

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

Donald Macleod

Dr T. F. Torrance and Scottish Theology: a Review Article

*The Professor of Systematic Theology in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, offers a detailed examination of Thomas F. Torrance, **Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell** (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996. xii + 330pp. hb. ISBN 0-567-08532-5) and raises some questions regarding his depiction of Scottish Calvinism.*

Key words: Theology; Scottish theology; T. F. Torrance; Calvinism.

Dr Torrance's recent book is no mere historical survey, dispassionately reviewing the story of theology in Scotland. It is a highly personal statement in which the author casts some theologians as heroes and others as villains.

Many of his criteria command instant respect: stress on the trinitarian nature of God, the centrality of the incarnation, the primacy of grace and the urgency of evangelism. Other emphases, however, are less securely based, particularly the almost paranoid aversion to limited atonement, the profound distaste for Federal Theology, the stress on incarnational redemption and the partiality to the idea that Christ's human nature was fallen. These are the distinctives of Dr Torrance's own theology (which is not the same as saying that they are its heart) and the book is at its weakest when it claims the support of such men as Knox, Bruce, Binning, Leighton and Boston for these distinctives.

As an inevitable corollary to this, Torrance argues that Calvinism (especially Scottish Calvinism) represented a radical breach with Calvin himself. Indeed, he can scarcely speak of Calvinism without attaching to it some opprobrious epithet. It is always 'hard-line Calvinism', 'rationalistic, supralapsarian Calvinism', 'legalistic Calvinism', 'hard-line federalist Calvinism', 'extreme Hyper Calvinism' or 'the hyper-Calvinist establishment.'

The references to 'Hyper Calvinism' are particularly irritating because, properly used, the label means something quite different from 'high' or even 'extreme' Calvinism. It is a particular school of thought, as well defined as Arminianism, and associated with such English Dissenting theologians as John Gill. Its philosophical root, like that of

Arminianism, is the idea that ability determines obligation and its hall-mark is the denial of the free offer of the gospel: what, after all, is the point in calling men to believe when you know they are unable to believe in the first place? This outlook has never been represented in Scotland. Every one of our theologians, from Knox to Cunningham, regarded the Free Offer as an axiom.

Did Calvinism betray Calvin?

The thesis that Calvinism betrayed Calvin goes back at least as far as the Amyraldian theologians of the early 17th century. But how plausible is it in the Scottish context? Do later theologians represent not only a development of Calvin's theology, but an evolution into a new species? Torrance asserts that they do. Rutherford and Dickson are of a different school from Craig and Knox.

There is a difference, for example, in the doctrine of predestination. The later Scottish tradition was dominated by the legalistic, federalistic and deterministic perspectives of the Westminster Confession and these differed radically from Calvin and the Scots Confession.

For the purposes of this discussion the Scots Confession can be discounted. It does indeed contain a chapter heading, *Of Election* (Article VIII), but no statement of the doctrine. This reflects the haste with which the document was compiled rather than any conscious theological strategy. Knox himself, the prime author of the Confession, was certainly not inclined to minimise its importance. 'The doctrine of God's eternal predestination,' he writes, 'is so necessarie to the Church of God, that, without the same, can faith neither be truly taught, neither truly established.'¹

Knox's own doctrine on the subject was identical with Calvin's, even to the extent of being couched in identical terms. Torrance suggests that their statements are more carefully nuanced than those of the Westminster Confession, but this is extremely doubtful. Calvin's most famous statement is in the *Institutes*, Book III, Chapter XXI,5: 'All are not created on equal terms, but some are predestinated to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.'² This propounds, unequivocally, a doctrine of symmetrical double predestination: predestination to life and predestination to death.

Knox wrote in similar vein, defining predestination as, 'the eternall and immutable decree of God by the which he hath once determined

1 See *The Works of John Knox*, edited by David Laing, Vol. V (Edinburgh, 1856), 25.

2 See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge (reprinted by James Clarke, London, 1962).

with himself what he will have to be done with every man. For he hath not created all . . . of one condition.'³

Neither of these statements is more careful or more evangelical than that of the Westminster Confession: 'God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.' This allows (indeed, requires) us to distinguish sharply between predestination and determinism. It also relates suggestively to the open universe described by modern physics. An event can be predestinated, yet free: indeed, it is predestination that guarantees freedom. Similarly, an event can be predestinated and yet contingent. Such, at least, was the perspective of Westminster Calvinism, leaving its adherents to be libertarians and indeterminists if that was where their philosophical predilections and scientific investigations led them.⁴

