

NEW EXPLORATIONS
IN THEOLOGY



T. F. TORRANCE
AS MISSIONAL
THEOLOGIAN

THE ASCENDED CHRIST AND
THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

JOSEPH H. SHERRARD

FOREWORD BY ALAN TORRANCE



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Dualism and the Doctrine of God

*T. F. TORRANCE'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY
AND THE GOSPEL WITHIN WESTERN CULTURE*



THE *MISSIO DEI* AND THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

In our introduction we noted the recent appearance of a number of arguments for the fundamental importance of the category of mission within the discipline of systematic theology. These attempts are often gathered under a single descriptive heading: *missio Dei*. This term and the conceptual framework attached to it, often (apparently erroneously) traced back to Karl Barth,¹ describes the fundamental conviction that unites all these recent projects. In *Transforming Mission*, a foundational text for both strands of biblical and theological reflection upon mission, David Bosch describes the conviction in this way: “Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. . . . As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation.”²

¹See John G. Flett’s helpful historical study of the term *missio Dei* in chapters three and four of his *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). Flett argues that while Barth is an important contributor to the church’s reflection on its mission, the specific term *missio Dei* was neither used nor defined by Barth.

²David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 390.

Yet recent work has questioned to what extent these proposals were ever properly grounded in the doctrine of God. In his analysis of the genesis of the term *missio Dei* and its historical development, Flett offers a critical assessment of the *missio Dei*'s development and history: "Both the decisive force and fatal flaw of the *missio Dei* rests in its relationship to the doctrine of the Trinity. As propounded to date, the concept is deficiently Trinitarian, and the wide range of its contemporary problems is a direct result of this single lack."³ In Flett's analysis, the relation between various *missio Dei* proposals and the doctrine of God was primarily defensive and apologetic in nature, rather than robustly constructive: "The doctrine of the Trinity plays only a negative role, distancing mission from improper alignments with accidental human authorities. This afforded a needed corrective to the phenomenological approach to mission so compromised by the colonialist endeavor, and established a theological means for distancing a local church from her host culture, that is, identifying her as a missionary community."⁴

This claim is certainly vindicated by a survey of the literature that surrounds the *missio Dei*. While many of the recent proposals that connect God's triune life with the church's practice of mission are quite helpful and elegant, there is a certain thinness to their accounts of the doctrine of God. Let us take as an example of a significant milestone in missional reflection upon the Trinity: the work of Lesslie Newbigin. The value of Newbigin's work on this topic, found first in the pamphlet *Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission* and then later expanded in *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology*, is difficult to overstate. Newbigin, in many ways ahead of the "trinitarian revival" of the second half of the 20th century, cleverly applies elements of basic trinitarian theology to key problems facing the church in the face of secularism's advance. There is little that one can find to criticize here. Yet it should be noted that Newbigin's work is devoid of any deeper reflection on God's immanent life and how the conclusions he draws about the economic activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be understood and coordinated within that light. Bosch's *Transforming Mission* demonstrates a similar reticence to speak about the relation between the claims about God's economic activity and God's immanent triune relations.

³Flett, *Witness of God*, 9.

⁴Flett, *Witness of God*, 76.

We should not lay blame at the feet of a missionary and a missiologist for a failure to apply the tools of systematic theology. But we should nonetheless ask, with Flett, that the claims of *missio Dei* theology be given greater scrutiny as they relate to the church's theological tradition, and that the missional resources already available might be supplemented even more so that possible error is identified and corrected. There have been recent gestures in this direction,⁵ but I would argue that more can be done to draw from the church's tradition. T. F. Torrance is an underutilized resource that can make a significant contribution to this conversation. As we have already discussed, Torrance's life was informed and shaped by missional concerns, and these concerns in turn shaped his work. In this chapter, we will make explicit the deep resonances between Torrance's thought and the concerns of *missio Dei* theology, bringing the two into fruitful conversation.

Our objective in this chapter is therefore two pronged. First, we will demonstrate how Torrance's doctrine of the Trinity is informed by missional concerns. The content of Torrance's trinitarian theology is supplied by theologians from the catholic tradition of the church such as Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea. But Torrance's appropriation of these sources is shaped by his distinctly modern concerns about the intelligibility of the gospel in the West and his concern for the church's mission. Second, we will also demonstrate how Torrance's doctrine of the Trinity is an important, constructive voice in the articulation of the church's participation in Christ's reconciling work.

THE SHAPING OF TORRANCE'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

In 1980, Torrance published what would be the first of three books on the Trinity which were in many ways the culmination of his theological career. This book, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, is at first glance a somewhat curious approach to the doctrine of the Trinity. The first four of the six chapters of Torrance's book have comparatively little to do with the doctrine of the Trinity, but are instead a survey of the intellectual conditions of science

⁵See for example Ross Hastings, *Missional God, Missional Church: Hope for Re-Evangelizing the West* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 80-118, 243-267; Jason Sexton, "A Confessing Trinitarian Theology for Today's Mission," in *Advancing Trinitarian Theology: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 171-189. See also the examination and critique of Flett, *Witness of God*, below.

and theology in the West. Throughout these chapters, Torrance is particularly attentive to what he calls in the preface to the second edition “the two great dualist cosmologies of the past, the Ptolemaic and Copernican-Newtonian, and to the non-dualist cosmological outlook arising out of the radical change in the basic rationality of science which we owe to Einstein.”⁶ In the final two chapters, however, the discussion pivots to the nature of Christian theology and to the doctrine of the Trinity. Far from a digression, these final chapters are in fact integral to Torrance’s understanding of his attempt in the book “to clarify the trinitarian structure of Christian theology.”⁷ Torrance moves naturally from an analysis of the dualistic intellectual conditions of Western culture to a discussion of the Trinity.

The progression of Torrance’s argument in *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* gives us a view into the concerns that shape his doctrine of the Trinity. Torrance’s trinitarian theology was not developed in an intellectual vacuum, but rather emerges in coordination with other concerns—in particular, the problem of dualism. Recent studies of Torrance’s theology have helpfully demonstrated the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in his thought⁸ as well as the nature of his handling of the patristic sources that provide the substance of Torrance’s doctrine of God.⁹ But in their inattention to the concerns that accompany this doctrine, a more complete understanding of Torrance’s trinitarian theology has been occluded. In what follows, we will first demonstrate the significance of the problem of dualism for Torrance’s theology and then follow how this influence shapes his doctrine of the Trinity.

Dualism. The theological career of T. F. Torrance was worked out in the context of the collapse of Christendom in Europe, and Torrance committed his considerable theological ability to a winsome and formidable presentation of the Christian faith within these social and intellectual conditions. In contrast to contemporaries with similar fundamental concerns—for example, Lesslie Newbigin—Torrance focused his response not on the

⁶Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology: Consonance Between Theology and Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), vii.

⁷Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, vii.

⁸Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

⁹Jason Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

advance of secularism but instead on the intellectual conditions of Western life and the dualistic philosophy he perceived to be a cause of its problems.

One would be hard pressed to find a work of Torrance's that did not contain an explicit or implicit reference to the concept of dualism, and this is particularly evident whenever Torrance deals with the doctrine of God. In the aforementioned *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, Torrance states his overwhelming concern with "dualist modes of thought that drive a wedge between Christ and God, and correspondingly between the message of Christ and Christ himself."¹⁰ In *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Torrance draws attention to the problem of "the menace of the dualist structure of thought."¹¹ And in *The Trinitarian Faith*, Torrance describes how "the biblical teaching about God's providential and saving activity in history, and the Christian message of incarnation and redemption in space and time, had to struggle with the underlying assumptions of a dualist outlook upon God and the world in order to be heard aright and take root."¹² Thus in each of the volumes on the Trinity that come at the climax of Torrance's theological career we see evidence of his concern with the problem of dualism.

Torrance's focus on dualism clearly springs from his concern about the mission of the church. In a speech which Torrance gave to the Scottish Church Theology Society (later titled "Preaching Christ Today"), Torrance gives what he calls "a plea to return to Christ-centered teaching and preaching."¹³ Speaking out of his concern with the plight of the church in the West, Torrance identifies dualism as one of the most significant contemporary obstacles to the proclamation of the gospel: "We are still in the midst of this struggle to maintain the supreme truth of the unbroken relation in being and act between Jesus Christ and God the Father against insidious dualist or dichotomous ways of thinking."¹⁴ An oft-recounted story from Torrance's experience as a WWII army chaplain further demonstrates the extent to which this concern shapes his thinking on the

¹⁰Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 41.

¹¹Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2016), 130.

¹²Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2016), 47-48.

¹³Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), viii.

¹⁴Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 21.

church's proclamation of the gospel. In the aftermath of a battle in Italy, Torrance came across a mortally wounded nineteen-year-old soldier. As he lay dying, the young man asked Torrance, "Is God like Jesus?" Reflecting upon the encounter, Torrance wrote, "I assured him that he was—the only God that there is, the God who had come to us in Jesus, shown his face to us, and poured out his love to us as our Savior."¹⁵ This event, and another like it from his time as a pastor in Aberdeen, was formative for Torrance: "When I thought about that afterwards, I asked myself, what has been happening, what has come in between Jesus Christ and God to obscure God from people?"¹⁶ Torrance's answer? "The insidious effect of dualism."¹⁷

The overall shape of Torrance's theology is polemically, or perhaps better put evangelically, directed at the problem of dualism in the theological and scientific culture of the West. But despite the importance of the term for Torrance's theology and its ubiquity within his corpus, it can at times be difficult to identify precisely how Torrance utilizes the term *dualism*. We can begin with a definition that Torrance approved, which is found in the endnotes to *Belief in Science and in Christian Life*. There, Torrance provides this description:

Dualism: the division of reality into two incompatible spheres of being. This may be cosmological, in the dualism between the sensible and an intelligible realm, neither of which can be reduced to the other. It may also be epistemological, in which the empirical and theoretical aspects of reality are separated from one another, thereby giving rise to the extremes of empiricism and rationalism. It may also be anthropological, in a dualism between the mind and body, in which a physical and mental substance are conceived as either interacting with one another or as running a parallel course without affecting one another.¹⁸

These realms may either be clearly separated or perhaps touching upon one another in a limited sense. But whether they are "adjacent to one another but with a clear gap between them" or "touching one another

¹⁵Quoted in Alister E. McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 74.

¹⁶Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 56.

¹⁷Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 56.

¹⁸Torrance, ed., *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 136.

tangentially,”¹⁹ they are, according to Torrance, fundamentally separate and therefore dualist.

Other interpreters offer differing definitions of Torrance’s understanding of dualism, all focusing upon the cosmological and epistemological aspects of the above description. In his survey of Torrance’s theology, Elmer Colyer describes dualism as “the division of reality into two incompatible or independent domains” and identifies two main species of dualism—epistemological and cosmological.²⁰ Titus Chung proposes that when Torrance uses dualism in a theological context, he indicates “an internalized mode of perceiving reality into two opposing poles of the Creator and the creation, negating any real relation between them and rendering God’s revelation and mediation in Christ null.”²¹ In our discussion of Torrance’s understanding of dualism, we will follow Colyer in his identification of epistemological and cosmological dualism as of particular significance to Torrance.²² As we shall see, these two kinds of dualism inform and form important aspects of Torrance’s dogmatic project.

In order to understand the formative influence of dualism in Torrance’s thought, we require more than a definition of dualism but rather an understanding of how dualism functions and how the catholic church has responded to its challenge throughout the ages. And that sense can be best gained by looking to Torrance’s historical theology. In so doing, we will not focus on the accuracy of Torrance’s reconstruction of the theologies of Athanasius, Calvin, and others. Recent work by scholars such as Lewis Ayres and Richard Muller²³ raise questions about the adequacy of Torrance’s work

¹⁹Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 51.

²⁰Elmer M. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance: Understanding His Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 58.

²¹Titus Chung, *Thomas Torrance’s Mediations and Revelation* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2011), 41.

