

Chapter Ten

Beyond Henry's nominalism and evangelical foundationalism: Thomas Torrance's theological realism.

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The careers of Carl Henry and Thomas Torrance share many similarities in their general outlines, and yet they could not have chartered more different courses in theology had they tried. Both men were born in 1913 and lived into their 90s. Both were professors of theology: Henry at Fuller Theological Seminary, which he helped to establish; Torrance at the University of Edinburgh. Both were prolific authors: Henry's *magnum opus* being the six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority*;¹ Torrance's *magnum opus* being *The Christian Doctrine of God* (and *The Trinitarian Faith*).² Both were also editors of significant theological journals: Henry of the popular *Christianity Today*,³ and Torrance of the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. Both were international speakers and first order systematic theologians. Finally, both were guardians of what they considered orthodoxy: Henry of the evangelical heritage which developed out of fundamentalism,⁴ and Torrance of an orthodoxy developed in line with the Great Tradition.

¹ Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (6 Vols; Waco: Word, 1976–1983).

² Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (2nd ed; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995).

³ While *Christianity Today* has become a popular, lay-driven magazine, it started out as a theological magazine–journal in opposition to *The Christian Century*.

⁴ Even though, in Grenz's estimation, Henry remained a fundamentalist in many respects. Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Centre: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 87.

While clearly of the same mind regarding a range of theological beliefs, Henry and Torrance did not share the same epistemic commitments and thus their theological methods were drastically different and this resulted in what can only be considered radically differing theologies. Having met on several occasions they disagreed considerably and this spilt over into their respective *oeuvres*. What follows is a focused reflection on what may be considered the heart of their theological disagreement: the nominalism of Henry versus the realism of Torrance.

Carl Henry vs. Thomas F. Torrance

In *God, Revelation and Authority* Henry sought to establish the foundations of an apologetic theology, an evangelical response to modernity on modernity's terms, with the aim of establishing the intellectual coherence and academic credibility of a Christian "world-life view," as Henry termed it. In volume one, *God Who Speaks and Shows*, he sets forth the nature of theology, and in volumes two, three, and four he comments at length upon fifteen foundational theses on divine revelation. Volumes five and six, *God Who Stands and Stays*, develop a classically orthodox approach to the doctrine of God. The ordering of the work is important; Henry privileges treating method before theology proper, for Scripture is epistemologically prior to God in his theology. To be clear, it was Henry's express conviction that the foundation for correct theology can only be found in the divine revelation of God as deposited in the Holy Scriptures.

Henry defined revelation as

that activity of the supernatural God whereby he communicates information essential for man's present and future destiny. In revelation God, whose thoughts are not our thoughts, shares his mind; he communicates not only the truth about himself and his intentions, but also that concerning man's present plight and future prospects.⁵

⁵ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:457.

Revelation is thus objective and available to unaided human reason. So insistent was Henry on this point that he rejected all attempts by the so-called neo-orthodox of his day (read here Barth, Bultmann, and Brunner especially), to establish a relational and participatory theology whereby only those united to Christ and enlivened by the Spirit could know God. Henry wrote, “If a person must first be a Christian believer in order to grasp the truth of revelation, then meaning is subjective and incommunicable”; and further, “the new birth is not prerequisite to a knowledge of the truth of God.”⁶

According to Henry, the Bible is almost entirely propositional in content, thus God communicates in order to convey truths in the form of propositional sentences.⁷ The purpose of theology is to take such sentences and form doctrines or propositions from them. In this regard we might note the affinities of Wayne Grudem’s approach to systematic theology with that of Henry when Grudem defines theology as “any study that answers the question: ‘What does the whole Bible teach us today?’ about any given topic?”⁸ John Franke calls this the “concordance conception of theology” which has characterized evangelical theology in general, to the extent that it has assumed the methodology of post-Reformation Protestant scholasticism.⁹ In a programmatic passage Henry sets forth his “basic epistemological axiom” as follows:

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency is a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test. The task

⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:229.

⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:181–409.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 21. Grudem’s definition is insufficient and deficient in that it ignores the interplay in all knowing between tradition, reason, and experience.