The Confession is also more careful than Knox and Calvin to avoid the idea of symmetrical double predestination. It is true, of course, as Dr Torrance points out, that in Calvin reprobation happens *accidentaliter*: 'in face of the Gospel operating as a savour of life unto life and of death unto death' (p. 109). Calvin explicitly declares that while the praise of salvation belongs to God, the blame of perdition is thrown upon those who of their own account bring it on themselves.⁵ 'Although their perdition,' he writes, 'depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is in themselves.'⁶

The statement in the Westminster Confession (Chapter III.VII) is in full accord with Calvin's '*per accidens*' as regards the non-elect, but formulates it much more carefully. It avoids altogether the word *reprobation*; and when it comes to defining the doctrine it draws a clear distinction between its two components, *preterition* and *condemnation*. The former of these is sovereign: 'The rest of mankind, God was pleased . . . to pass by'. But the *condemnation* is not sovereign. It is judicial: they are ordained to 'dishonour and wrath *for their sin*'. (italics mine).

The Confession thus signalises a basic asymmetry in the doctrine of predestination. The divine decree does not sustain the same relation

3 John Knox, *Works*, Vol V, 36.

4 See the comment of David Dickson in *Truth's Victory Over Error* (1684: New Edition, Glasgow, 1764), 53: 'That the Liberty and the Freedom of the Will, and Contingency of Events, is consistent with the Decree is clear from Acts 2:23 and 3:17, 18.' This serves as a clear indication of Dickson's theological outlook, regardless of our opinion of his exegesis.

5 *Institutes*, III.XXIII,1.

6 *Institutes*, III.XXIII.8. Knox quotes this (*Works*, Vol V, 168).

to the destiny of the unsaved as it does to the destiny of the saved. In the case of the saved, God's action is creative and dynamic. It is directly causative, although operating in a way that is totally consistent with individual freedom of choice. God personally calls, regenerates and sanctifies. In the case of the unsaved, by contrast, God's action is privative: one of not-doing. He does not regenerate. He does not give them faith. He does not unite them to Christ. But neither, on the other hand, is He in any sense the cause or author of the sin and corruption for which, ultimately, they are condemned. This does full justice to Calvin's insistence that 'the reprobate procure the wrath of God by their own depravity and daily hasten its falling on their own heads.'⁷

The extent of the atonement

Dr Torrance also posits a radical discontinuity between later Scottish theology and the teaching of Calvin on the question of the extent of the atonement; and a similar discontinuity between earlier and later Scottish theologians on the same question. The older presbyterian tradition, he argues, believed, like Calvin, that Christ died for all. Only after the Synod of Dort did the Reformed churches come to believe in limited atonement.

Despite an enormous amount of research we seem to be no closer to certainty on Calvin's views as to the extent of the atonement than we were in 1861, when William Cunningham wrote his essay, *Calvin and Beza*.⁸ The truth is that neither party to this dispute can confidently claim the support of Calvin. Torrance makes much of the fact that Calvin rejected the 'common solution', namely, that Christ died 'sufficenter for all, but efficaciter for the faithful.' (page 64). It is doubtful whether this is factually correct. Dr Torrance bases his assertion on a passage in Calvin's treatise, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* (page 148). In it Calvin is dealing with an argument which his adversary, Georgius, builds on 1 John 2:2: 'those who wish to exclude the reprobate from participation in Christ must place them outside the world.' The statement Dr Torrance cites is as follows: 'For this the common solution does not avail, that Christ suffered sufficiently for all, but efficiently for the elect.' The context, however, suggests that

7 John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, translated by J. K. S. Reid (London, James Clarke, 1961), 91. Cf. Knox: 'let us rather behold the evident cause of damnation in the corrupt nature of mankind, than that we shall pretend to search it, being hid, and utterly incomprehensible, in the Predestination of God.' (*Works*, Vol. V, 168).

8 See W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Edinburgh, 1862). Calvin's views as to the extent of the atonement are discussed 395-402.

Calvin is in fact quoting this remark from Georgius himself. His own comment follows: 'By this great absurdity, this work has brought great applause in his own fraternity, but it has no weight with me.'

Calvin's own exegesis of the Johannine passage is clear: 'Wherever the faithful are dispersed throughout the world, John extends to them the expiation wrought by Christ's death.'⁹ He may appear to align himself with the advocates of universal redemption when he says, 'It is incontestable that Christ came for the expiation of the sins of the whole world.' But the reason that it is 'incontestable', is, of course, that the Apostle John says it. Calvin's comment is less an exegesis than a quotation. When it comes to exegesis, the solution, he says, 'lies close at hand, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but should have eternal life.'

The exposition which follows is fully consistent with a doctrine of particular redemption: 'The evangelist John sets forth the office of Christ as nothing else than by His death to gather the children of God into one. Hence, we conclude that, though reconciliation is offered to all through Him, yet the benefit is peculiar to the elect'¹⁰ This sounds suspiciously like an echo of '*sufficienter pro omnibus, efficaciter pro electis*'.