²²Torrance’s concern about anthropological dualism, as demonstrated in his own definition of dualism, is worth noting. This concern, however, isn’t fully developed in his writings and are tangential to our argument here.

²³Lewis Ayres’s *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) demonstrates just how much more complicated the history that surrounded Athanasius and other pro-Nicene theologians is than what Torrance describes. See in particular pp. 430-435 for a summary of the twists and turns of this period of church history. Muller’s criticisms of the interpretation of the school of Calvin, that includes Torrance, appears throughout his work. But for an example of his most direct engagement, see “The Barth Legacy: New Athanasius or Origen Redivivus? A Response to T. F. Torrance,” *The Thomist* 54.4 (1990): 673-704.

qua historical scholarship. But as his historical theology reveals the mind of Torrance himself, it provides a window into precisely what dangers Torrance saw in dualism and how elements of the doctrine of the Trinity serve to redress these dangers and thereby provide safe passage for the church. In his historical theology, Torrance identifies three key moments where the church overcame the problems of a dualist epistemological, and cosmological, framework: the Arian controversy, the Protestant Reformation, and the theology of Karl Barth. This historical theology is not original to Torrance. In his 1934 essay "Revelation,"²⁴ Karl Barth proposes the same narration of church history. Almost certainly Torrance read this essay and it provided the foundation for his own work. But in Torrance's writing we find the idea developed beyond what is seen in Barth's initial suggestion, and with an eye trained specifically on the concept of dualism.

Key moment one: the insight of Athanasius. To have even the most casual acquaintance with the theology of T. F. Torrance is to know the significance of the heroes and villains of the Arian controversy. Torrance's most in-depth account of this chapter of church history is seen in *The Trinitarian Faith*, where we find his analysis of the fourth century debates of the early church. In this account, Torrance identifies the conflict primarily as what took place when "the preaching and teaching of the Gospel came up against a radical dualism of body and mind that pervaded every aspect of Graeco-Roman civilisation."²⁵ This dualism finds its genesis first in Plato, who endorsed a fundamental separation between the sensible world and the intelligible world. That dichotomy is compounded by Aristotle, whom Torrance (following his philosopher friend and fellow Scotsman Donald MacKinnon) believed offered a basically similar cosmology, with abstract forms "pre-scinded" from the concrete expression of matter.²⁶ When the apostolic and post-apostolic church proclaimed its good news within this dualist cosmology, friction was both inevitable and immediate. The Greco-Roman philosophical understanding of the universe presumed "to shut God out of

²⁴Karl Barth, *God in Action: Theological Addresses*, trans. Elmer George Homrighausen and Karl J. Ernst (New York: Round Table Press, 1936), 3-19.

²⁵Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47.

²⁶Torrance, "Theological Realism," in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193n1.

the world of empirical actuality in space and time,²⁷ while the Christian gospel appeared to be stating the immediateness of God's presence within it, in the person of Jesus Christ. It was this basic conflict over the appropriateness of a dualistic epistemological framework that set the terms of the debate between Arius and Athanasius.

The figure of Athanasius has a special place of distinction in Torrance's theology. Not only the subject of various chapters and articles, he is also named by Torrance as his favorite theologian.²⁸ It is an admiration that is based in large part upon Athanasius's role in the Arian controversy and his articulation of what is the most important concept in the church's contention with the problem of dualism. In his essay "The Hermeneutics of Athanasius,"²⁹ Torrance gives an account of the forces present in Athanasius's intellectual and spiritual formation in order to give some sense of the influences that helped him accomplish that feat. With the city of Alexandria and its vibrant theological and philosophical tradition providing the backdrop, Torrance suggests three influences that provided Athanasius with the tools necessary for his later achievement. The first was the influence of Philo and his use of the *logos*, a marriage of biblical language with contemporary philosophy. The second was the apostolic tradition, which was traced back from the bishop's seat to St. Mark, and was reinforced by the presence of a number of Jewish Christians who had fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the Second Temple.³⁰ And finally there was the influence of Alexandria, the site of a growing scientific community that did not proceed deductively from preestablished axioms but instead allowed the object of study to determine the questioning and ultimate conclusions. Torrance sees this particular influence evident in Athanasius's willingness to allow the language he used to describe God to be shaped by God himself.³¹

²⁷Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 47.

²⁸Myk Habets, *Theology in Transposition: A Constructive Appraisal of T. F. Torrance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 13n32.

²⁹Torrance, "The Hermeneutics of Athanasius," in *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 229-288.

³⁰Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," in *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays Towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 215-216.

³¹Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," 216-217.

The effect of these influences is evident in Athanasius's departure from contemporary traditions that subordinate the identity of the Son to the doctrine of the Logos.³² According to Torrance, Philo's understanding of the Logos had the effect of sealing off God's being from the sensible world, placing knowledge of the Logos only on the intelligible side of the separation. This "Philonic and Neo-Platonic" understanding of God meant that in theological speech, one was "forced to speak of God as finally beyond being and knowing."³³ Thus while Alexandrian Logos theology attempted to address the problem of dualism, it did so by reinforcing its basic assumptions. Athanasius reclaimed the biblical conception of a God who had real relation to his creation in and through its created structures. Rather than accepting this dualistic framework, Athanasius made the term Logos malleable so that the revelation of Jesus Christ exerted its own inner logic upon this term and thus transformed the word into something it had previously not been understood to mean, simultaneously breaking down this dualistic framework.

Athanasius went beyond Philo and even Origen in his new description of the Logos. Whereas previously the concept of the Logos indicated something that was detached from God, an external construct that in some sense mediated his relation to the world, Athanasius coined the term *enousious logos*. In this innovation within the Alexandrian tradition, the Logos is something that is of God's own being. In the article "Theological Realism," Torrance comments on this theological construct, "This word . . . is not some 'word' detached from God, but *enousious logos*, who eternally inheres in the being of God even when incarnate and addressed to us on earth and in time."³⁴ In describing the Logos in such a way, Athanasius made it clear that the relation between God and the Logos was an internal relation which offered real epistemic access to who God is. The importance of this reformulation of the Logos is all the more important in view of the debate with the Arians in which Athanasius found himself locked. It is in the context of that controversy that Athanasius's Logos-theology helped forge his own articulation of the *homoousios*.

³²Torrance, "Hermeneutics of Athanasius," 229

³³Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," 182.

³⁴Torrance, "Theological Realism," 188.

The Arian controversy. The Arian controversy is popularly described as a battle between two opposing figures that was resolved at a single ecumenical council. Recent scholarship³⁵ has complicated and even undone those tidy categories that Torrance himself shared, but it is nonetheless helpful to provide a brief description of his understanding of the conflict in order to summarize what amounts to his “theology of retrieval.” Arius, a presbyter in Athanasius’s own home of Alexandria, became embroiled in a dispute with the bishop of Alexandria, Alexander. Arius sensed in Alexander’s theology confusion about the status of Jesus the Son of God in his relation to the Father. He perceived that Alexander failed to distinguish properly the difference in status between the Father and the Son. As tension around this disagreement began to build and other churches, bishops, and eventually Emperor Constantine became involved, the nature of the disagreement became more and more clear. At the Council of Nicaea, a creed was forged in order to settle the dispute, and it included the crucial qualifier *homoousion* to describe the Father’s relation to the Son.

There are two things that must be noted about Torrance’s understanding of the Arian controversy. First, Torrance believes that the controversy was fundamentally an epistemological conflict between the message of the gospel and an intellectual framework that precluded the implications of this message. In Torrance’s narration, Arius operated within an epistemological and cosmological dualism that came from Hellenistic philosophy and culture. Because of this dualistic framework, it was impossible to penetrate the separation between the sensible and intelligible realms. Because of this, the ascription of the title “Son of God” to Jesus could indicate many things with respect to Jesus’ status, but it could never indicate a relation of real

³⁵Ayres’s landmark study, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, has corrected many misconceptions about the nature of the Arian controversy. Some of Ayres’s conclusions—Athanasius’s attribution of beliefs to Arius that he did not hold and the inconclusive nature of the Nicene Council in 325 CE among others—can be viewed as a helpful corrective to aspects of Torrance’s account without affecting the fundamental insights Torrance draws from the controversy. Indeed, Torrance appears to have an implicit awareness of one of Ayres’s central claims: that the debate centered around the relation between God and the Word, rather than whether Jesus was divine or human. See Torrance’s account of the “internal relation” of the Father and Son below. For responses to Ayres, including his handling of Athanasius, see the reviews by Paul Molnar, “Was Barth a Pro-Nicene Theologian? Reflections on Nicaea and its Legacy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64 (2011): 347-359; and Khaled Anatolios, “Yes and No: Reflections on Lewis Ayres, Nicaea and its Legacy,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100.2 (2007): 153-158.

identity; “Son” did not mean “fully God.” It was also impossible for God to be active in the created world: “Bringing to the Gospel an epistemological and cosmological dualism derived from Hellenic culture, Arius and his followers had taught that while Christ may be called ‘the Son of God,’ a sharp line must be drawn between his being and nature and that of the Father. . . . As ontologically separate from God Jesus Christ is finally no more than a transient image of the eternal and unknowable God.”³⁶

Second, Torrance understands that the decisions one makes about this epistemological conflict are crucial to the nature of theological speech. If the Son is merely on the creature side of the Creator/creature distinction, then nothing can be said with confidence about the nature of God. This is a point that Torrance makes in multiple places in his corpus and understands to be particularly important for modern theology after Friedrich Schleiermacher: “This way of understanding Christ, not from a oneness with God in his own eternal being and nature, and thus uncontrolled by any objective reality in God himself, meant that the Arians could only think of him in detachable symbols or myths governed by their own subjective modes of thought.”³⁷ Torrance’s description of the Arian controversy is strikingly similar to his narration of the problems of modern theology: “The radical detachment or disjunction between God and this world, and the ultimate separation between the Father and his own Logos, not only meant that the Arians were thrown back upon themselves, obsessed with their own self-understanding and humanly thought-up ideas, but implied a doctrine of God as ultimately irrational or deprived of his own Logos.”³⁸

It is in this light that Torrance views Athanasius’s achievement in the exposition of the *homoousion*. Athanasius places his reformulated Alexandrian Logos theology within the context of the *homoousion* of the Nicene Creed, which means that the knowledge we have of Jesus Christ is internal to who God is, not external. In Athanasius’s own words, “And so, since they are one, and the Godhead itself is one, the same things are said of the Son, which are said of the Father.”³⁹ Because the Logos who became incarnate is the *enousios*

³⁶Torrance, “The Legacy of Karl Barth,” in *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 167-168.

³⁷Torrance, “Legacy of Karl Barth,” 168.

³⁸Torrance, “Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology,” 225.

³⁹*Contra Arianos* III.4. Quoted in “Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology,” 227.

logos who is of God's being, through Jesus Christ real knowledge of God is possible. The epistemological dualism between God and humanity is not impenetrable: God can and does make himself known to his creation. And because this happened in Jesus Christ, genuine theological speech is possible: "Through the word made flesh, we human beings with our created minds are enabled . . . to know and think of God in such a way that our knowledge and thought of him repose upon his divine reality."⁴⁰ It is on this backdrop of epistemological dualism that Torrance understands the significance of Athanasius's accomplishment in the Arian controversy.

By understanding Torrance's reading of this moment in church history, we can understand how his historical theology shapes his own constructive trinitarian proposal. The evangelical passion that always attends the *homoousion* in his writings and centrality of the concept for his doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in the convictions that Torrance gleaned first from the Arian controversy. Thus this statement from the chapter "Three Persons, One Being" in *The Christian Doctrine of God* is representative of his wider trinitarian reflection: "The pivotal issue here, as we have already seen in our discussion of the *homoousion*, is the identity . . . between God and the revelation of himself and of his activity in Jesus Christ and what he really is in himself in his own ever-living and dynamic Being."⁴¹ With respect to his doctrine of God, the *homoousion* is almost always for Torrance "the pivotal issue."