⁹ See John R. Franke, *The Character of Theology: An Introduction to its Nature, Task, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), especially 88–89.

of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.¹⁰

One may enquire about the relationship between Scripture and general revelation, given the epistemological axiom above. Henry states that:

The scriptural revelation takes epistemological priority over general revelation, not because general revelation is obscure or because man as sinner cannot know it, but because Scripture as an inspired literary document republishes the content of general revelation objectively, over against man's sinful reductive dilutions and misconstructions of it.¹¹

It was Henry's conviction that general revelation was sufficient for the independent use of reason for a knowledge of God. He thus believed that special revelation was an objective given. In a 1964 work, *Frontiers in Modern Theology*, Henry, in Grenz's words, "charted an agenda that proved to be an apt summary of his entire theological program":¹² "If Christianity is to win intellectual respectability in the modern world, the reality of the transcendent God must indeed be proclaimed by the theologians – and proclaimed on the basis of man's rational competence to know the transempirical realm."¹³

This is not to say that Henry was an advocate of natural theology; he wasn't. Henry was a biblicist who rigorously upheld the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture.¹⁴ Thus, right thinking

¹⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:215 (in italics in the original). This is not to deny that the triune God is Christianity's basic ontological axiom. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:219.

¹¹ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:223.

¹² Grenz, *Renewing the Centre*, 92.

¹³ Carl F.H. Henry, *Frontiers in Modern Theology A Critique of Current Theological Trends* (Chicago: Moody, 1964), 154–55, cited in Grenz, *Renewing the Centre*, 92.

¹⁴ For his defence of inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration see Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:103–219. Henry did not, as many other fundamentalist-evangelicals have done, including the ETS, make inerrancy a

about God can only be found through Scripture, for here alone one finds the authoritative word of God in objective form. While Henry does allow that revelation is personal, simply because God and humans are personal, his theology amounts to a rejection of personal revelation in favour of an absolute propositional revelation. This is asserted in his Thesis Ten: “God’s revelation is rational communication conveyed in intelligible ideas and meaningful words, that is, in conceptual-verbal form.”¹⁵ Henry clarifies that he is opposed to all definitions of revelation which are expressed as God’s “*self-revelation*, or to *cosmic* revelation, or to *historical* revelation, in express contrast to a divine disclosure of truths and information...”¹⁶ Henry cites Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance as two such champions of the sort of dialectical and existential (read, non-evangelical) theology he is opposed to.

Focusing specifically upon Torrance’s doctrine of the knowledge of God drawn largely from his 1969 work *Theological Science*,¹⁷ Henry devotes an entire chapter of *God, Revelation and Authority* to rebutting Torrance’s position.¹⁸ In Henry’s estimation, Torrance’s formulation of what he terms “theologic” is evangelically inadequate and an example of the “unstable neo-Protestant formulation of man’s knowledge of God.”¹⁹ What exactly Henry takes exception to is Torrance’s attempt to relate human logic to the logic of God in a non-formal way.

Acknowledging that Torrance rises above the neo-orthodox (a pejorative and inaccurate term in itself) antithesis of propositional and personal revelation by locating revelation in Jesus Christ, himself the Truth and the one who manifests the truth, Henry then

badge of evangelical orthodoxy. See Carl F.H. Henry, “Reaction and Realignment,” *Christianity Today* 20 (2 July 1976): 30.

¹⁵ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:248.

¹⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:248.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969).

¹⁸ Chapter 14, “The Logos and Human Logic,” in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:216-29.

¹⁹ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:216.

accuses Torrance of “unjustifiably converting the fact that God objectifies himself for us and meets us in Jesus Christ into an eclipse of general revelation, a devaluation of the prophetic revelation, and a cognitive deflation of all Logos-revelation.”²⁰ What Henry takes umbrage to is the idea that outside of Jesus there is no knowledge of God.²¹ Henry appeals to the Old Testament in the first instance (then after to nature, history, and the conscience), as evidence that God has spoken in propositional form through prophets, kings, priests, and directly in divine manifestations. Henry considers these to be defeating arguments against Torrance’s insistence that outside of Christ there is no knowledge of God. But this is to misunderstand Torrance’s position that Jesus Christ is epistemologically determinative and thus there is no knowledge of God outside of Jesus Christ, given that Christian theology as a science is posterior to an actual encounter with an actual event.

Henry agrees with Torrance that humanity after the fall is estranged from God and thus cannot think rightly – about God, truth, or reality. However, that does not mean, argues Henry, that we must attribute this to an “epistemic deficiency” in humanity whereby only through regeneration and repentance may one actually know God.²² Henry then levels his charge against Torrance:

Torrance here overstates the deformity of human reason in relation to divine revelation; he disregards the general revelation that penetrates man’s reason and conscience with the knowledge of God which confronts him consciously with light and truth and knowledge and in relation to which he is culpable. The change in logical structure which a revelation is held to require, it develops, is nothing less than a rejection of the law of

²⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:217.

²¹ This is the fourth of Torrance’s five points as to what characterises theological science, Torrance, *Theological Science*, 137; and Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 1.

²² Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:218. See Torrance, *Theological Science*, 147.

contradiction and if that be the case – so we shall argue, against Torrance – nonsense can be regarded as divine truth.²³

Henry was not one to lack rhetorical flourish or force a point!