In his *Commentary on the First Epistle of John* Calvin's exegesis is clearly influenced by his doctrine of predestination and totally consistent with Dort's Canons on the extent of redemption.¹¹ Here again Calvin alludes to the formula, *sufficienter pro omnibus, efficaciter pro electis*; and he certainly does not reject it. 'This solution,' he writes, 'has commonly prevailed in the schools. *Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage.*' (Italics mine).¹²

Dr Torrance completely overlooks the possibility that it was the advocates of limited atonement who found the formula *sufficienter pro omnibus, efficaciter pro electis* objectionable. It was not endorsed by the Synod of Dort, and later Reformed theologians were generally ill at ease with it. According to A. A. Hodge, for example, it was adopted from the Schoolmen 'by Calvin and by the early Reformed theologians prior to the thorough sifting of this subject by the speculations of the French theologians Cameron, Amyraldus, Testardus, etc.' (italics mine)¹³ This clearly

9 John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 148.

10 John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 149.

11 See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Edinburgh, Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 173: 'the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word *all* or *whole*, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world.'

12 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 173. Dr Torrance also asserts (p. 196) that Fraser of Brea 'rejected the proposition that "Christ died sufficiently for all, and efficaciously only for the elect."' In a foot-note, however, he states that Fraser could 'make use of this distinction in a modified evangelical way'.

13 A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (1867: reprinted Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1974), 361.

implies that after the Amyraldian controversy Calvinist theologians lost their enthusiasm for the formula. Hodge's own position was that, 'This Scholastic expression is inaccurate and inadequate rather than false.'

William Cunningham (who did for Scottish theology what John of Damascus did for Eastern Orthodoxy) discusses the formula in his essay, *Calvin and Beza*.¹⁴ His discussion, however, is by way of concession: Amyraldians are correct in claiming that Calvin used it. But this cannot be taken, argues Cunningham, as proof that Calvin sanctioned their principles, since 'there is a sense in which the advocates of particular redemption can consistently admit and adopt it.'

Cunningham appends an interesting footnote, confirming the suspicion with which 'orthodox Calvinists', including himself, viewed this Scholastic formula. 'When the subject of the extent of the atonement,' he writes, 'came to be more fully and exactly discussed, orthodox Calvinists generally objected to adopt this scholastic position, on the ground that it seemed to imply an ascription to Christ of a *purpose or intention* of dying in some sense for all men. For this reason they usually declined to adopt it as it stood, or they proposed to alter it into this form: Christ's death was sufficient for all, efficacious for the elect. By this change in the position, the question was made to turn, not on what Christ did, but on what His death was; and thus the appearance of ascribing to Him personally a purpose or intention of dying, in some sense, for all men, was removed.'¹⁵

Cunningham's point is borne out by the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which quotes Thomas Preston's remarkable paraphrase of Mark 16:15: 'Go and tell every man without exception, that there is good news for him, *Christ is dead for him*' (italics mine).¹⁶ Thomas Boston's note on the form, *Christ is dead for him*, is equally remarkable: 'Therefore he saith not, "Tell every man, *Christ died for him*"; but, "Tell every man, *Christ is dead for him*"; that is, for him to come to, and believe on: a Saviour is provided for him; there is a crucified Christ for him, the ordinance of heaven for lost man, in the use—making of which he may be saved'.¹⁷

Dr Torrance describes the idea of particular redemption as anti-missionary in general and as an impediment to the free offer of the gospel in particular. He even attributes the lack of interest in world evangelisation to the fact that the late 18th century kirk was 'too tied to

14 See W. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 397.

15 Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 397.

16 *The Marrow of Modern Divinity, with Notes by the Rev. Thomas Boston* (1726: new edition, Edinburgh, 1818), 148. For Preston see John Preston, *The Breast-plate of Faith and Love* (London, 1634), 8.

17 *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, 158. See also the reservations of John Owen, *Works* (Edinburgh, 1850–53), Vol. X, 296.

the narrow outlook upon the world that stemmed from the rigid principles of its Westminster tradition' (p. 249). He blames in particular 'the old Calvinistic conception of limited atonement and the doctrine of God with which it was bound up' (p. 250).

None of this comports with historical reality. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries Scotland produced a distinguished succession of missionaries and evangelists: James and Robert Haldane, Alexander Duff, John MacDonald, Brownlow North and William Chalmers Burns, to name but a few. All of these were pronounced predestinarians, some of them (such as the Haldane brothers) militantly so. Behind them lay such influential figures as Thomas Chalmers and George Whitefield, both also predestinarians.