This guiding conviction allows us to understand the shape of Torrance's doctrine of God. When speaking of God's internal life, Torrance's instinct is always to demonstrate the unity among the persons of the Trinity. The central terms that Torrance uses in his doctrine of God, therefore, all point to that end: *homoousion*, perichoresis, and onto-relations.⁴² The distinctions between processions and missions that can be found in Augustine,⁴³

⁴⁰Torrance, "Athanasius: A Study in the Foundations of Classical Theology," 239.

⁴¹Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 143.

⁴²See, for instance, Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 155-159. For a discussion of Torrance's concept of "onto-relations," see Gary W. Deddo, "The Importance of the Personal in the Onto-relational Theology of Thomas F. Torrance," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Thomas F. Torrance*, ed. Paul D. Molnar and Myk Habets (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 143-160.

⁴³Augustine, *The Trinity*, 2nd ed., trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2017).

Thomas,⁴⁴ and others are less useful to him apart from his ecumenical work with the Orthodox Church around the filioque. As we shall demonstrate, for Torrance the driving concern of his doctrine of God is to demonstrate that God is truly known in the person of the Son.

Key moment two: The reclamation of the homoousios in the Reformation.

Torrance's narration of the victory of Nicaea, its interpretation and defense by Athanasius, and the later confirmation of its decisions in Constantinople in the year 381, are a high watermark in his history of doctrine. But the tides of history go out as well as come in, and in Torrance's account of church history it was followed by a period of time where some aspects of the truth were lost as the philosophical procrustean bed of dualism malformed theology once again. It is not the case that the church returned to precisely the same Arian heresies that had already been dealt with definitively at Nicaea. Instead, aspects of Athanasius's insights were obscured as the church's history continued to unfold. It would not be until the time of the Reformation that those important and fundamental truths would be fully recovered. And Torrance once again gives the conflict with dualism a central place in this history. Over and against the "impersonal philosophical theology of the mediaeval schoolmen,"⁴⁵ Reformation theology would emphasize a real encounter with the living Word, who is met in Jesus Christ and the witness to him in the Scriptures.

The Reformation and the "homoousion of reconciliation." When Torrance published his 1964 article on "The Roman Doctrine of Grace," he saw signs of promise in the Roman Catholic Church's embrace of biblical theology. But while he is quite willing to speak hopefully of the prospects of the Roman Catholic Church, he is equally critical of the tradition's past. In particular, Torrance is concerned with how dualism has affected the church's understanding of reconciliation and how those old struggles resurface again.

Torrance sees in the Augustinian heritage of the Roman Catholic Church a latent dualism that has deleterious effects on the concept of grace. In his estimation, Augustine operated with the same assumption of a radical,

⁴⁴See the excellent description and analysis in Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press), especially chapters four and fifteen.

⁴⁵Torrance, "The Roman Doctrine of Grace and Reformed Theology," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 181.

dualistic separation between the *mundus intelligibilis* and the *mundus unintelligibilis* that is latent in the Neoplatonism of his thought.⁴⁶ Standing on the shoulders of the Nicene and Constantinopolitan Councils, Augustine was too sophisticated of a theologian to return to an Arian position. And yet there were still traces of the same kind of dualism that afflicted the Arians. Thus while Augustine could straightforwardly affirm aspects of Nicene christology, Torrance sees a dualism in his thought that creates a separation between the Word and God “in terms of a distinction between the ‘internal mental Word,’ or ‘vision’ in the Mind of God, which as Word is ‘formable but not yet formed,’ and ‘the external Word’ which assumed finite form as Word in the proper sense.”⁴⁷ “Even St Augustine could echo the view of Origen that the historical Christ and the historical Gospel were ‘shadow’ compared to the ‘reality’ of the eternal Truth in God.”⁴⁸

Having unknowingly imported this unnecessary radical dualism in his theology, Augustine nonetheless understood that he must address its implications. According to Torrance, this is done through his doctrine of the church, where Augustine ingeniously established the church on both sides of the dualistic divide. The church functions as the bridge between the sensible world of passing things and the eternal world of divine realities. The church, therefore, is the realm where Christians must seek divine grace: “As the mystical Body of Christ the Church is full of grace and truth, indwelt by the Spirit of Christ and illumined by his eternal Light and therefore informed with his Mind. It is therefore within the Church where the fulness of divine grace and truth dwells that we may be enlightened and saved.”⁴⁹

As Roman Catholic tradition continued to develop, the identification of the doctrine of the church with the doctrine of grace also continued. This development unfolded in two complementary ways. On the one hand, the church was understood to be continuous with the incarnation as the place

⁴⁶The thesis, popular in Torrance’s day, that Neoplatonism exercised a controlling and distorting influence on Augustine’s theology has since been overturned. For a concise account of the complicated relationship between Augustine and the Platonism of his day, see Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 13-20.

⁴⁷Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” in *Karl Barth, Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, 222.

⁴⁸Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 175.

⁴⁹Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 175.

where nature and grace converge.⁵⁰ This localized the work of grace in the institution of the church in such a way that grace was understood as a “power actualized and embodied in the structured life of the Church on earth.”⁵¹ On the other hand, the church’s place within Roman culture meant that there was a preoccupation with controlling the “ways and means” of grace: “Grace came to be considered within the orbit of ways and means, as something that required to be dispensed and controlled through institutional structures.”⁵²

According to Torrance, it was this kind of understanding of grace and of church that the Reformers confronted during the Reformation. While Torrance praises Thomas Aquinas and affirms the evangelical nature of his theology as it sought to remain faithful to the gospel within the terms he was given to work with, the dualist Trojan horse had already entered the gates.⁵³ Thus at the time of the Reformation, the Roman church’s doctrine of grace could be said to have made grace “something to be rationally defined and administered under the control of the Church.”⁵⁴ All of this is to be traced to the epistemological and cosmological dualism that was imported through Augustine’s theology and which found expression in his doctrine of the Church.

The presence of this dualism created friction with the Reformers as they began to rearticulate the doctrine of grace. The Reformers sensed a gap between the church’s description and administration of grace and the doctrine of God. Augustine had attempted to close this gap by way of his ecclesiology, but the fundamental separation remained. According to Torrance, the Reformers deployed the same insight that was grasped at Nicaea, the *homoousion* as the concept that overcomes the problem of dualism: “It is the same teaching [the *homoousion*], according to Reformed theology, that must be applied to the grace of God, for what God communicates to us in his grace is none other than himself. The Gift and the Giver are one.”⁵⁵ By rejecting the presuppositions of dualism and reinserting the concept of *homoousion* into theology in the doctrine of grace, the proper relation was

⁵⁰Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 178.

⁵¹Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 176.

⁵²Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 172.

⁵³Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 176.

⁵⁴Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 179.

⁵⁵Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 182.

restored. What Athanasius had grasped in the fourth century was laid hold of by the Reformers in the sixteenth century.

In the same way that detaching the identity of Jesus Christ the Son from God damages and distorts the evangelical message, detaching the *work* of the Son from God has a deleterious effect upon grace. The rejection of this dualism is one of the great legacies of the teaching of the Reformers. Thus, Torrance writes,

Grace is not something that can be detached from God and made to inhere in creaturely being as ‘created grace’; nor is it something that can be proliferated in many forms; nor is it something that we can have more or less of, as if grace could be construed in quantitative terms. . . . Grace is whole and indivisible because it is identical with the personal self-giving of God to us in his Son. It is identical with Jesus.⁵⁶

Thus, at this second key juncture in church history, it is the specter of dualism that is confronted.

Again, we see just how significant the *homoousion* is for Torrance’s dogmatic project and thus why it has such a central place in his doctrine of God. In establishing the proper relation between persons of the Trinity, the *homoousion* secures not only the epistemic foundations of revelation but also the effectiveness of the saving work of Christ. Torrance understands the Reformation to be the moment in history that reminds the church of this truth: “We believe that if the Lord God himself had not actually come among us and become one with us and acted for us in the life and work of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of the Love of God, the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Communion of the Holy Spirit, would be utterly wanting of any divine validity in its message of reconciliation, salvation, and redemption.”⁵⁷

Key moment three: Karl Barth as the “theologian of the homoousion.” In Torrance’s analysis the controversies of the fourth century and of the sixteenth century are at root the same: “The struggle of Nicaea and the Reformation was for the same fundamental truth: what God is toward us in Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit he is inherently and eternally in himself as the one living God.”⁵⁸ As the previous analysis of Torrance’s argument

⁵⁶Torrance, “Roman Doctrine of Grace,” 182-83.

⁵⁷Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 142.

⁵⁸Torrance, “Legacy of Karl Barth,” 166.

demonstrates, at both junctures in church history this insight came into conflict and eventually overcame the problem of dualism. But according to Torrance, it was not long before dualism returned and once again infiltrated the theology of the Western church. It was the great achievement of Torrance's *Doktorvater* and mentor, Karl Barth, to articulate the gospel in such a way that it was not imprisoned within the strictures of dualism.

In Torrance's view, one of the great achievements of Karl Barth's theology is his synthesis of the two great insights of Nicaea and the Reformation. Barth's theological and philosophical context was dominated by the same dualistic framework that the Arians had assumed and that was also latent in Western Augustinianism. Philosophically, Descartes, Hume, and Kant furthered the presupposition of the radical separation between the sensible and intelligible worlds, though each had their own strategy for resolving (or even simply accepting) the gap between the two. In Protestant theology, what resulted were two distinct and seemingly opposing traditions—liberal Neo-Protestantism and Protestant Scholasticism. The former attempted to bridge the dualist divide by proposing a correspondence between the divine and the “subjective structures in man's religious self-consciousness.”⁵⁹ Having assumed that the rationality of the Word of God could not cross the sensible-intelligible chasm, the Neo-Protestant tradition tried to preserve God's communication by locating it in the religious self-understanding of the individual or the community. The Protestant scholastics, on the other hand, responded to this epistemological quandary by resorting to a nominalist system, described by Torrance as “a closed system of doctrinal propositions formalized in such a way that they were equated with the divine truths they were intended to express.”⁶⁰

As Torrance narrates Barth's theology in his collection of essays, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, Barth found in his own work of historical theology the resources to address this radical dualism. As he investigated the Nicene and Reformation controversies, Barth recognized the same theological principle in play: “Twice over, [Barth] claimed, the Church had been compelled to contend for the supreme truth that revelation

⁵⁹Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 224.

⁶⁰Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 225. For a rejoinder to the thesis that Protestant scholasticism was inherently nominalist, see Richard A. Muller, “Not Scotist: Understandings of Being, Univocity, and Analogy in Early-Modern Reformed Thought,” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 14.2 (2012): 127-150.

properly understood is God himself, for just as God is of and through himself, so he may be known only on the free ground of his own being, out of and through himself alone.”⁶¹ What Barth then did was take the key insights of the *homoousion* that were worked out in these two controversies and unite them for his own dogmatic project. For Torrance, the *homoousion* is a central hermeneutic for understanding the *Church Dogmatics*. He writes,

This is how, I believe, his *Church Dogmatics* must be assessed: in respect of his determination to think through the bearing upon our understanding of divine revelation and grace of the supreme truth that the incarnate and risen Jesus Christ is one in being and act with God the Father, and thus to draw out the far-reaching implications of the inner logic of the Gospel brought to light in the formulation of the *homoousion* for the whole range of the Church’s preaching and teaching.⁶²

At this third key juncture in Torrance’s reading of church history, the *homoousion* is the key to confronting the invidious influence of dualism.

Torrance’s reading of church history provides a fascinating and revealing window into the central concerns that drive his theology and, thus, his doctrine of God. Torrance understood the perennial enemy of the church to be a dualist epistemology and cosmology that seals off humanity from God, preventing real knowledge of the triune Lord and distancing humanity from his saving action in Jesus Christ. While the story that Torrance tells of Western theology is not without significant problems,⁶³ it is effective in

⁶¹Torrance, “Legacy of Karl Barth,” 165.