Interpreting Torrance accurately, I think, Henry shows that according to Torrance, only Jesus, who is the Logos, can know the truth through human concepts and statements, because Christ is the God-man. For all other people our statements point away from ourselves to some objective truth, but for Christ he is the Truth incarnate thus his statements do not point away from himself but to himself. Torrance can thus say: “Theological knowledge and theological statements participate sacramentally in the mystery of Christ as the Truth.”²⁴ As such revelation is, for Torrance, *uniquely* personal and *uniquely* propositional to Christ, and mediated to others to the extent that they participate in Christ.²⁵ It is thus faith (revelation) in Christ and not philosophy which forms the conceptual bridge between God and humanity.

What Henry is pushing back against is Torrance’s dialogical/dialectical theological method. According to Henry, truth and statements of the truth correspond so that the truth is objectively known despite the condition – fallen or otherwise, Christian or not – of the subject. Henry’s correspondence theory of the truth (similar to Wittgenstein’s “picture language”)²⁶ comes up squarely against Torrance’s realistic theory of the truth. In Henry’s estimation, all such dialectical/dialogical reasoning must end up “either saying nothing or of stating gibberish.”²⁷

²³ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:218.

²⁴ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 150, cited by Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:219.

²⁵ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 42, 148, cited by Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:219.

²⁶ See David Munchin, *Is Theology a Science? The Nature of the Scientific Enterprise in the Scientific Theology of Thomas Forsyth Torrance and the Anarchic Epistemology of Paul Feyerabend* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 205–209, for a description of various correspondence theories of truth, including that of Torrance.

²⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:221.

Henry also appears to misunderstand Torrance's claim that only those united to Christ genuinely know Christ. Torrance, it seems to me, does not insist that there is no general revelation, simply that general revelation does not provide enough information for the unredeemed person to come to a saving knowledge of God. This is the "new natural theology" which McGrath and Molnar, to name but two, have canvassed.²⁸ Henry also appears to adopt something of a Thomistic theology of conversion whereby reason acts as a genuine and natural *preambula fidei*, the means by which one is led to faith. Any other view, Henry avers, amounts to fideism – the blind leap of faith, with Kierkegaard mistakenly being the poster child of such a theology. In short, what Henry would seem to take exception to in this part of his argument is Torrance's Reformed doctrine of election whereby faith itself is a gift imparted to the believer. In relation to the work and role of human reason, Henry is a semi-Pelagian as opposed to Torrance's Reformational *sola gratia* and *sola fidei* commitments. In Henry's best estimation, "the insistence on a logical gulf between human conceptions and God as the object of religious knowledge is erosive of knowledge and cannot escape a reduction to scepticism."²⁹ And finally, "We are therefore back to the emphasis that the laws of logic belong to the *imago Dei*, and have ontological import."³⁰

Henry is particularly critical of what he sees as the illogical presuppositions of Torrance's intuitive theology. Torrance rejects the form of propositional revelation espoused by Henry in favour of a "personal knowing." Reality is to be known in faith through an existential encounter with the ultimate Reality – Jesus Christ the incarnate Word (Logos). Henry believes this amounts to mysticism, something he is not favourably disposed to.³¹

²⁸ See Alister E. McGrath, *The Open Secret: A New Vision for Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); and Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance: Theologian of the Trinity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 93–99.

²⁹ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:229.

³⁰ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:229.

³¹ On mysticism see Myk Habets, "T.F. Torrance: Mystical Theologian *Sui Generis*," *Princeton Theological Review* 14 (2008): 91–104. Also see the brief

Henry sees the critical mistake of Torrance's epistemology, derived in part from Kierkegaard but more from Polanyi, to lie in his seeming rejection of any objective revelational knowledge. From Kierkegaard, Torrance is committed to the idea that the truth of God is communicated through personal relations, not, as Henry would have it, "objectively" and even dispassionately.³² However, Torrance holds that theology which accepts the absolute primacy of its proper object of inquiry can be considered rational and scientific – hence objective. Torrance understands Kierkegaard's "truth as Subjectivity" as in fact theological objectivity and realism, the subject's proper relation to the Object.

Henry appears to misread Torrance (and Polanyi) also at this point and interprets the notion of "personal knowledge," which acknowledges the necessity for "responsible commitment" – Polanyi's term for personal knowledge – in terms of *subjectivism*. This is especially so when "personal knowledge" is applied to religious knowing and is virtually equated with biblical "faith."

Utilizing as he does Polanyi's epistemology, Torrance would no doubt react to this criticism that Henry, and other critics, are perhaps looking to an impersonal procedure which operates along detached and mechanical lines and ultimately appeals to the concept of autonomous reason. This autonomous reason is then directed at an external authority, in this religious case the Holy Scriptures, and a system of propositional truth is worked out in a purely impersonal but logical way. It is this program that Torrance is particularly concerned to eradicate.