As far as the offer of the gospel is concerned, it might seem, *a priori*, that those who believed that Christ died only for the elect would be seriously inhibited in offering him to all men. Dr Torrance clearly believes so. He argues that the unrestricted gospel call requires a foundation in universal redemption (p. 203) and avers that such a preacher as Hugh Binning was distinguished from his 'hyper-Calvinist colleagues' by the fact that he did not hold that the offer of the gospel applies only to 'the few people' (*sic*) elected to be saved. He even allows himself to speak of 'the idea which had a primary place in hyper-Calvinist theology', namely, 'that the ultimate ground of faith is in the electing will of God'.

But the free offer of the gospel was never questioned in Scotland. Even those who opposed the Marrowmen accepted the legitimacy and urgency of the gospel call: they questioned only the terms in which that offer was expressed. They never questioned that the gospel was to be preached to every creature.¹⁸ It could even be argued that the stricter (or higher) the Calvinism the greater the stress laid on the free, universal offer. Samuel Rutherford, for example, is accused by Torrance of thinking in terms of a strict, causative relation between God's decrees and their end. Yet it is this very same Rutherford who writes: 'Christ cometh once with good tidings to all, elect and repro-

18 While unimpressed by Dr Torrance's specific criticisms of the doctrine of limited atonement, I also believe that in practice it often had (and still has) a distorting effect on the formulation of the gospel offer. However, this is a matter of anecdote and observation, not of documentation. Formal belief in the free offer of the gospel can easily fall victim to the fear of being accused of Arminianism. See the admirable comments of Thomas Chalmers in his *Notes on Hill's Lectures in Divinity*, Book IV, Chap. VI (see *Select Works of Thomas Chalmers*, Edinburgh, 1856, 424–442). Chalmers' concern was with the 'practical disturbance which it has given to the work of the pulpit'. He was clearly annoyed that the question of the extent of redemption had ever been raised, but he laid the blame firmly on the advocates of universal salvation. Had it not been for them, we would never have heard of the 'counter-dogma' of particular redemption. (425)

bate . . . I doubt if reprobation be so far forth revealed to any, even to those that sin against the Holy Ghost, as they are to believe their own impossibility to be saved; for though a man knew himself to be over score and past all remedy, he is obliged to believe the power of infinite mercy to save him, and to hang by that thread, in humility and adherence to Christ.¹⁹ This fully justifies Ebenezer Erskine's paraphrase of Rutherford (quoted by Dr Torrance himself, p. 225): 'the reprobate have as fair a warrant to believe as the elect.'

This idea that the gospel is to be preached in the same terms to elect and reprobate also appears in Adam Gib: 'the Lord,' he wrote, 'is pleased to gather his elect from among others, by such a dispensation of the gospel as takes no more notice of them than others . . . And this unlimited method of dispensation, is what the Lord blesseth for gathering in his elect: while they are gathered in upon no other ground, by no other invitation or welcome, than what is common to them with all other hearers of the gospel'.²⁰

Assurance

Torrance also argues that the doctrine of limited atonement was to blame for the problem of lack of assurance. 'For generations of people in the Kirk,' he writes, 'faith was deeply disturbed and shaken by all the doctrine thundered from the pulpits that Christ did not die for all but only for a few chosen ones—assurance of their salvation withered in face of the inscrutable decree of divine predestination' (p. 59).

This is hardly a scientific statement. It is easy to exaggerate the incidence of lack of assurance in Scottish Christianity. For Scottish theologians, it was seldom a personal problem. Nor was it ever as much of a problem in the south as it was in the north. The reasons for this difference are complicated, but it certainly owed more to the Celtic temperament, the scathing inquisitorialness of Highland Separatism and the peculiar approach to Communion than to any emphasis on the doctrine of limited atonement. To say that the doctrine of limited atonement was 'thundered' from the Scottish pulpit is certainly unwarrantable. Although brought up in Scotland's Calvinistic heartland I have only once heard a sermon on limited atonement; and that was in the Church of Scotland some months ago. Nor does the homiletical literature of Scotland support Torrance's claim. In

19 Samuel Rutherford, *The Trial and Triumph of Faith* (1645. Reprinted Edinburgh, 1845), 131.

20 Adam Gib, *The Present Truth: A Display of the Secession Testimony* (Edinburgh, 1774), Vol II, 162. Gib's exposition of the Gospel Call is remarkable particularly for the way it links the universal offer to the communion established by the incarnation between Christ and all sinners. He shares human nature not merely with the elect, but with all (154–157).