⁶²Torrance, “Legacy of Karl Barth,” 166. This quote can be understood as a kind of summary *in nuce* of Torrance’s own positive doctrine of God. The integral aspects are all present: the reference to the term *homoousion*, the centrality of Act and Being, and the application of these concepts to the particular doctrinal loci of revelation and reconciliation.

⁶³As we have already noted and shall see later on in this work, the scholarship of Ayres, Muller and others presents a significant challenge to Torrance’s reading of Nicaea, Augustine, and Calvin. The more one presses into the details of church history, the more readily one can see that the insights and lessons of each moment are to varying degrees more complicated than Torrance describes. (It is also telling that Barth himself moved beyond the initial insights of the 1934 essay “Revelation,” that apparently inspired Torrance’s work, and on to a more nuanced engagement with the tradition.) There are many things that can be said about Torrance’s historical theology in light of more recent scholarship, but it is important to note that his body of work represents one of the first English-speaking Protestant attempts at a theology of retrieval. If we cannot ultimately agree with some of Torrance’s conclusions, we can also note with gratitude both his attempt and the way in which he has helped to establish a movement in the English-speaking world that continues to bear fruit.

helping us to understand Torrance himself. And in so doing, we can now understand and describe the evangelical impetus of his theology and the resulting implications for Torrance's doctrine of God.

As we turn to that task, we should note how Torrance's historical theology has introduced the key insight that shapes his doctrine of God. According to Torrance, Nicaea, the Protestant Reformation, and the theology of Karl Barth each demonstrate the centrality of the *homoousion* for the church's proclamation of the gospel in light of the challenge of dualism. We will not be surprised to find that this reality has a determinative role in Torrance's own constructive doctrine of God.

TORRANCE'S DOCTRINE OF GOD: A RESPONSE TO DUALISM

The homoousion and the Holy Spirit. Torrance believes the *homoousion* was such a crucial concept because of his conviction that it was essential for the church's understanding and proclamation of the gospel in light of the perennial issue of dualism. His decision to make *homoousion* the central descriptive term for the relation of the Father and the Son reflects how significant Torrance understands the dangers of dualism to be. And the explanatory power of the *homoousion* leads him to utilize it elsewhere in his doctrine of God. Before considering Torrance's doctrine of God in full, we must first understand how the *homoousion* is deployed in the Holy Spirit's relation to the Father and the Son.

As we might expect, Torrance's argument about the use of the *homoousion* with respect to the Holy Spirit runs through his historical theology. In Torrance's narration of the doctrinal controversies of the fourth century, the identity and status of the Son was closely related to the identity and status of the Spirit. Those theologians who argued for a Nicene understanding of the Son's identity made the same argument for the Spirit.⁶⁴ Athanasius, again prominent for Torrance, laid the foundational arguments: "Athanasius developed the doctrine of the Spirit from the essential relation to the one God and his undivided coactivity with the Father and the Son, and specifically from his inherence in the being of the eternal Son."⁶⁵ Torrance understands this coactivity to be the driving force behind the early church's eventual

⁶⁴Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 200.

⁶⁵Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 201.

acknowledgement of the Holy Spirit as a coequal in divinity with the Father and the Son. In the same way that acknowledging God's being and act in the person of Jesus leads to the confession of the *homoousion*, so it becomes necessary to make the same argument with the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ "It became clear that the truth and effectiveness of the Gospel rest not only on the oneness in being and agency between the incarnate Son and God the Father but on the oneness in being and agency between the Spirit and both the Son and the Father."⁶⁷

The importance of this relationship of coactivity of the Spirit with the Father and the Son is demonstrated in the epistemological link between the Spirit and the Son. In Athanasius's letters *Ad Serapionem*, a seminal text in Torrance's account of the development of the doctrine, his pneumatology unfolds from an understanding that knowledge of the Son is only possible in and through the Holy Spirit. To know the Son in his true identity as the Son who reveals the Father, the work of the Spirit is required. Thus, Torrance states, "It is only in the Spirit that we may . . . know the Son, and know that he is antecedently and eternally in himself in God what he is toward us in revelation and redemption."⁶⁸

This conclusion about the Spirit's coactivity with the Son (and thus the Father) means that the Spirit is understood first and foremost in his *internal relations* with the Father and the Son: "Precisely because the Spirit *is* the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Athanasius developed the doctrine of the Spirit from his essential relation to the one God and his undivided coactivity with the Father and the Son, and specifically from his inherence in the being of the eternal Son."⁶⁹ For Torrance this Athanasian insight is foundational and becomes a significant part of his own pneumatological proposal. In this way Torrance is following Athanasius as he applies the concept of *homoousios* to the Holy Spirit.

It is important to note that Torrance's argument for the *homoousion* of the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son contains many of the same elements

⁶⁶Once the Spirit has been implicated in the Son's work and has been presented as completing that work, then all the arguments that have been used to link Father and Son can be used of the Spirit. Athanasius' concern here is a fundamentally soteriological one." Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 212.

⁶⁷Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 200.

⁶⁸Torrance, "Spiritus Creator: A Consideration of the Teaching of St Athanasius and St Basil," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 215.

⁶⁹Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 201.

of his argument for the *homoousion* of the Son with the Father. The fourth century Fathers and the sixteenth century Reformers are given a prominent place (though the argument for the latter operates on a more general level than that which he provides for the former).⁷⁰ Perhaps most significantly, Torrance's description of the Holy Spirit is once again accompanied by concerns about dualism. Here, Torrance lays blame for confusion about the identity of the Spirit at the feet of Origen, who held to an "axiomatic assumption of the *chorismos* [separation] between the intelligible and sensible worlds."⁷¹ Nicaea's rejection of this cosmology was accompanied by "the very different biblical distinction between the Creator and the creature, and the freedom of the Creator to be present and active in his creation."⁷² The church's eventual articulation of the person of the Holy Spirit involved in part a rejection of a cosmology at odds with Scripture.

The dualistic concerns that inform Torrance's pneumatology are emphatically epistemological. In a way similar to the *homoousion* between the Father and the Son, the *homoousion* of the Holy Spirit serves to secure trustworthy knowledge of God: "It is . . . only through staunch support of the *homoousion* . . . that there can be prevented a dissolution of the work of Christ into timeless events, and a dissolution of the operation of the Spirit into timeless processes."⁷³ Torrance is concerned that the pneumatology can all too easily be enlisted into institutional or "religious" projects: "There has been a marked failure to distinguish the Holy Spirit from the spirit of the Church or the spirit of religious man, that is, from the self-consciousness of the Church or the self-consciousness of the believer."⁷⁴ Thus throughout his work Torrance understands the *homoousion* of the Holy Spirit to give the church the objectivity it requires in its knowledge of God. This objectivity is grounded in the person of Jesus Christ, who, in distinction from the Spirit, comes to humanity "within the conditions and structures of our earthly existence and knowledge."⁷⁵ The Spirit, as *homoousion* with the Father and

⁷⁰"The extent to which the Reformation had to recall the Western Church to the centrality of Christ is the measure of its departure from the *homoousion* of the Spirit." Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 230.

⁷¹Torrance, "*Spiritus Creator*," 211.

⁷²Torrance, "*Spiritus Creator*," 211.

⁷³Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 230.

⁷⁴Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 231.

⁷⁵Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 203.

the Son, operates in unity with the revelation of Jesus Christ to secure knowledge of God: "It is on that ground, the same ground where we know the Father through the Son, that we may also know the Spirit, for it is in the Spirit sent to us by the Father through the Son that knowledge of God is mediated and actualised within us."⁷⁶

Torrance is at pains to distinguish this objectivity from a different kind that might attempt to work within the constraints of dualism: "This is not a divine objectivity that stands behind some radical dichotomy between the objectifiable and the non-objectifiable, between the given and the non-given (in relation to which we can only have a feeling of absolute dependence)."⁷⁷ Rather, this is an objectivity determined by the *homoousion* of the Son Jesus Christ with the Father, "an objectivity that meets us in the particularity of Jesus Christ where God has really given himself to us within the structures of our intra-mundane and intra-personal relationships."⁷⁸ And by properly understanding the Spirit as *homoousion* with the Father and the Son, "we are not allowed to confound the objective reality of God with our own subjective states, or to resolve it away as the symbolic counterpart of our human concerns."⁷⁹ Thus again we see the way Torrance's use of the *homoousion*, in connection with his pneumatology, mitigates the problem of dualism.

TORRANCE'S DOCTRINE OF GOD: THEOLOGICAL, REALISTIC OBJECTIVITY

A brief summary of Torrance's doctrine of God is helpful at this juncture in our engagement with his thought. First, and as we have already demonstrated, *homoousion* is the central, controlling concept of God's triune life. This is not only true for the relation between the Father and the Son, but indeed for each person of the Trinity in their relations with one another. The *homoousion* is so crucial because it reflects the logic of Scripture's witness about the identity of the Son and the reality of salvation. Thus Torrance writes about the concept, "It expressed the fact that what God is 'toward us' and 'in the midst of us' in and through the Word made flesh, he really is in

⁷⁶Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 203.

⁷⁷Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 234.

⁷⁸Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 234.

⁷⁹Torrance, "Relevance of the Doctrine of the Spirit," 235.

himself; that he is in the internal relations of his transcendent being the very same Father, Son and Holy Spirit that he is in his revealing and saving activity in time and space toward mankind.”⁸⁰ The importance of this term relativizes the use of other classical language about God’s life such as procession, generation, or spiration. It is the *homoousion*, more than any other, that provides the framework for understanding God’s immanent relations and his triunity.

Two other terms—one classical and the other a neologism—fill out the language of Torrance’s doctrine of God. *Perichoresis* is the first concept, and in many ways, it is Torrance’s way of applying the insights of the *homoousion* to God’s triune identity. Whereas *homoousion* indicates the identity and distinction between two persons of the Trinity, *perichoresis* demonstrates the Trinity’s unity and the distinctions of the Father, Son and Spirit. Thus Torrance defines *perichoresis* as “the truth that no divine Person is he [*sic*] who he truly is, even in his distinctive otherness, apart from relation to the other two in their mutual containing or interpenetrating of one another in such a way that each Person is in himself whole God of whole God.”⁸¹ *Perichoresis* demonstrates how the persons of the Trinity can neither be isolated from one another nor can they be collapsed into one another: “While it helps to clarify the circularity of our belief in the Trinity through belief in his Unity, and our belief in his Unity through belief in his Trinity, it does not dissolve the distinctions between the three divine Persons unipersonally into the one Being of God.”⁸² That same identity-in-distinction balance that is preserved by the *homoousion* is also preserved by *perichoresis*.

The second additional concept that is central to Torrance’s doctrine of God is *onto-relation*. For Torrance, onto-relation is a term that indicates what it means for us to speak of God’s *hypostases* and his *ousia*. In brief, onto-relations means that “the relations between the divine persons belong to what they are as Persons—they are constitutive onto-relations.”⁸³ When we speak of God’s being, our language should be shaped by the reality of God’s triune life and not abstracted through the improper

⁸⁰Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 130.

⁸¹Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 174.

⁸²Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 175.

⁸³Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 157.

application of otherwise helpful philosophical language. For Torrance this means that God's inner life "is to be understood as essentially *personal, dynamic, and relational Being*."⁸⁴ These two terms—*perichoresis* and onto-relations—provide helpful context for understanding how Torrance's doctrine of God is understood in its entirety. But at the same time, it is clear that it is the *homoousion* that is the keystone concept for his trinitarian theology.

Torrance's use of *homoousion* as a foundational concept in his doctrine of God has a number of implications for understanding the shape of his thought. Stephen R. Holmes has suggested that for Torrance the concept functions similarly to how the doctrine of divine simplicity did for the Cappadocians.⁸⁵ Jason Radcliff proposes that Torrance uses the *homoousion* as a way of reconstructing the Solus Christus of the Reformation.⁸⁶ And Paul Molnar states that in Torrance's theology, "the *homoousion* was seen as the main point of Christian orthodoxy and godliness because . . . to reject it meant to reject the message of salvation which was the content of the Gospel message."⁸⁷ Each of these statements gives a helpful perspective on how the concept functions within Torrance's thought. But within the argument that we have made about Torrance's prevailing concern with dualism and its downstream effect on the shape of his theology, another argument can be made about the importance of the *homoousion* in Torrance's thought. In order to present this argument, we must examine one of the formative influences on Torrance's thought: Karl Barth.