This use of Polanyi further explains Torrance's form of realism in his theological method. It is this commitment to *critical* realism

discussion in Titus Chung, *Thomas Torrance's Mediations and Revelation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 127–29.

³² For an interesting insight into how Torrance articulated some of these convictions in response to a liberal Christian methodology see the account of his job interview for Princeton University in I. John Hesselink, "A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ – An Interview with T.F. Torrance," in *Reformed Review* 38 (1984): 54–55; and Alister E. McGrath, *T.F. Torrance: An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999), 57–58.

that constitutes one of Torrance's main reasons for drawing on the work of Polanyi. In Polanyi, Torrance finds a philosophical ally and one who has illustrated Torrance's own point in the natural sciences as Torrance is seeking to do in Christian theology.

Not only is Polanyi appealed to, but also the theological method of Athanasius, Anselm of Canterbury, John Calvin, and not least, Karl Barth. Throughout his reading of the tradition Torrance develops what he calls a *kata physik* form of theological methodology which is as applicable to the sciences as it is to the humanities, and here specifically to systematic theology. An overview of Torrance's theology illustrates his methodology and an examination of his use of Scripture in particular highlights the fundamental differences between the fundamentalist orientation of Henry's – and popular evangelicalism's – theological methodology and biblical hermeneutics.

As can be gleaned from this brief survey of Henry's critique of Torrance's theological method, Henry's theology may be characterised as rationalist, foundationalist, and nominalist, at least to some extent. As Grenz observed, Gordon H. Clark, Henry's professor of philosophy when he was a young student at Wheaton College, was perhaps the single most important intellectual influence on Henry's thought, giving it its rationalist-oriented worldview.³³ Not all would agree with this assessment though. "Put simply, if the term 'foundationalist' is to be applied to Henry's theological outlook, his sounds more like that of a soft than a hard foundationalist,"³⁴ writes Mavis Leung. Chad Brand agrees:

Is Henry a foundationalist? If one means by 'foundationalist,' the search for Cartesian certainty through the discovery of indubitable and noninferential truth claims arrived at through reason or reflection, then the answer is a resounding, 'no'... It

³³ Grenz, *Renewing the Centre*, 90.

³⁴ Mavis M. Leung, "With What is Evangelicalism to Penetrate the World? A Study of Carl Henry's Envisioned Evangelicalism," *Trinity Journal* 27NS (2006): 240.

might be correct, on the other hand, to call Henry a scriptural foundationalist...³⁵

And further,

In regards to Scripture, Henry is certainly a firm, biblical foundationalist; in regards to the outworking of the theological implications of biblical asseverations, it appears that Henry is a soft foundationalist, one who is willing to admit that all our claims to understanding are subject to... God's judgment.³⁶

Wider critique of T.F. Torrance

Henry is not alone in his critique of Torrance and others who adopt a similar theological method. One example will be useful, that of an appreciative critic of Torrance's, Colin Gunton. Gunton tells us that he first met Torrance at a student conference in 1963 when Gunton was a student and Torrance was a keynote speaker. Since then the two men were known to each other and respected each other's work, despite disagreeing on many points. Gunton later organised a day conference in Torrance's honour at the King's College's Research Institute in Systematic Theology, and he contributed to a volume of essays interacting with Torrance's theology edited by Elmer Colyer in 2001. Torrance's doctrine of God was the subject of Gunton's appreciative critique,³⁷ and of a short response by Torrance.³⁸

³⁵ Chad O. Brand, "Is Carl Henry a Modernist? Rationalism and Foundationalism in Post-War Evangelical Theology," *Trinity Journal* 20NS (1999): 18.

³⁶ Brand, "Is Carl Henry a Modernist?" 19.

³⁷ Colin Gunton, "Being and Person: T.F. Torrance's Doctrine of God," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T.F. Torrance* (ed. Elmer M. Colyer; Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 115-37. Paul Molnar has provided a thorough critique of Gunton's essay in *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: in Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 317-30.

³⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, "Thomas Torrance Responds," in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 303-40.