that literature the doctrine of limited atonement has little prominence.²¹

But there is a deep irony in Dr Torrance's position. By his reasoning, believers in universal redemption should have been untroubled by lack of assurance. One thinks in particular of James Fraser of Brea. Fraser's work, *Justifying Faith* (published posthumously in 1749) set forth clearly his belief in universal redemption. Yet his *Memoirs* (1738) provide us with the best record of spiritual doubt and depression in Scottish theological literature: a record which makes it abundantly plain that the malaise had little connection with the idea of limited atonement. The issue as far as Fraser was concerned was not whether he was elect or whether Christ had died for him, but whether he was born again. A whole section of the *Memoirs* (Chapter VII, Section V) is devoted to, 'Declaring the objective Grounds of doubting my conversion and actual interest in Christ, with the special and general answers thereto.' With a thoroughness of which John Owen might have been proud, Fraser adduces no fewer than twenty grounds for his doubts. Not one of these relates either to election or to limited atonement. The first was that, 'there was not such a distinct, long, orderly and deep work of preparation and humiliation at first conversion as I found in practical books writing of the new birth' (p. 169). The last was that, 'when I consider the great dispensation that is betwixt my service and my rule and the former practice of saints, I cannot conceieve how I can go to heaven'. And the whole section is followed by another bearing the heading, 'Declaring my evidences of Regeneration and Heaven' (184–189). This section contains twenty-seven 'evidences'.²²

In this connection, as in others, Dr Torrance contrasts the teaching of Calvinists unfavourably with the teaching of Calvin himself. How-

21 See, for example, *Sermons Delivered in Times of Persecution in Scotland* (first published in 1779, with a Preface by John Howie: reprinted Edinburgh, 1880). This volume contains more than fifty sermons preached during the Killing Times. They betray little interest in the doctrine of limited atonement and no hesitation over the freeness of the gospel. 'God offers the promises freely to all that will take them,' proclaims William Guthrie. 'God loves freely, and He does not regard whether they be wicked, or not wicked, if once they will come unto Him' (p. 105).

22 In the same connection, Torrance compliments Dr Robert Gordon for republishing Howe's treatise, *The Redeemer's Tears Wept over Lost Souls* (Glasgow, 1837). Yet in the Introductory Essay Gordon writes: 'where is the individual among professing Christians, who has not had his seasons of suspicion and fear regarding his eternal interests . . . and who has not been, at one period or another, under something approaching to a conviction, that all was not right with regard to his soul?' However, the danger of such rhetorical questions appears from a passage in one of Gordon's contemporaries, Andrew Bonar: 'The Lord has enabled me to lean upon Christ day by day, for sixty years, or rather fifty-nine. He took hold of me that year [1830], and has never once left me in darkness as to my interest in Him all that time.' (Andrew A. Bonar, *Diary and Life*, edited by Marjory Bonar, Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1960, 363).

ever, the Reformer himself was no stranger to doubt and lack of assurance. In one of his sermons, for example, he writes, 'it is often the case that believers do not always feel this great liberty and freedom: for we are often anxious, or expressing remorse, or doubting if God will hear us at all. Sorrow can oppress us to such an extent that we have great difficulty formulating a prayer and expressing ourselves.'²³ Calvin also implicitly endorses the practical syllogism: 'To know whether or not the benefits of the sufferings and death of the Lord Jesus Christ apply to us, we need to walk in the fear of God; for if we give a free rein to our lusts the Lord Jesus will reject us.'²⁴

It must be borne in mind, too, that there was a practical, evangelical aspect to the insistence that, 'True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished and intermitted' (*Westminster Confession*, XXX:IV). If assurance is of the essence of faith (if, that is, there is no faith without it), what are we to say to those who lack it? That they are unbelievers?

This was exactly the problem which arose in the parish of Rhu as a result of the teaching of John McLeod Campbell. Campbell's formal position was clear enough: 'Whilst I hold assurance to be of the essence of faith, I do not hold that the converted person is necessarily always in a condition of assurance as to his being in a state of salvation.'²⁵ His pulpit utterances, however, were less careful. According to one witness at his trial, 'it was usual with Mr C. to divide his hearers into two classes, viz., those who had assurance of personal salvation and those who had not—and he said that the one class were true Christians, and the other were not.'²⁶ Another witness had heard Campbell, 'in fencing the tables', debar from the Lord's Supper 'all who had not a personal assurance of their own salvation.'²⁷ And yet another told of a death-bed visit to his uncle, during which Campbell had said to him, 'that he was in hell, and that he was worse than a pagan, because he did not see his sins pardoned.'²⁸

It is impossible, of course, to be absolutely certain that Campbell ever said such things. But this leaves unaffected the fact that there were sound pastoral reasons for denying that assurance is of the essence of faith. This explains, for example, the robust statement of Robert Riccaltoun: 'I believe a man may have as strong a Faith, who yet is born

23 John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 377.

24 John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians*, 28, 29. Cf *Institutes*, IV:1.

25 *The Whole Proceedings before the Presbytery of Dumbarton and Synod of Glasgow and Ayr in the Case of the Rev John McLeod Campbell* (Greenock, 1831). This volume has two separate paginations, the first for the Libel and the second for the *Proof for the Prosecution*. They are best distinguished as *Libel* and *Proof*. This particular citation is from *Libel*, page 49.