Torrance had already encountered Barth's theology while studying at New College. Upon entering New College, his mother gave him a copy of Barth's *Credo*.⁸⁸ And he soon was a part of a conflict in the Edinburgh University Christian Union which centered on the difference between Barth's

⁸⁴Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

⁸⁵Stephen R. Holmes, "Response: In Praise of Being Criticized," in *The Holy Trinity Revisited: Essays in Response to Stephen R. Holmes*, ed. Thomas A. Noble and Jason S. Sexton (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015), 152. Holmes, who admits that he is "painting in very broad brushstrokes," does not expand upon this proposal in great detail, though he has hesitations about putting the *homoousion* to this kind of theological work.

⁸⁶Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*, 67.

⁸⁷Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity*, 58.

⁸⁸McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 25.

theology and traditional Calvinism.⁸⁹ Most significantly, Torrance encountered Barth through H. R. Mackintosh, the chair of systematic theology at New College, who as early as 1926 began to give attention to Barth and was increasingly influenced by his theology until his death in 1936.⁹⁰ It is largely because of Mackintosh's influence that Torrance chose to study with Barth in Basel after graduating from New College.

When Torrance arrived in Basel to begin his studies, Barth was lecturing on the material that would make up II/1 of the *Church Dogmatics*.⁹¹ The influence of this material, which contains some of the central aspects of Barth's doctrine of God, is evident in Torrance's thought. Torrance later described his encounter with this material, stating, "I still believe that the *Gotteslehre* of *Church Dogmatics* II/1 and 2 is the high point of Barth's *Dogmatics*. What I have in mind is the epistemology of II/1, which must be read along with Barth's work on St. Anselm . . . ; in particular, his doctrine of God as Being-in-his-Act and Act-in-his-Being."⁹² In this statement we find the fundamental conceptual framework that Torrance would integrate into his own theological project, and indeed into his understanding of the *homousion*: the concepts of God's act and being.

In the material covered in II/1, Barth explores the grounds of theology's knowledge of God. Here he is concerned to distinguish proper knowledge of God from knowledge that is abstract or determined by alien elements that have been smuggled into the theological task. Thus, Barth states, "The act of God's revelation . . . carries with it the fact that man, as a sinner who of himself can only take wrong roads, is called back from all his own attempts to answer the question of true being, and is bound to the answer to the question given by God Himself."⁹³ The epistemological quandary of humanity's sinfulness and the limits of creaturely reason drive Barth to articulate a unique formulation of knowledge of God: "Barth has no confidence in the theological strategy which handles the term 'God' as if it could be understood without reference to a particular identity

⁸⁹McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 25.

⁹⁰McGrath, *Thomas F. Torrance*, 32-33.

⁹¹Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," in *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 54.

⁹²Torrance, "My Interaction with Karl Barth," 54.

⁹³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 262.

(that enacted in the drama of creation and reconciliation summed up in Jesus Christ). What theology seeks to unearth is thus the sheer ‘this-ness,’ the irreducible specificity, of the one indicated in the Christian confession.”⁹⁴

Barth’s answer is to state that God’s being can only be known in his acts: “Every statement of what God is, and explanation of how God is, must always state and explain what and who He is in His act and decision.”⁹⁵ By understanding God’s being in and through the concrete act as understood in Scripture and centrally through the person of Jesus Christ, Barth secures theological knowledge upon its only trustworthy foundation. In so doing, Barth’s aim is to exclude distorting criteria: “We are dealing with the being of God: but with regard to the being of God, the word ‘event’ or ‘act’ is final, and cannot be surpassed.”⁹⁶ “If we keep this clearly in mind, if all our thoughts are always grasped by God’s action, because in it we have to do with God’s being, we may be sure that they cannot err, and become either openly or secretly thoughts about ourselves.”⁹⁷

This methodological decision by Barth, often called “actualism” or “actualistic ontology,”⁹⁸ had a profound impact upon Torrance, and the influence is evident in his theology. Significantly, Torrance understands Barth to be dealing here with the same insight that is contained in the *homoousion* as understood in Torrance’s narration of the Nicene and Reformation periods. According to Torrance,

Barth showed . . . the credal *homoousios to Patri* clearly implied a oneness in agency as well as in being between Jesus Christ and God the Father. It was the genius of Karl Barth that he should combine in one both forms of this evangelical principle, thus bringing together the Greek Patristic emphasis upon

⁹⁴John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2004), 83.

⁹⁵Barth, *CD II/1*, 272.

⁹⁶Barth, *CD II/1*, 263.

⁹⁷Barth, *CD II/1*, 272.

⁹⁸For further explanation, see the description given by George Hunsinger in *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30–32. Alan Torrance notes some of the dangers in utilizing this term as a description of Barth’s thought: “It is not Barth’s concern or intention to seek to universalise an actualistic concept of being. His emphasis on the *a posteriori* nature theological articulation precludes this kind of ontological agenda.” Alan Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 32n57.

the being of God in his saving acts and the Reformation emphasis upon the act of God in his being revealed to us through Christ and in the Spirit.⁹⁹

Such a statement may only give us Torrance's sometimes quite idiosyncratic understanding of the Fathers, the Reformers, and Barth¹⁰⁰ (rather than the Fathers, the Reformers, or perhaps even Barth themselves), but in so doing it is quite helpful in understanding Torrance himself.

For Torrance the *homoousion*, as understood through the doctrinal matrix supplied by Barth's actualism, gives the church the resources to speak with confidence and energy about God and his saving action. John Webster notes how Barth's argument in *Church Dogmatics* II/1 provides a robust "theological realism" for Torrance so that "attention to ontology provides a means of resisting subjective reduction to affective or moral discourse."¹⁰¹ While agreeing with the thrust of Webster's argument, we might substitute "dualistic modes of thought that separate God from creation" as the more fundamental object of Torrance's resistance. We would also add the term "objective" to the otherwise fitting description of Torrance's project.¹⁰² It is nonetheless true that Torrance's doctrine of God—particularly his use of the *homoousion* and the concepts of act and being—is constructed in order to emphasize a particular account of knowledge about God and his activity that is in broad agreement with Webster's suggestion.¹⁰³ Thus Torrance says,

⁹⁹Torrance, "Legacy of Karl Barth," 175. This is a statement Torrance repeats at various points. See "My Interaction with Karl Barth," 54.

¹⁰⁰See, for example, the criticisms of Richard A. Muller in "The Barth Legacy: New Athanasius or Origen Redivivus? A Response to T. F. Torrance," *The Thomist* 54.4 (1990): 673-704.

¹⁰¹John Webster, translator's introduction to *God's Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, by Eberhard Jüngel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), xx.

¹⁰²Katherine Sonderegger has noted the limited usefulness of describing the break of Barth, Torrance, et al. from liberal Protestantism as simply a move toward mere "realism":

The problem, often misdiagnosed in criticism of modern theology, is not irrealism—not certainly in the aim or structure of Schleiermacher-inspired theology. There truly is a key, and it in fact unlocks the door. . . . Barth was well aware of this fact, and his brusque rejection of Emil Brunner's denunciation of Schleiermacher as a 'mystic' is built on that insight. God is real, and really given in pious awareness, just as the world is, really given to and knit up in the interplay of freedom and dependence that human creatures bring to the net of nature and its relations. The problem that Barth spies in all this is that the Reality of God is measured by and conformed to the strictures of creaturely awareness. (Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 117).

¹⁰³Torrance's account of realism takes on a different shape than that of Barth's. For Torrance the "givenness" of the knowledge of God is constrained by his adaptation of Michael Polanyi and the *kataphysic* nature of proper knowledge, but in a way that emphasizes the objectivity of realism more emphatically than in Barth. Barth, in contrast, was more guarded about the extent to

The doctrine of the *homoousion* was as decisive as it was revolutionary: it expressed the evangelical truth that what God is toward us and has freely done for us in his love and grace, and continues to do in the midst of us through His Word and Spirit, he really is in himself, and that he really is in the internal relations and personal properties of his transcendent Being as the Holy Trinity the very same Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that he is in his revealing and saving activity in time and space toward mankind, and ever will be.¹⁰⁴

Trustworthy knowledge of God is available, and it is available in the act of God toward humanity, understood in the *homoousion*.

This objectively realist impulse in Torrance's theology helps us to understand the place of one of the more striking original elements in Torrance's theology: the stratified structure of knowledge. In two of his later works on the doctrine of the Trinity, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*¹⁰⁵ and *The Christian Doctrine of God*, Torrance introduces into Christian theology this concept, which was first used by Albert Einstein in his essay "Physics and Reality." In his appropriation of Einstein, Torrance delineates three interconnected levels of knowledge: the evangelical/doxological level, the theological level and the higher theological and scientific level.

The initial level of knowledge is the "evangelical and doxological level," "the level of our day-to-day worship and meeting with God in response to the proclamation of the Gospel and the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures within the fellowship of the Church."¹⁰⁶ At this level, the focus is on direct apprehension and intuitive appropriation in the light of the Church's kerygma and *didache*. All theological knowledge begins from this common foundation, a foundation Torrance identifies with the encounter with God that takes place in the worshipping life of the local church. In this "incipient

which realist knowledge could be understood to be "given" and thus spoke of the need for an idealist element in his account of human knowing in a way that Torrance did not. See Barth's "Fate and Idea in Theology," in *The Way of Theology in Karl Barth: Essays and Comments*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 25-61. (I am grateful to Martin Westerholm for pointing out this article and for his assistance in understanding this difference between Torrance and Barth.) Bruce McCormack gives an excellent summary of these issues in "Beyond Nonfoundational and Postmodern Readings of Barth: Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology," in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 109-113, 157-165.

¹⁰⁴Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 130.

¹⁰⁵Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 156-173.

¹⁰⁶Torrance, *Ground and Grammar of Theology*, 156.

theology,” Torrance says that, “Our minds apprehend this evangelical Trinity intuitively, and as a whole, without engaging in analytical or logical process of thought, which we are constrained though faith in Christ to relate to the Mystery of God’s inmost Life and Being.”¹⁰⁷

As this first level of experience is reflected upon, the second level of knowledge, the “theological level,” is formed. Torrance identifies this level of reflection with the economic Trinity. In light of reflection upon the first level of knowledge, intellectual tools are developed to form appropriate patterns of thought and speech that accurately describe the first level. For Christian theology, this means the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and a coherent articulation of his works *ad extra*: “As we direct our inquiries into the field of evangelical and doxological experience, we reflect on the fact that God reveals his one Being to us as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, in a three-fold *self*-giving in which revelatory and ontological factors are indivisibly integrated.”¹⁰⁸ At this level, Torrance says, “we are concerned with the Act of God in his Being,” that is to say, the economic Trinity.¹⁰⁹

The *homoousion* is unsurprisingly, again, crucial in Torrance’s articulation of how the movement from the first to the second level of theological knowledge is possible. While the term is, like other theological concepts, alien to the biblical idiom, it is not an abstraction but a faithful representation of Scripture’s meaning: “The *homoousios* here represents a faithful distillation of the fundamental sense of the New Testament Scriptures in many statements about the unique relation between the incarnate Son and the Father in order to describe it in as definite and precise a sense as possible.”¹¹⁰ More importantly, this movement does not leave behind the first level of “evangelical and doxological” knowledge, but instead moves deeper into it. In his description of Torrance’s understanding of the stratification of knowledge, Benjamin Meyers writes, “We have therefore moved not away from the level of concrete experience but deeper into that level, by uncovering the patterns and structures which gave rise to our experience in the first place.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 89.

¹⁰⁸Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 92.

¹⁰⁹Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 157.

¹¹⁰Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 94.