Gunton's critique of Torrance's method is best explored through his published lectures *Revelation and Reason*, where Torrance's idea of "theological science" is critiqued in chapter 2, §2.³⁹ The focus of Gunton's lectures is on the relationship between revelation and reason. In the wake of Enlightenment philosophy revelation was consigned to the periphery of human knowledge, if not rejected outright, and in its place reason assumed the centre. Whereas the Patristic thinkers simply assumed divine revelation, post-Enlightenment theology felt it had to establish a basis from which revelation could be accepted and then utilised by human reason. Thus it was that foundationalism found its way into theology. Gunton refers to this as "faith seeking foundations," a phrase coined by Ronald Thiemann, and an obvious play on Anselm's "faith seeking understanding." Gunton is using a definition of foundationalism as the proposition that every coherent belief system rests upon certain convictions. These convictions are assumed to be true, or even self-evident, and thus provide stability for the framework of belief. The coherence of many other beliefs depends upon the acceptance of these beliefs as true.⁴⁰ In his use of Thiemann, Gunton believes Torrance is a foundationalist of a sort in that he grounds revelation in the ability to explain causally revelation as coming from God; thus belief in God is the foundation. According to Gunton, "By intuition Torrance does mean, well, integrity, a kind of integration of data rather than leaping into another world [revelation]. There is a very rationalistic side to Tom Torrance; he would use a foundationalist argument if

³⁹ Colin Gunton, *Revelation and Reason: Prolegomena to Systematic Theology* (trans. and ed. Paul. H. Brazier; London: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 49–51; also see pp. 33–36. The work is based on tape recordings of a seminar programme for MA students given by Gunton at King's College, London, 1999–2000.

⁴⁰ Gunton is using the definition provided by Ronald F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology: The Gospel as Narrated Promise* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 13–15. Thiemann's work is critical of Torrance's "epistemological foundationalism" and in its place a coherentist account of epistemology is offered. For a critical interaction see Tom McCall, "Ronald Thiemann, Thomas Torrance and Epistemological Doctrines of Revelation," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 148–68.

he could.”⁴¹ It is unclear in the context what Gunton means exactly by this last phrase, “if he could.” He goes on to say that Locke and Schleiermacher are certainly foundationalist, thus we may aver that he thinks Torrance is a qualified foundationalist of some sort.

When Gunton turns his attention to Torrance directly he examines his use of “science” to describe his theological method. Science in this context is the activity in which we observe objects and reduce the description of their workings into a coherent explanation. Thus Torrance allows God the Object to impose himself on us rather than appealing to philosophical foundations or some such. By means of a Polanyian integration, the scientist then integrates all the evidence into a logical coherence. Thus Torrance reads from the Object (God) to the subject (the enquiring mind).

Later in the work, under a discussion of Vatican II, Gunton provides a chart in which Torrance’s view of revelation as an act and an event is pictured. In it Gunton explains that when revelation means Jesus Christ it is different from revelation as a series of propositions.⁴² And so, when we come to ask if revelation is personal or propositional, as Henry does, unless Torrance’s twofold view of revelation is acknowledged, there is going to be confusion. It will appear that Torrance does not believe in propositional revelation, leaving many evangelicals to assume that Torrance is merely a more sophisticated mystical theologian for whom doctrine is either Gnosticism on the one hand, known only to the initiated (something we have seen Henry accuse Torrance of in other words); or one is a liberal or postmodern theologian for whom there is no truth but only personal experience. Torrance is neither.⁴³

⁴¹ Gunton, *Revelation and Reason*, 35.

⁴² Gunton, *Revelation and Reason*, 98. This distinction approximates Torrance’s distinction between “coherence-statements” and “existence-statements” in Torrance, *Theological Science*, 164–72.

⁴³ Interestingly, in Torrance’s opinion the fundamentalist and the liberal are not that far removed from each other when it comes to their epistemic commitments in that they both share “a fatal deistic disjunction between God and the World” in that they both cut short the ontological reference of biblical

Gunton contrasts Torrance's view with that of Roman Catholicism, even post-Vatican II. According to the latter view God's personal act presupposes all our traditions and our writings such that church tradition must be considered as authoritative as Scripture, given both affirm the same content of propositional truth. If we were to apply this to Henry and some other evangelicals then we would have to conclude that a commitment to a strong propositional revelation that is not nuanced in the twofold way that it is by Torrance necessarily ends up in a form of narrow foundationalism so that classic Roman Catholicism and fundamentalist-evangelicalism are actually operating out of the same theological methodology and epistemology.

So much for the evaluation and critique of Torrance by Henry and others. It will pay us to consider Torrance's theological methodology directly before forming some critical conclusions.

T.F. Torrance vs. Carl Henry

In 1981 Torrance presented the Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary (subsequently published as *Reality and Evangelical Theology*), wherein he was "concerned to establish a realist basis in evangelical theology in contrast with the nominalism that prevails so widely among so-called 'evangelicals'!"⁴⁴ While at Fuller Theological Seminary, Torrance singled out evangelical doyen, Carl Henry, as one such evangelical. In answer to a student's question on the extent of the atonement Torrance replied:

You see there is nowhere in the Christian faith, there is no such thing as partial representation, as partial substitution. It's a total act and therefore the total being comes under the death and resurrection of Christ and therefore under the judgement of the cross. So that you, whether you are good or evil – Christ died for you. Now for you with your good as well as your evil comes

and theological statements to God. See Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 2–3.