26 *The Whole Proceedings*, etc., *Proof*, 338.

27 *The Whole Proceedings*, etc., *Libel*, 4.

28 *The Whole Proceedings*, etc., *Proof*, 339.

(sic) down with Doubts and Wrestlings, in the greatest Uncertainty about his State, as another who triumphs in the highest Assurance.'²⁹

Incarnational redemption

But Torrance is not content to argue merely that Calvin and the first-generation Reformers were superior to later Calvinists. He also argues that the real giants of Scottish theology shared his own precise theological outlook. In fact, this is what distinguishes the good from the bad. The truly evangelical believed in incarnational redemption; and they believed that Christ took a fallen human nature.

But the documents do not bear out either of these claims. Take two examples: Robert Bruce and Hugh Binning.

Torrance cites Bruce as one who stressed incarnational redemption. According to this idea, there lies at the heart of Christ's saving work the fact that, 'we are sanctified in the purity of his Incarnation through union with him in his humanity' (p. 57). Underlying this is an aversion to any forensic idea of atonement. The incarnation, not the cross, is the defining moment of atonement; the person, rather than the work, is the sanctifying event. For example, discussing Thomas Boston, Torrance writes (p. 210), 'in the very act of assuming sinful flesh, far from sinning in it, Christ redeemed sin in the flesh and sanctified it, that we sinners might be sanctified body, soul and spirit, in him.' In the same context he refers to the Virgin Birth 'as itself (a) saving and sanctifying event.'

Such statements desperately need clarification. Apart from all else, they attribute to the Virgin Birth an importance undreamed of by even the most enthusiastic Fundamentalist. But to what extent can they claim the support of Bruce? Torrance quotes (p. 56) a passage from Bruce's *Saxt Sermon upon Isaiah*:³⁰ In this passage, Bruce is discussing 'the cause that moved God to forgive him his sins' and he emphasises three points. Two of these, the first and the third, are commonplaces of Calvinistic orthodoxy: the active and the passive obedience of Christ. But between these, according to Torrance, Bruce sandwiches something which had been lost by scholastic Calvinism: incarnational redemption.

Bruce's words are as follows: 'Secondly, he delivered us from the puddle and rotten root from the quhilk they' (that is, our actual sins) 'proceed. For ye see Christ Jesus was conceived in the womb of the

29 R. Riccaltoun, *A Sober Enquiry into the Grounds of the Recent Differences in the Church of Scotland* (n.l., 1723), 163.

30 See *Sermons and Life of Robert Bruce*, edited by William Cunningham (Edinburgh, Wodrow Society, 1843), 268, 269.

Virgin, and that by the mighty power of his Holy Spirit. So that our nature in him was fully sanctified by that same power. And this perfect puritie of our nature in his person covereth our impuritie; for he was not conceived in sin and corruption as we are, but by the power of the Holy Spirit, who perfectlie sanctified our nature in him, even in the moment of his conception. So, he being throughlie purged, his puritie covereth our impuritie.'

This merits three observations.

First, there can be no doubt but that the main thrust of Bruce's doctrine of the atonement is forensic; nor that he endorses the Anselmic concept of satisfaction. Indeed, the reason he adduces the three points cited by Dr Torrance is precisely to prove that the 'cause that moved God to forgive sins' is that Christ 'perfectly satisfied for the whole ware'. Bruce similarly endorses the idea of imputation: 'this perfect righteousness of his starteth in betwixt us and his Father, and covereth our rebellion and disobedience'.

Secondly, Bruce never suggests that the sanctifying of Christ's human nature in the moment of incarnation had the effect of sanctifying human nature as such, human nature universally or human nature in Everyman. It sanctified human nature *in him*: that is, *his* human nature. After all, it was Jesus alone who was born of the Virgin. The humanity of Christ (or the humanity of God) was pure as a result of the Spirit's action in the incarnation.³¹ The humanity of Judas Iscariot was not.

Thirdly, even in his use of the idea of the human nature being sanctified by the Spirit Bruce's basic language is not that of *transformation*, but of *imputation*. He writes, for example: 'this perfect puritie of our nature in his person *covereth* our impuritie' (italics mine); and again, 'So, he being thoroughly purged, his puritie *covereth* our impuritie.' (italics mine).

The sum is that there are three strands in Bruce's understanding of the righteousness of Christ: active obedience, passive obedience and ontological perfection. Deficiency in any of these would have been fatal to his work of atonement. But the ontological is not in any way an alternative to the sacrificial. It was precisely because he was the sacrificial lamb that he had to be absolutely perfect (1 Pet. 1:19).