¹¹¹Benjamin Meyers, “The Stratification of Knowledge in the Thought of T. F. Torrance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61.1 (2008): 9.

There is finally the third level of knowledge, the “higher theological level.” The movement to this level from the second level is a movement from our reflection upon the economic Trinity to our reflection upon the immanent Trinity. Here the theologian moves “from the level of economic trinitarian relations in all that God is toward us in his self-revealing and self-giving activity to the level in which we discern the trinitarian relations immanent in God himself which lie behind, and are the ground of the relations of, the Economic Trinity.”¹¹² Once again the *homoousion* is of great significance, though in a different way than as was evident in the movement from the first to the second level. Here the concept allows our knowledge of God to be pressed beyond the level of the economic Trinity to the immanent Trinity in a way that affirms the fundamental continuity between the two (“the Being of God in His Act”). But in moving to this third level, the *homoousion* requires a “critical edge” in order that human speech about God’s immanent life will be appropriately reverent and reticent, a point which we will explore in greater detail below. At this level, the *homoousion* “stands for the basic insight deriving from God’s self-communication to us, that what God is toward us in his saving economic activity in space and time through Christ and the Holy Spirit, he is antecedently and inherently in himself.”¹¹³

The force of Torrance’s understanding of the stratified nature of knowledge, funded in large part by the concept of the *homoousion* and the theological categories of act and being, is to make clear the way in which “evangelical and doxological” knowledge is in fact a knowledge of who God is in his immanent life: “This means that our evangelical experience of God in Christ is not somehow truncated so that it finally falls short of God, but is grounded in the very Being of God himself; it means that our knowing of God is not somehow refracted or turned back on itself in its ultimate reference to God, but that it actually terminates on the Reality of God.”¹¹⁴ Again Torrance demonstrates the significance of theological objective realism for his theology, as well as the way in which the crucial elements of his thought work toward this end.

Epistemological and soteriological realism. Before we draw Torrance’s doctrine of God into a comparison with another recent attempt to utilize

¹¹²Torrance, *Ground and Grammar*, 158.

¹¹³Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 99.

¹¹⁴Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 99.

resources drawn from the doctrine of God—in order to address contemporary issues related to the church’s proclamation of the gospel and mission to the world—there is more to be said about this theological objective realism. We examined at the beginning of this chapter how, as in the case of the Arian and Reformation controversies and in the theology of Karl Barth, Torrance understands the church to have recovered key insights of the *homoousion* with respect to revelation and reconciliation (or, as elsewhere in Torrance’s parlance, “being” and “act” respectively). In connection to his discussion of these moments in the church’s life and also at other junctions in his thought, Torrance details aspects of his theological objective realism as it unfolds in his understanding of the knowledge of God and of salvation. To these descriptions we now turn.

Internal knowledge of God’s being. Torrance’s realist description of the knowledge of God is composed of an emphatic affirmation of our knowledge of who God is *in se* with an element of apophaticism. The emphasis of his account is clearly with the former: in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, humanity has been given real knowledge of God. This is unsurprising in light of Torrance’s understanding of the stratified nature of theological knowledge and the way that allows the knower to move freely and transparently from our experience of God in worship and prayer to an understanding of who God is in his immanent life. Here as elsewhere, the *homoousion* provides the fundamental insight: “The *homoousios to Patri* was revolutionary and decisive: it expressed the fact that what God is ‘toward us’ and ‘in the midst of us’ in and through the Word made flesh, he really is in Himself; that he is in the internal relations of his transcendent being the very same Father, Son and Holy Spirit that he is in his revealing and saving activity in time and space toward mankind.”¹¹⁵

Understanding the *homoousion* as the indicator of “*oneness in being* between the incarnate Son and the Father”¹¹⁶ provides Torrance an objective point of reference that establishes an epistemological realism about the immanent divine life: “The knowledge which God thus gives us of himself in his incarnate Son is from a centre in his own being, where all our human understanding and conceiving of him may be governed and tested in

¹¹⁵Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 130 (emphasis original).

¹¹⁶Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 49.

accordance with his divine nature.”¹¹⁷ Because of this, Torrance can describe the life of the immanent Trinity as more fundamental than what we might say about God is in his economic activity. For instance, Torrance makes a great deal of the statement of Athanasius that, “it would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works and call him Unoriginate.”¹¹⁸ Jesus Christ reveals who God is *in se*. The kind of knowledge that stops with God’s economic activity only gives “external” knowledge of God: “When we seek to know God from his created works . . . we do not know him as Father, but only of him as Maker, and are no better off than the Greeks.”¹¹⁹ If in our attempt to understand who God is we operate only on the creature side of the Creator/creature distinction, we will find that there is an arbitrary character to our speech about him. Without an anchor in God’s own nature, knowledge of God is ultimately a speculative venture. But because the *homoousion* is understood to describe the presence of the incarnate Son on the created side of the distinction, then this meaningful and real divine presence generates the possibility of true speech about the nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Torrance counterbalances these claims to objectivity and knowledge of God in his internal relations with an element of apophaticism. While Torrance can see no other place to ground knowledge of God except in the person of the incarnate Son Jesus Christ, he is at the same time cognizant of the dangers associated with advancing this argument. Because of this, Torrance states that in the movement from the economic Trinity to the immanent Trinity (and in the aforementioned movement from the second level of knowledge to the third level of knowledge), there is “a need for a real measure of *apophatic theology* grounded in the *homoousion*.”¹²⁰ This apophaticism is not to be understood as privileging the negative over the positive, for that would ultimately undo Torrance’s understanding of the achievement of the *homoousion*: “Apophatic knowledge of that kind implies that the economic condescension of God in revelation and salvation is only of a temporary or transient nature, one ‘by way of reserve’ or ‘economy’ and

¹¹⁷Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 52.

¹¹⁸Quoted in Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 76.

¹¹⁹Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 52.

¹²⁰Torrance, “Toward an Ecumenical Consensus on the Trinity,” in *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 85.

not one identical finally with the abiding reality of God.”¹²¹ Rather, this apophaticism is instead rooted in what Torrance calls the “positive ineffability” of God. Torrance describes this as the “positive ineffability of God who in making himself known through the Son and in the Spirit reveals that he infinitely transcends the grasp of our minds.”¹²²

Thus, Torrance understands the *homoousion* to broker knowledge of God in such a way that a proper distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity is maintained:

The *homoousion* is found to have a critical significance in regard to what may and what may not be read back from God’s revealing and saving activity in history to what he is antecedently, eternal and inherently in himself . . . so that a significant distinction and delimitation between the economic Trinity and the ontological Trinity must be recognised as well as their essential oneness.¹²³

Torrance is clear that the implementation of the “critical edge” required in applying the *homoousion* is not a straightforward process: “The situation is rather more difficult in theology than in natural science, for due to our deep-rooted sin and selfishness we are alienated from God in our minds, and need to be reconciled to him.”¹²⁴ The objectivity that is needed to purge human knowledge from anthropomorphic descriptions of God requires a repentant posture of thinking: “A repentant rethinking of what we have already claimed to know and a profound reorganisation of our consciousness are required of us in knowing God.”¹²⁵

This repentant rethinking is secured by Torrance in the Holy Spirit’s activity toward humanity. The Son is the objective center of humanity’s knowledge of God because in the incarnation he is present and available to human knowing. Thus Torrance will describe the incarnation as taking place “within the structured objectivities of our created world in such a way that an epistemic bridge is established in Christ between man and God that is grounded in the Being of God and anchored in the being of man.”¹²⁶ Alone this would seemingly leave humanity in a relationship with God mediated

¹²¹Torrance, “Toward an Ecumenical Consensus,” 85.

¹²²Torrance, “Toward an Ecumenical Consensus,” 87.

¹²³Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 97 (emphasis added).

¹²⁴Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 99-100.

¹²⁵Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 100.

¹²⁶Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 100-101.

only through creaturely forms. But the Holy Spirit, though always operating in unity with the Son, is not similarly constrained: “The Holy Spirit is God of God but not man of man, so that our knowledge of the Holy Spirit rests directly on the ultimate objectivity of God as God, unmediated by the secondary objectivities of space and time, and it rests only indirectly on those objectivities in relation to the Son with whom he is of one being as he is with the Father.”¹²⁷ The Spirit’s work, always inseparable from the Son, thus allows humanity to move beyond an anthropomorphic understanding of the immanent Trinity.¹²⁸ “Through the oneness of the Son and the Spirit the imaging of God in Jesus the incarnate Son or the Word made flesh is *signitive*, not mimetic. Thus the creaturely images naturally latent in the forms of thought and speech employed by divine revelation to us are made to refer transparently or in a diaphanous way to God without being projected into his divine Nature.”¹²⁹

Therefore, for Torrance, the *homoousion* establishes the possibility of objective realist knowledge about who God is within his own internal relations. But as the Christian moves deeper into the knowledge of God’s ineffable being, the *homoousion* acquires a “critical edge” so that human knowing acquires a proper apophaticism as it seeks trustworthy knowledge of God “in his internal intelligible personal relations.”¹³⁰

Identity between God and his gracious acts. Torrance’s soteriological realism is constructed in response to his perception of the dualisms within certain forms of catholic ecclesiology and builds upon his understanding of the insights of the Reformation and the theology of Karl Barth. Torrance’s critique and his accompanying proposal correspond with his epistemological concerns; whereas there he wishes to affirm “God’s Act-in-His-Being,” here the concern is “God’s Being-in-His-Act.” Crucial to an account

¹²⁷Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 101.

¹²⁸Muller’s critique of Torrance’s use of the *homoousion* as undermining divine transcendence here misses the mark. See Muller, “New Athanasius or Origen Redivivus?,” 699-700.

¹²⁹Muller, “New Athanasius or Origen Redivivus?,” 699-700. See the similar argument made in “The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit” in *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 166-167: “Thus by letting our thinking obediently follow the way God Himself has taken in Jesus Christ we allow the basic forms of theological truth to come to view. That happens, however, only as in the Spirit the being and nature of God is brought to bear upon us so that we think under the compulsion of His Reality. That is the activity of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus spoke of in this connection as the Spirit of Truth” (167).

¹³⁰Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 102.

of salvation for Torrance is the affirmation that “the divine Giver and the divine Gift are one and the same.”¹³¹

On the one hand, Torrance’s use of *homoousion* at this juncture is unsurprising. Radcliff’s description of Torrance’s thought is apt: “The famous dictum ‘all roads lead to Rome’ could be inverted and applied to the Torrancian-Athanasian *homoousion*: all roads depart from, go through, and lead back to the *homoousion*.”¹³² But on the other hand, the application of the *homoousion* is also strikingly curious. As a work of history, Muller is correct here in that Torrance’s application of *homoousion* directly to soteriology is not how it was used in the Nicene period.¹³³ *Homoousion*, though not without extensive soteriological consequences, was a term used to establish the identity of the Son with the Father, and was not in its original context utilized in the ways that Torrance pressed it to use. But this does not prevent us from engaging with Torrance and exploring how, despite his lexical innovation, he appears to be moving within the bounds of creedal orthodoxy broadly construed. What, then, does Torrance intend in the application of his “imaginative Reformed-evangelical reconstruction” of the *homoousion* to soteriology?¹³⁴

This question finds its answer in the analysis of his *Doktorvater* that Torrance gives in “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy.” The “Latin Heresy,” as Torrance understands it, represents “the Western habit of thinking in abstractive *formal relations*.”¹³⁵ These formal, or external relations, are the inevitable endgame of the dualistic frameworks that Torrance finds in Augustine, Descartes, Newton, and Kant.¹³⁶ As we have already noted while discussing Torrance’s interpretation of Barth in a different context, the great achievement

¹³¹Torrance, “Preaching Christ Today,” 20.

¹³²Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*, 68.