⁴⁴ Torrance, "A Pilgrimage in the School of Christ – An Interview with T.F. Torrance," 60.

under the judgment of the cross. Now that applies to the whole of creation. That applies to this creation that God made to be good but which has become estranged from him. So there you have to take seriously, dead seriously, the fact that the Creator became creature made atonement for the whole creation, consecrated the whole creation for God, not part of it. Now this is very important, you see.

Carl Henry, for example, in a discussion with me on this very issue, would not agree that Christ died for all of him. There is still an integrity in his reason that doesn't come under the judgement of the cross, you see. So I said to him, Carl Henry do you believe in a partial substitution, and therefore there is something in your reason Carl Henry, that hasn't really come under the judgement of the cross of Christ. And that's why you are a rationalist.

So you see that is the point; and this is where the Gospel comes at its hardest. It's a good man, a righteous man, a man who is rich in goodness, it's as impossible for him to be saved as it is a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And yet that's possible for God, you see. And so the more we cling to our rationality, the more we cling to our goodness, the more difficult it is for us to have salvation.⁴⁵

Torrance, it appears to me, is accurate in his assessment of Henry. According to Henry, the fall affects the will and not the mind: "Man wills," writes Henry, "not to know God in truth, and makes religious reflection serviceable to moral revolt. But he is still capable of intellectually analyzing rational evidence for the truth-value of assertions about God."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, "The Ground and Grammar of Theology," lectures given at Fuller Theological Seminary, 1981: Lecture 6, Q & A, 20.54-22.42. Transcribed from the audio available at Online: <http://www.gci.org/audio/torrance> [cited 13 November 2011].

⁴⁶ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:226-27. Henry locates the *imago Dei* in the cognitive capacity of humanity and does not see this as inoperative after the Fall. See Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:394, 405; 2:136.

Echoing the same critique, Donald Bloesch rightly observed that Carl Henry and other fundamentalist-evangelicals provided a “transcendence in ontology but not in epistemology, for they are confident that human reason can lay hold of the truth of divine revelation apart from special grace.”⁴⁷ He then outlines a four-stage taxonomy of ways in which contemporary Christianity has sought to respond to the challenges of modernity. Carl Henry is allocated to stage one, a theology of restoration which Bloesch characterises as a return to the rationalistic idealism of the early Enlightenment: “In this approach we arrive at truth by beginning with universal principles and then proceeding to deduce particular conclusions.”⁴⁸

Like Torrance and Bloesch, John Webster makes a trenchant and enlightened case for the need for reason itself to be sanctified and converted if it is to be of use in thinking theologically. “Christian theology is an aspect of reason’s sanctification... good Christian theology can only happen if it is rooted in the reconciliation of reason by the sanctifying presence of God.”⁴⁹ This is a central point which Henry misses, even rejects. According to Henry, reason is a natural faculty seemingly unaffected by the Fall, and as such, reason is not involved in the drama of God’s saving work. As Webster notes of this approach, “Consequently, ‘natural’ reason has been regarded as ‘transcendent’ reason.”⁵⁰ “Holy reason is eschatological reason,”⁵¹ argues Webster. Torrance accepts the basic orientation of Webster’s claims with his dialectical/dialogical method in theology.

Gunton too, follows this basic epistemological stance in discussing Christian claims to knowledge. Gunton glosses 1 Cor 1:22: “For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and

⁴⁷ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992), 252.

⁴⁸ Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 253. Bloesch identifies the influence of Gordon Clark on Henry, along with the influence of Descartes and Leibniz.

⁴⁹ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 10.

⁵⁰ Webster, *Holiness*, 10.

⁵¹ Webster, *Holiness*, 12.

foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God,” as: ‘Modernists seek certainty; postmodernists deny it? What do we claim and proclaim?’⁵² We proclaim Christ, of course. But knowledge which comes by faith is of a different sort, or at least requires a different epistemic orientation – that which comes by faith.