Did Christ take fallen human nature?

What about Hugh Binning? Did he teach that Christ took fallen human nature? Torrance refers us to Binning's treatise, *The Sinner's Sanctuary*, a series of sermons on the Eighth Chapter of the Epistle to the

31 There is a difficulty in the very idea of the Spirit sanctifying Christ's human nature, but it would be inappropriate to discuss it here.

Romans.³² There, according to Torrance, Binning speaks of the 'bond of union which Christ forged between us when in his incarnation he took upon himself our sinful flesh, the flesh of sinners, and without sinning himself condemned sin in the flesh, sanctifying himself for us that we may be sanctified in him' (p. 78).

This suggests that the distinctive ideas of Edward Irving were really a rediscovery of the original teaching of the early presbyterian theologians. In reality, Binning's teaching is a world apart from Irving's; quite incompatible with the interpretation put upon Romans 8:3 by such contemporary Barthian exegetes as C. E. B. Cranfield,³³ and exactly in line with the approach of those who deny that Christ took fallen human nature. 'He came,' wrote Binning, 'in the likeness, not of the flesh simply, for he was really a man; but in the likeness of sinful flesh, though without sin, yet like a sinner, - as to the outward appearance, a sinner, because subject to all these infirmities and miseries which sin did first open a door for.'³⁴ Nowhere does Binning suggest that human nature as individualised in Christ was fallen. His stress falls on *likeness*: to human perception he was a sinner, 'so like as that, touching his outward appearance, no eye could discern any difference, compassed about with all those infirmities and necessities, which are the followers and attendants of sin in us.'³⁵ It was not a matter of his inner moral condition, but of the fact that in 'his outward estate' he was 'subject to all those miseries and infirmities unto which sin subjects other men.'³⁶

It is equally inappropriate to suggest that Binning taught incarnational redemption. Admittedly, he does say that God married his own nature with ours, in one person; and he portrays that 'marriage' as a pledge of our union and peace with God.³⁷ But it is a pledge, and no more. It is not the defining moment of atonement. On that point, Binning's doctrine is totally forensic and Anselmic. Forgiveness is based on Christ's *death*, understood as a satisfaction and as a sacrifice: 'If he had pardoned sin without any satisfaction what rich grace it had been! But truly, to provide the Lamb and sacrifice himself, to find out the ransom, and to exact it of his own Son, in our name, is a testimony of mercy and grace far beyond that. But then, his justice is very conspicuous in this work.'³⁸

32 See *The Works of the Rev. Hugh Binning*, ed. M. Leishman (Edinburgh, 1858), 119-266.

33 C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1975), 382: 'the Son of God assumed the selfsame fallen human nature that is ours'. Barth clearly endorses Irving's position that it was 'manhood fallen which He took up into His Divine person' (*Church Dogmatics*, Vol I, 2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1956, 153-155).

34 Binning, *Works*, 161.

35 Binning, *Works*, 168.

36 Binning, *Works*, 168.

37 Binning, *Works*, 172.

38 Binning, *Works*, 169.

Constant repetition of the idea of incarnational redemption is one of the main items on Dr Torrance's agenda and he attributes it (or at least the germ of it) to all his favourite (that is, non-Scholastic-Calvinist) theologians from Knox to Boston. But the documentary evidence precludes our believing that the idea ever occurred to any Scottish theologian prior to Edward Irving. They were too acutely aware that in the New Testament the climactic moment of redemption was neither Bethlehem nor Gethsemane, but Calvary. Their souls resonated to St Paul's asseveration, 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal. 6:14); and their ministries were geared to the same agenda: they preached Christ crucified. This is why, rightly or wrongly, Scottish theological literature prior to the 20th century is littered with treatises on the atonement and almost devoid of treatises on the incarnation.

Yet these same Scottish theologians knew full well the importance of the link between the person and the work of Christ. They would have endorsed fully Torrance's emphasis that the whole life of Jesus from Bethlehem to Calvary was integral to our redemption. They would have insisted that his advocacy (1 Jn. 2:1) derived its peerless authority from the fact of his being the Son of God. They would have insisted, too, that the great *hilasmos* on which the Advocate rested his case derived all its glory from the fact that what he offered was his divine self (1 Jn. 2:2). And they would have agreed wholeheartedly that the parameters of atonement demanded nothing less than divine incarnation.

But they would have taken serious offence at Dr Torrance's constant insinuation that as Federal Calvinists their doctrine of God was defective: particularly at the idea that they portrayed his love as having been *bought* or *purchased* by the atonement. In fact, the notion that it was only the propitiation that persuaded God to love would have been abhorrent to them. Torrance is surprised (p. 96) that Rutherford did not regard the death of Christ as the cause of the love of God, but as its consequence. He should not have been surprised. Rutherford's view was universal among Scottish divines, if only because all felt the force of John 3:16, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son'. The love came first and the sacrifice followed.