¹³³Muller, “New Athanasius or Origen Redivivus?,” 690. The divergence between Muller and Torrance with respect to the nature of the task of historical theology is particularly evident here. For a “critical appreciation” of Torrance’s historical theology, see Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*. The best assessment of the characteristics of pro-Nicene theology remains Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹³⁴This term is utilized by Radcliff in his assessment of Torrance and his proposal for how Torrance’s theology can be critically appreciated and adopted. See in particular Radcliff, “Conclusion: An Assessment and Proposed Adoption of Torrance,” in *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers*, 182-199.

¹³⁵Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 215.

¹³⁶Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 215.

of Karl Barth with respect to the “Latin Heresy” is found in his recovery and integration of the principles of Nicaea and the Reformation. Barth’s greatness as a theologian is to be found in large part “with the place which Barth, like Athanasius, gave to *internal relations* in the coherent structure of Christian theology, and of the way in which he exposed and rejected the habit of thinking in terms of *external relations* which had come to characterise so much of Western theology.”¹³⁷

The latter half of Torrance’s essay focuses upon the soteriological implications of Barth’s recovery of the fundamental insight of the *homoousion*. Just as he argued with respect to the knowledge of God, Torrance proposes a realist understanding of salvation: salvation is a present reality in Jesus Christ. He writes, “Reconciliation is not just a truth which God has made known to us; it is what God has done and accomplished for us. . . . How could God actually reveal and give *himself* to us across the chasm, not only of our creaturely distance but of our sinful alienation from him, except through a movement of atoning reconciliation?”¹³⁸ For Barth, and also for Torrance, to understand the *homoousion* properly is to state that Jesus Christ *is* salvation. Salvation is an act that is accomplished in his person and it is a reality that is completed within him.

Torrance provides a full description of the objective and, therefore, realist nature of the salvation obtained in Jesus Christ throughout his work. While space does not allow us to describe in detail all that Torrance says, a general sense of his understanding is given in “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy.” The emphasis upon internal relations is obtained by the explicit connection between the incarnation and the atonement. A merely forensic account of salvation, while understood as a part of Torrance’s understanding of the atonement, fails to grasp the implications of the incarnation. This is because in the incarnation, Jesus Christ is at work in humanity accomplishing the work of salvation throughout his earthly career: “There took place in Christ as Mediator an agonizing union between God the Judge and man under judgment in a continuous movement of atoning reconciliation running throughout all his obedient and sinless life and passion into the resurrection and ascension.”¹³⁹

¹³⁷Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 217.

¹³⁸Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 227.

¹³⁹Torrance, “Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy,” 230.

That initial emphasis is then filled out with greater specificity in Torrance's belief that Jesus Christ assumed fallen humanity. Over and against an external account of Jesus' work, Torrance argues for the "total substitution" of humanity by Jesus Christ: "The Latin heresy operates with a form of autonomous reason which has not been allowed to come under the judgment of the Cross, in which Christ wholly took our place, substituting himself for us in mind as well as in body."¹⁴⁰

This understanding of Christ's work is present in Torrance's thought from the very beginning of his theological career on to his final writings. In his doctoral dissertation, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, written under Barth, Torrance is already attentive to this issue. Torrance's dissertation is a sustained criticism of a series of pre-Nicene theologians for their inability to grasp the full truth of the New Testament concept of grace and to lapse instead into what Torrance believes to be sub-Christian conceptions of the Pauline understanding of *charis*. In the introduction to the study he writes, "The real content of the word [*charis*] is . . . the person of Jesus Christ. Grace is the transcendent Christ in gracious and forgiving and enabling motion."¹⁴¹ This conviction would remain with Torrance for the entirety of his life; it is an insight that secures the objective nature of salvation.

Torrance is here concerned about any slippage or separation between the person of Jesus Christ, his gift of grace, and its objective and accomplished reality. Because salvation is nothing less than that which is established and realized in the incarnate Son, grace is never to be conceptually separated from the person of Jesus: "The Gift and the Giver are one. Grace is not something that can be detached from God and made to inhere in creaturely being as 'created grace'; nor is it something that can be proliferated in many forms."¹⁴² In his interpretation of the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic understanding of grace, Torrance argues that it runs against the grain of the New Testament to position the church as an intermediary between God's gracious generosity to sinners and the sinner who seeks forgiveness. Whenever this separation occurs, the church has overstepped its place in the economy of grace, usurping the place that belongs properly only to Jesus:

¹⁴⁰Torrance, "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy," 236.

¹⁴¹Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 32.

¹⁴²Torrance, "Roman Doctrine of Grace and Reformed Theology," 182-183.

“The grace of God given to us in Christ is not some kind of gift that can be detached from Christ, for in his grace it is Christ himself who is given to us. . . . It is impossible to think of grace or of the Spirit as endowments bequeathed by Christ to the church to be administered under the authority of the church.”¹⁴³ For Torrance, Christian dogmatics must preserve the objectivity of the doctrine of grace.

DUALISM, THE *HOMOOUSION*, AND THE CHURCH’S MISSION

This chapter began with an examination of the significant aspects of Torrance’s historical theology. As we followed his narration of church history, we noted the significant concern Torrance had with the problem of dualism. Torrance understands dualism in its epistemological and cosmological forms to have had a deleterious effect upon the church’s understanding and proclamation of the gospel. According to Torrance, at three key moments in the church’s history—the Arian controversy, the Protestant Reformation, and the theology of Karl Barth—this dualistic framework was identified and overcome through the insights of the *homoousion*. While Torrance’s narration of the church’s theological tradition may contain questionable elements when considered by its own, it merits close examination because of how significant historical theology is for Torrance’s own positive construction of his doctrine of God. Indeed, the apparently disproportionate emphasis Torrance places on dualism throughout his historical theology only makes clearer how significant of a problem Torrance considers it to be. In light of this study of Torrance’s historical theology, it is clear that Torrance’s doctrine of God, and the fundamental place of the *homoousion* within it, is shaped in large part by his concerns about dualism and how it inhibits the church’s proclamation and ministry of the gospel. In particular, the *homoousion*, understood via the conceptual framework of Barth’s “Act and Being” functions to ground the theological objective realism that the church requires in its knowledge of God and his work in a world that would otherwise obscure this through its tendency toward dualism.

It can be argued that Torrance’s doctrine of God is in one sense representative of what Maarten Wisse has in a different context called the “*functionalization*

¹⁴³Torrance, *Preaching Christ Today*, 20.

of the idea of God as Trinity.”¹⁴⁴ Torrance’s description of the Trinity is handled in such a way as to emphasize how the doctrine confronts and overcomes the distinctly modern problem of dualism. While this “functionalization” is not undertaken intentionally, it is nonetheless the case that the conceptual framework of Torrance’s trinitarian theology is shaped to confront this issue. At the same time, Torrance’s extensive historical theology and his engagement with the primary texts of the Nicene and Reformation traditions serve as a kind of anaphylactic, preventing modern concerns from encroaching so far that they subsume his doctrine of God into a peculiarly modern shape. Torrance’s doctrine of God, while in one sense quite certainly a “creative reconstruction” of the tradition he engages with, it is at the same time a “catholic” project in the sense Torrance intended it to be.¹⁴⁵

Indeed, the argument can be made that Torrance’s understanding of the doctrine of God is a unique and significant contribution to the church’s resources in its understanding and proclamation of the gospel, not least with respect to its theological realism. While Torrance does not utilize the language of processions and missions in his doctrine of God, the *homoousios* functions in much the same way as the classical tradition has deployed these ideas. The missions reveal the processions; there is continuity between God’s life *ad intra* and *ad extra*. What Michael Allen has said elsewhere about the relation of the doctrine of God to the doctrine of justification could similarly be said of Torrance’s understanding of the doctrine of God to the church’s understanding of mission: “The justifying work of the triune God, then, is not accidental or arbitrary. God does not simply

¹⁴⁴Maarten Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology Beyond Participation: Augustine’s De Trinitate and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 5. Wisse continues (though the argument is overstated with respect to Torrance), “If the idea or dogma of the Trinity is a mere mystery, or a mere equivalent to the name of God, it is hard to draw implications from the dogma to every single locus of systematic theology. Hence, if the doctrine of the Trinity is to become the *Rahmentheorie* for systematic theology, the content of this type of theology needs to be comprehensible or rationally perspicuous. This is precisely the case in contemporary Trinitarian theology. It is characteristic of this type of theology to develop the doctrine of the Trinity in a highly functionalized way” (5).

¹⁴⁵Thus, while Stephen R. Holmes parts ways with Torrance’s distinctive use of the *homoousion*, he nonetheless maintains that “Torrance offers a doctrine of the Trinity that is in visible continuity with the classical doctrine.” Holmes, “In Praise of Being Criticized,” 152.

happen to go this route or take this course fortuitously. God's missions express the divine processions. In other words, the course of God's economy expresses the very character of God."¹⁴⁶

Torrance's Doctrine of God in conversation with John Flett's The Witness of God. The distinctive contribution to the church's proclamation and understanding of the gospel that is Torrance's doctrine of God is clarified when we draw it into comparison with another recent proposal, that of John Flett in his recent book *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*. In this book, Flett advances a particular reading of Barth's theology so as to argue for the necessity of the church's missional nature from its prior ground in God's being. For the purposes of this comparison, we will not attempt to adjudicate the appropriateness of Flett's reading of Barth and his doctrine of God. Instead, we will describe Flett's proposal and then compare it with the doctrine of God that we find in Torrance. This comparison will be fruitful not only because of the similar departure points of the two approaches but also because of the divergences that emerge from the two proposals.

Writing out of a deep concern for the witness of the church in the West, Flett's diagnosis is that the church's missiological ills are the result of a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the church. Flett's argument in *The Witness of God* seeks to trace these ecclesiological and missiological problems to an origin in the doctrine of God: "The problem of the church's relationship to the world is consequent on treating God's own mission into the world as a second step alongside who he is in himself. With God's movement into his economy ancillary to his being, so the church's own corresponding missionary relationship with the world is ancillary to her being."¹⁴⁷ The descriptor *ancillary* is crucial. That it is possible to give an account of the church in which the church's mission is secondary is, for Flett, indicative of a serious dogmatic error. The church's malaise is to be traced to a "breach in the being and act of the church, with deleterious

¹⁴⁶R. Michael Allen, *Justification and the Gospel: Understanding the Contexts and Controversies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 21.

¹⁴⁷Flett, *Witness of God*, 3.

consequences for accounts of the nature of Christian community and witness. The community becomes one focused in on herself.¹⁴⁸

It is difficult to overstate the appropriateness and urgency of Flett's diagnosis. His concerns are reflective of the wider "missional church" movement; the church in the West has far and wide lacked, or at the very least failed to apply, the theological resources necessary to face the challenges of the collapse of Christendom and the advance of secularism. Thus Darrell Guder can accurately write, "The obvious fact is that what we once regarded as Christendom is now a post-Constantinian, post-Christendom, and even post-Christian mission stands in bold contrast today with the apparent lethargy of established church traditions in addressing their new situation both creatively and faithfully."¹⁴⁹ Flett's identification of a church in which mission is a fundamentally ancillary (as opposed to primary) activity is representative of the kind of problem that the missional church movement is correct to engage with, and the attempt to provide a properly theological, rather than pragmatic, response is to be commended. But with respect to the central component of his argument, there is reason to question the particular solution that Flett proposes in *The Witness of God*.

Flett's answer to this problematic conception of the church is to trace the error to its origin in the doctrine of God: "The question of the grounding and consequent form of mission is, first, a question of who *God* is in himself. God is a missionary God because his deliberate acting in the apostolic movement toward humanity is not a second step alongside—and thus in distinction to—his perfect divine being."¹⁵⁰ The description of God's "movement toward humanity" in the incarnation as a kind of "second step" in God's immanent life is the source of the church's missional confusion. God can be conceived in his perfections in a way that is not determined by the mission of the incarnate Son: "While the economy epistemically reveals God to be three in one, God's *movement* into the economy cannot be itself ontologically determinative."¹⁵¹ And this, according to Flett, is precisely the problem: "If it is possible to so define God's true being

¹⁴⁸Flett, *Witness of God*, 195.