Torrance directly accuses Henry of being a nominalist in his insistence that revelation is propositional and not also personal. Then follows an example: “This paper is white” is not the truth, according to Torrance, but is a statement about the truth; however, according to Henry, “This paper is white” is truth itself. Torrance is thus a metaphysical realist against Henry’s nominalism, presumably in the sense that Torrance thinks Henry rejects universals. Torrance then draws a comparison with law when he says, “I thought lawyers would have seen through this much clearly and more early.” Juridical law is based upon actual law and is utterly consistent. A clue is thus found in juridical law – law testifies to actual Law which imposes itself upon us. Thus it may be that Torrance’s little book on juridical law may say more about his hermeneutics and method than has previously been thought.⁵³

In Tom McCall’s estimation Torrance is a modest foundationalist.⁵⁴ While this, in McCall’s opinion, is better than Thiemann’s coherentism, it is not without its problems. He writes:

Torrance’s epistemological foundationalism will likely continue to draw criticism from his detractors... but the general position seems to be a stable one. If there is a problem with his theology

⁵² Gunton, *Revelation and Reason*, 17.

⁵³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Juridical Law and Physical Law: Toward a Realist Foundation for Human Law* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997). In this work it is legal positivism Torrance is reacting to with his realist epistemology.

⁵⁴ McCall, “Ronald Thiemann, Thomas Torrance and Epistemological Doctrines of Revelation,” 164–165.

of revelation it will appear when he relates his doctrine of revelation to scripture.”⁵⁵

McCall was on the money, as they say, and Henry was one such detractor to make this point. It is thus to Torrance’s doctrines of knowledge, revelation, and Scripture that we turn.

Critical realism

For Torrance the truth can be known and apprehended by the human person and this knowledge represents a genuine disclosure of that which is real. Christian theology and natural science operate with an understanding of knowledge which has its “ontological foundations in objective reality.” Torrance develops his critical realism in two directions, first, from natural science, especially in the work of John Philoponos, Clerk Maxwell, Albert Einstein, and Michael Polanyi, and second, from theology, especially in the work of Athanasius, Anselm, and Barth. Torrance argues that theology and the sciences share a common commitment to a realist epistemology (given an ordered universe), with each responding appropriately to their respective objects of study (*kata physin*).⁵⁶ Each of these disciplines recognises

the impossibility of separating out the way in which knowledge arises from the actual knowledge that it attains. Thus in theology the canons of inquiry that are discerned in the process of knowing are not separable from the body of actual knowledge out of which they arise. In the nature of the case a true and adequate account of theological epistemology cannot be gained apart from substantial exposition of the content of the knowledge of God, and of the knowledge of man and the world as creatures of God... this means that all through theological inquiry we

⁵⁵ McCall, “Ronald Thiemann, Thomas Torrance and Epistemological Doctrines of Revelation,” 165.

⁵⁶ Alister McGrath characterises Torrance’s method as “scientific realism,” in *Reality (A Scientific Theology)*, vol. 2; London: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 130. The alternative to scientific realism would be constructive empiricism, whereby theories are empirically adequate but may not necessarily correspond to reality.

must operate with an *open* epistemology in which we allow the way of our knowing to be clarified and modified *pari passu* with advance in deeper and fuller knowledge of the object, and that we will be unable to set forth an account of that way of knowing in advance but only by looking back from what has been established as knowledge.⁵⁷

Torrance has a particularly high regard for the work of Einstein and often returns to his scientific insights as illustrations of a realist epistemology in practice. From Einstein's "scientific realism" Torrance sees great application for theology through the means of a "critical realism." Accepting the legitimate status of epistemic realism, what is the nature of correspondence between Reality and our understanding of it? The question of correspondence theories of truth is of great importance to our discussion.⁵⁸

Torrance does not advocate a scientific positivism which argues for a direct correspondence between concepts and experience. He made this clear when he wrote:

The fundamental difficulty with abstractive and positivist science... is that it operates with a logical bridge between concepts and experience, both at the start and the finish, that is, in the derivation of concepts from the universe as we experience it and in the verificatory procedures relating concepts back to experience... This is not only a difficulty, but an impossibility, for this is not and cannot be any logical bridge between ideas and existence. There is indeed a deep and wonderful correlation between concepts and experience, and science operates with that correlation everywhere, but since there is no logical bridge the scientist does not work with rules for inductive procedures, and

⁵⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 10.

⁵⁸ See the discussion of Torrance's christocentric analogy in regards to a "created correspondence" in Roland Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence: In the Theologies of Thomas F. Torrance and Eberhard Jüngel* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1995), 47–57.

cannot finally verify his claims to have discovered the structures of reality by logical means.⁵⁹

Torrance also rejects a “naïve realism” in which there is a direct correspondence between knowledge and reality.⁶⁰ What Torrance does advocate is a “critical realism.”⁶¹ Perhaps one of the better known advocates of critical realism in biblical theology today is that of N.T. Wright. In his 1992 work he defines critical realism as:

A way of describing the process of “knowing” that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence “realism”), while also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiralling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence “critical”). This path leads to critical reflection on the products of our enquiry into “reality”, so that our assertions about “reality” acknowledge their own provisionality. Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning reality is independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower.⁶²

Unless Torrance is misunderstood, we must understand that realism involves at least three elements, identified by Andrew Moore as: ontological (realism vs. idealism); epistemological

⁵⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 76.

