiastical spirit animating the church. These are both ever-present dangers and temptations in American culture today, with the manifold panentheisms that forge an inner identity between God's Spirit and the human spirit or the spirituality of the creaturely universe.

When we think of the Holy Spirit, we must think of the Spirit first from the perspective of the Spirit's intra-trinitarian relations with the Father and the Son and from the Spirit's coactivity with the Father and the Son in redemptive activity in history. When *this* Holy Spirit comes upon us, and we are *in* the Spirit, Torrance

<sup>12</sup>Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 95. The emphasis is Torrance's own.

<sup>13</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) 206.

understands it in a radically objective sense. The Holy Spirit never indwells us because of some inherent receptivity on our part, but simply out of God's sheer grace. Nor does the Spirit become identified with, and domesticated to, the human spirit, but always remains free and transcendent to us.

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This, however, is the utterly astonishing and breathtaking character of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon us at Pentecost and ever after: *the very Holy Spirit of God, the ineffable, transcendent, and glorious presence of the Holy One*, is pleased to be closer to us than we are to ourselves, and all for our salvation. In Torrance's theology, the Holy Spirit is as profoundly, personally, and intimately present to us and all of creation as in any form of panentheism, but in a way that acknowledges the majesty, objectivity, and freedom of the Spirit, and guards against every cultural and ecclesiastical domestication of the Holy Spirit to the human spirit.

The utterly astonishing character of the coming of the Holy Spirit is that God gives us God's very self without ever surrendering God's majesty and transcendence as God. This is part of God's glorious freedom, for God is free not only to become incarnate and suffer on our behalf and in our place; God is free to impart God's very self to us in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. God is free to be present to us, to realize God's relation to us and our relation to God, and therein bring our lives as God's creatures to their true end in communion with God.<sup>14</sup>

Torrance argues that this is the real intent of what the Nicene theologians meant by *theosis* or *theopoiesis* (becoming like God), not the deification or divinization of our humanity, but simply the immediate personal and ineffable presence of the Holy Spirit, in and through whom we are united to Jesus Christ, and through Christ with the Father, without in any way violating the reality and integrity of our creaturely humanity or compromising God's majesty and freedom. God comes to us through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, reconciling and redeeming us in a way that also personalizes and humanizes us, and imparts a creaturely freedom to us that answers and reflects God's own freedom as God. Through Jesus Christ and in the ineffable and transcendent Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, we come to live and move and have our being in and for God, and for others, brokenly in this life, fully in the next. 

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<sup>14</sup>Torrance, *Christian Doctrine*, 152.