¹⁴⁹Darrell Guder, "From Sending to Being Sent," in *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, ed. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 7.

¹⁵⁰Flett, *Witness of God*, 197.

¹⁵¹Flett, *Witness of God*, 199.

apart from his economy, then his *coming* in the economy, though it forms as a parallel to God's eternal nature, occurs in contest with his being. . . . In himself, God remains the almighty Lord, but in his becoming human he lives at some distance from his being."¹⁵² Flett identifies this "distance" as precisely what must be overcome if the church is to reclaim fully its fundamentally missional identity.

While attempting to close this perceived "breach" and "distance" between God's being and his act in Jesus Christ, Flett states at the same time his desire and intention to preserve a proper distinction between the Creator and the creature: "God is in himself distinct from his creation. His connection, as such, occurs not via a simple extension, or abrogation, of his being. Nor does his movement in creation result from some contingency external to God's own life as though his being required some addition to become complete."¹⁵³ But while arguing this on the one hand, Flett also wishes to maintain that there is no "second movement" of creation or election in God's immanent life, because it is precisely this that introduces the distance into God's being: "This language of a first and second movement in the life of God tends to be formulated in terms of logical and consequential order. God's perfection attaches to the first movement in such a way that the second movement proceeds out of the first."¹⁵⁴ There, God is understood to exist in this first movement in the perfect and complete life of the Holy Trinity, and only then can the "second movement" be conceived. But as one's doctrine of God ultimately unfolds into ecclesiology, "This has acute consequences for the missionary nature of the church, as indicated by the general absence of mission from dogmatic treatments of God's connection with his creation and from the concomitant ecclesiologies. In other words, one can develop full accounts of the church without reference to her missionary being."¹⁵⁵

Flett's answer is to collapse these first and second movements into a single movement in which being and act are identified with one another, without remainder. This decision is grounded upon Flett's reading of Barth's doctrine

¹⁵²Flett, *Witness of God*, 199.

¹⁵³Flett, *Witness of God*, 202.

¹⁵⁴Flett, *Witness of God*, 205.

¹⁵⁵Flett, *Witness of God*, 205.

of election, which Barth formulated so as to avoid the speculative implications of the *logos asarkos*.¹⁵⁶ Flett takes this same insight and utilizes it so as to eliminate any conception of a “second movement” in God’s life: “God’s *movement* into the economy belongs to his being for all eternity. It is not alongside who God is; rather, it is the very plenitude of God’s own life that is capable of including the human in such a way that this inclusion is God’s own self-realization.”¹⁵⁷ The emphasis is to be placed on the determinate place given to the mission of the Son in God’s immanent life: “Grounding mission in the Trinity means grounding his movement into the world in his being from and to all eternity.”¹⁵⁸ It is thus that Flett argues, “The church is a missionary community because the God she worships is missionary.”¹⁵⁹

And yet while we wish to affirm the missional identity of the church community, we cannot follow him in the theological remedy he proposes. The language that Flett finds so troubling in the doctrine of God—language of “distance” or of a “second movement”—and which he wishes to jettison so as to secure the church’s missionary nature is language that is theologically important and which protects the truths of God’s freedom and the gracious nature of God’s action by providing a proper distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. While language of “distance” may be troubling and perhaps other language would be more appropriate, the purpose of this kind of speech is to maintain a proper distinction between God and creatures thus to affirm the unnecessary, gratuitous nature of grace. Talk of a “second movement” is not used in order to introduce a “breach” in God’s own being, but is rather used in a qualified sense, once again in order to affirm that God’s loving movement toward his creation is free and unconstrained. When Flett describes God’s movement into the economy as a part of God’s “self-realization” without accompanying language that affirms God’s freedom, it would seem as if incarnation has become a necessity in an improper way. Moreover, Flett’s fundamental decision to ground God’s immanent life in the economic mission—not

¹⁵⁶An influential, although controversial (in its implications), description of this has been given in Bruce McCormack’s “Grace and Being,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110.

¹⁵⁷Flett, *Witness of God*, 208 (emphasis original).

¹⁵⁸Flett, *Witness of God*, 200.

¹⁵⁹Flett, *Witness of God*, 208.

merely as a revelation of the internal processions, but as constitutive of God's own being—is equally problematic.

Torrance's account of the doctrine of God provides a conceptual framework that protects against these kinds of errors in three significant ways. First, Torrance utilizes the language of time—in a very qualified sense—to God's immanent life as a way of distinguishing God's *ad intra* and *ad extra* life. The context of Torrance's application of this concept is within a discussion of God's unchangeableness, which Torrance further describes as “the constancy of his self-living, self-moving and self-affirming personal Being.”¹⁶⁰ While this description makes it clear that Torrance wishes to avoid introducing a kind of voluntarism into his doctrine of God, he nonetheless introduces the language of “moment” and “time” into God's life as a way of speaking of God's freedom in his relation to creation. The language of time is utilized in a qualified sense, as Torrance explains: “We must think of the constancy of God which is his unchanging eternal Life as characterised by *time*, not of course our kind of time which is the time of finite created being with beginning and end, and past, present and future, but God's kind of time which is the time of his eternal Life without beginning and end.”¹⁶¹

This language is combined with Torrance's use of the descriptors of “direction” and “fulfillment” when describing God's purpose in his dealings with creation. *Direction* refers to the constancy of God's character as it is revealed in his works *ad extra*, and *fulfillment* is meant to refer not to God's “self-realization” within creation but instead to God's unswerving faithfulness to his purpose. When this is understood in coordination with Torrance's qualified use of “time” in God's immanent life, he can thus state, “There is a purpose of love and so a definite direction in God's eternal Life, marked by distinct *moments* in it such as that before and after the creation or before and after the incarnation, in which it moves toward the divinely determined fulfillment revealed in Jesus Christ.”¹⁶² And it is this language of “moments” (performing a similar function to that of a “second movement”) that provides Torrance with the proper distinction between

¹⁶⁰Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 240.

¹⁶¹Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 241.

¹⁶²Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 241-242.

the immanent and economic Trinity, while at the same time maintaining their fundamental continuity.¹⁶³

The fact that in the incarnation God became man without ceasing to be God, [sic] tells us that his nature is characterised by both repose and movement, and that his eternal Being is also a divine Becoming. This does not mean that God ever becomes other than he eternally is or that he passes over from becoming into something else, but rather that he continues unceasingly to be what he always is and ever will be in the living movement of his eternal Being.¹⁶⁴

Commenting on this theme in Torrance's writing, Paul Molnar describes Torrance as having stated that, "God can do something new, new even for himself because he is a living God and because, without any dependence on history and created time, he himself has his own eternal time."¹⁶⁵

Second for Torrance, the doctrine of election has a specific and much more modest place than in Flett's proposal. For Flett, election is a determination of God's own being which then determines the church's being: "The event of election in which the missionary determination of God determines the human missionary correspondence remains the event of election."¹⁶⁶ In contrast, for Torrance election does not determine God's being but rather is something like a "secondary movement" that is grounded upon God's immanent life (as opposed to grounding that life). Thus Torrance states, "Election rests on the relation of love between the Father and the Son, and election is the *prothesis*, the setting forth, the projection of that love in Christ the beloved Son of God, through whom we are adopted into Christ's eternal relation of sonship in love to the Father."¹⁶⁷ Torrance has a relatively modest doctrine of election for a Reformed theologian,¹⁶⁸ and he understands the doctrine as a way of describing the constancy of God's dealings

¹⁶³For an exploration of how these decisions may put Torrance's doctrine of God in tension with other aspects of classical theism, see James E. Dolezal, *All That Is In God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 79-104 and particularly 101n58.

¹⁶⁴Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 242.

¹⁶⁵Paul D. Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit: The Economic Trinity in Barth, Torrance and Contemporary Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 211.

¹⁶⁶Flett, *Witness of God*, 213.

¹⁶⁷Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 178.

¹⁶⁸This is true both in comparison to Reformation and Reformed Orthodox figures such as John Calvin and Francis Turretin, as well as Barth, for whom election is central to the doctrine of God. In contrast, Torrance is much more restrained in his use of the doctrine of election.

with humanity while attempting to avoid any abstraction from the person of Jesus Christ: “The twofold significance of *prothesis* means that our salvation in Christ does not rest upon any eternal hinterground in the will of God that is not identical with the foreground in the actual person of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.”¹⁶⁹ Thus while Torrance clearly wishes to distinguish his own position from other, more traditional species of the Reformed tradition, he at the same time does not push the doctrine of election into God’s immanent life in the same way as his *Doktorvater* Barth did. Commenting on this aspect of Torrance’s thought, Molnar states that “Torrance carefully stresses that what is completed in God’s movement toward us is not the fulfillment of the divine being, but the fulfillment of the divine love in its purposes for us.”¹⁷⁰

Third, and perhaps most basically, Torrance’s approach rejects the fundamental analogy Flett draws between God’s being and act and the church’s being and act. This decision, which drives the heart of Flett’s proposal, hangs too much on an equivalency that Torrance (and perhaps even Barth) would find more appropriate to build upon christology and the two natures of the person of Jesus Christ (a point that we will explore in chapters three and four). Thus, Torrance writes, “The incomparable God is not to be understood on the analogy of our finite creaturely human being with whom word, act, and person are different from another. With us word is different from act.”¹⁷¹ Torrance’s description of the church, and the analogy that will drive that description, is built on what he understands to be the firm foundation of christology.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have explored T. F. Torrance’s doctrine of God by examining it in a different register than that of other studies of a similar type. Guided by Torrance’s own self-understanding of his calling as an “intellectual evangelist” of Western culture, his continued involvement in the life of the church while teaching at New College and later while Moderator of the Church of Scotland, and his desire to fulfill his pastoral and missionary

¹⁶⁹Torrance, *Incarnation*, 179.

¹⁷⁰Molnar, *Faith, Freedom and the Spirit*, 202.

¹⁷¹Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 236.

calling through academic theology, we have studied the central elements of Torrance's trinitarian theology with an eye trained to the missional impulses and implications of his thought. As we followed Torrance's historical theology, which has a significant relationship to Torrance's own constructive work, we noted the influence of the dualisms that Torrance perceives to run through history and their corrosive effect on the church's proclamation of the gospel. Torrance's concern about dualism leads him to privilege a particular understanding of the *homoousion* as a central aspect of the doctrine of God. This construction of the *homoousion* is combined with the conceptual framework of act and being that Torrance learned from Karl Barth. In light of this analysis of his theology, we have argued that Torrance's trinitarian theology is best understood in light of his desire to secure a theological realism through his doctrine of God that will provide a firm doctrinal foundation for the church's understanding and proclamation of the gospel in Western intellectual culture.

Having provided a description of this element of Torrance's theology, we then compared Torrance's doctrine of God with another, more recent proposal—that of John Flett—to draw missional implications from the doctrine of God. In examining Flett's *The Witness of God*, we noted how Flett seeks to make mission an essential part of the church's nature by attempting to ground God's immanent life in his *ad extra* missions. The comparison with Flett was fruitful in that it makes clear what Torrance's doctrine of God does not do: attempt to ground mission fundamentally in God's immanent life. As we saw, Torrance's doctrine of God resists this kind of proposal, as this would fail to provide a proper distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. God moves, ineluctably, into the economy in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, in that he is faithful and constant to who he is *in se*. But this movement does not in any sense ground who he is *in se*. While Torrance does understand mission to be an essential aspect of the nature of the church, he believes that this concept is better grounded elsewhere in Christian doctrine.

For Torrance, christology is the doctrinal locus that provides the material ground for understanding the church and its mission. While Torrance is often known as a "theologian of the Trinity," his christology is no less a part of the unique contribution that he has made to systematic theology.

Torrance's christology is a creative synthesis of biblical and Reformed theology—a synthesis that, as we shall later see, is one part of the foundation that Torrance lays for the church's participation in the mission that is crucial to its existence. It is to that doctrine, and Torrance's description of it, that we now turn.

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