On the other hand, the concept of the atonement as an appeasement is as prominent in Calvin as it is in the Federal theologians. 'It was sufficient,' he writes, 'for the High Priest to enter in the name of all the people, having blood in his hands in order to appease the wrath of God.'³⁹ Part of the difficulty with Torrance's treatment is that his terminology lacks discrimination and precision. He fails to distinguish between anger and malice, falls into the trap of assuming that to be angry

39 John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1997), 375.

means 'not to love' and then falls into the further trap of defining appeasement/propitiation as 'causing to love'. All this overlooks the fact that it is perfectly possible to love and to be angry at one and the same time and even with regard to one and the same object. An angry mother can be an extremely loving mother, and the same is true of God's relations with the human race. The fact that he loves does not mean that he is not angry. Nor does the fact that he is angry mean that he does not love (it is worth noting that the vast majority of biblical references to God's anger point to his displeasure with his own people).

It was no part of the work of Christ to make God love us, and no Scottish theologian ever thought it was. The very fact of his being on earth at all was proof of the divine love. The business of the atonement, therefore, was to propitiate the God who already loves us: to lay the foundation for an advocacy directed towards him specifically as *Father* (*pros ton Patera*, 1 Jn. 2:1). God unequivocally requires such propitiation, but in the last analysis God also provides it and God even becomes it. The whole cost of our redemption is borne by the triune God. In that sense, the atonement is a transaction entirely internal to the trinity. But by virtue of the incarnation, it is also external. It takes place not in heaven, but on Calvary; not in eternity, but on Good Friday. The Saviour is Last Adam as well as Son of God.

Dr Torrance also alludes repeatedly to the oft-observed fact that the New Testament never portrays God as reconciled to us. He is the Reconciler, not the Reconciled. In this, as in other ways, St Paul (the only New Testament writer to use the idea of reconciliation) highlights the divine initiative in redemption. The offended one takes the first step: 'all things are of God' (2 Cor. 5:18).

Yet we must not overlook the fact that God did not proceed directly from love to reconciliation. Between these two points there lies the transaction described in 2 Corinthians 5:21: he made him who knew nothing of sin to be sin for us; and he made us, who knew no righteousness, to be God's very righteousness in him.

This is a solemn business. For all the preveniency of love we are reconciled to God only when we come to be righteous; we come to be righteous only in faith-union with Christ; and he is our righteousness only because he consented to becoming not only 'flesh' but 'sin', enduring in his own human finitude all that our sin deserved.

Conclusion

Dr T. F. Torrance is among the immortals of Scottish theology, his work on the trinity an enduring and priceless legacy. He has placed the *homoousion* at the heart of all our belief, reminding us that God has no face but Jesus. Even in his anger there is no un-Christlikeness at all.

The electing God (and the reprobating God) is none other than the incarnate Son. In Jesus' sacrifice, God himself becomes the *hilasmos*. In his indwelling, God himself indwells us.

I and many others embraced these contributions with instant appreciation. But we saw in them no reason to repudiate our past. True, some of these emphases were not explicit in Scottish Calvinism. But they were implicit; or at least easily assimilated. We can welcome the new trinitarian insights and weave them happily (if critically) into the legacy of Rutherford and Durham, Martin and Cunningham. Dr Torrance does not need to discredit the past to create space for his vision.

Abstract

A modern Scottish Calvinist assesses T. F. Torrance's recent review of Scottish theology. While appreciative of Torrance's personal contribution to theology, this article takes issue with the thesis that Westminster Calvinism represented a betrayal of both Calvin and the earlier Scottish theologians. It focuses particularly on such issues as predestination, limited atonement, assurance and the free offer of the gospel. It also evaluates the claim that such ideas as incarnational redemption and Christ's assumption of a fallen nature are supported by the older Scottish Reformed tradition. Finally, it examines Torrance's strictures on Scottish Calvinism's doctrine of God.

Of Related Interest

God's Empowering Presence

The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul

Gordon D. Fee

Beginning with analysis of every statement of Paul on the subject of the Holy Spirit, Fee moves on to a synthesis of Paul's general pneumatology, mindful of the exegetical tradition of the academy and the pressing needs of today's church.

'It is a good book that will do good.' – Bruce M. Metzger

'A blockbuster . . . a benchmark for future discussion.' – Expository Times

0-85364-644-9 / hb / xxiv + 967pp / 235 × 156mm / £29.99



Paternoster Press

PO Box 300 Carlisle Cumbria CA3 0QS UK