⁶⁰ See Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency and Divine Presence*, 94–101. With a phrase borrowed from Nancy Murphy, Spjuth characterizes Torrance’s critical realism as “chastened modern” (98).

⁶¹ See Paul M. Achtemeier, “The Truth of Tradition: Critical Realism in the Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre and T.F. Torrance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1996): 355–74; John D. Morrison, “Heidegger, Correspondence Truth and the Realist Theology of Thomas Forsyth Torrance,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 69 (1997): 139–55; John D. Morrison, *Knowledge of the Self-Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997).

⁶² Nicholas T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 35.

(realism vs. empiricism); and semantic (realism vs. linguistic idealism).⁶³ These three elements are distinct and confusion often results in insufficiently distinguishing between them. David Munchin observes, “The debate concerning realism becomes therefore a matter of epistemic degrees...”⁶⁴ So Torrance asserts:

Belief is not something that is freely chosen or arbitrary, that is, without evidential grounds, for that would be highly subjective, a mere fancy. Nor is it something hypothetical or conditional, for then it would not be genuine, since we would entertain it, as it were, with our fingers crossed. Rather does belief arise in us, as we have seen, because it is thrust upon us by the nature of the reality with which we are in experiential contact. It arises as we allow our minds to fall under the compelling power of an intelligible structure or order inherent in the nature of things which we cannot rationally or in good conscience resist.⁶⁵

This leads us to ask about the relationship between Scripture and theology within Torrance’s scientific theology.

Scripture and dogmatics

There is an inseparable relation between Scripture and dogmatics for Torrance, which may be explained around three interrelated movements. First, dogmatics explains Scripture and Scripture explains Christ. Second, Christ explains Scripture. Third, dogmatics is only rightly conducted when Christ is rightly known.⁶⁶ As a consequence, Scripture stands in a middle relation between Christ and dogmatics, as the mediator of Christ, but it needs illumination

⁶³ Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

⁶⁴ Munchin, *Is Theology a Science?* 190.

⁶⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 13.

⁶⁶ These relations are articulated in Robert T. Walker, “Editor’s Foreword,” in Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), xxvi.

itself from both ends, from Christ and from dogmatics. The result is that Christ the Word is known both through and in the Word written, which means the written Word has a unique and normative authority in our knowledge of him.

There is a *theological* reason for Torrance's method. For Torrance revelation is always divine self-disclosure in which God communicates *himself* to his creatures. This self-revelation was made decisively through the Incarnation. Scripture thus plays a secondary (but indispensable) role to the self-revelation of God through Christ. In Torrance's theology revelation determines both Scripture and the *depositum fide*. The *depositum fide* is a gracious work of God in which knowledge of God through Christ is made possible in a personal and participatory way in the knower.

While Scripture is an imperfect and inadequate text, when it is appropriated by God's full, final and Holy Word, Jesus Christ, it is made to serve his reconciling revelation and infallible communication of his truth. Thus, explicating the relationship between the Word incarnate and the Word written becomes one of Torrance's central tasks. In a sermon on Matthew 18:1-22, "Christ in the Midst of His Church," Torrance narrates the relationship between Christ and Scripture by means of a meditation on the fact of "Christ in us." Christ lodges permanently within us by means of his Word, but they are more than merely human words, they are "creative words," "personal words," "life-giving words" which create personal communion and presence, they "germinate in the human heart and create room for Christ there."⁶⁷ Christ and Holy Scripture are in such an intimate union that Torrance can say:

It is as we allow the Word of the Gospel to saturate our minds and imaginations, to penetrate into our memories, and to master all our thinking, that Christ is born within us, that all that He is and has done becomes, as it were, imprinted upon us within, and becomes so truly and permanently the very centre of our being

⁶⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, "Christ in the Midst of His Church," in *When Christ Comes and Comes Again* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1957), 110.

that we are transformed into His image and likeness, and even partake of His nature.⁶⁸

Here the goal of Scripture is clearly stated,⁶⁹ related as it is to the Word incarnate. We also begin to see how Torrance clarifies how the Christological analogy and the Chalcedonian formula are integral to his understanding of the relation between the Word written and the Living Word.⁷⁰

Between realism and idealism

Torrance's use of Scripture avoids a fundamentalist and Roman Catholic foundationalism on the one hand, and on the other hand, a liberal and neo-Protestant idealism; both approaches Torrance considers to be mistaken.⁷¹ In relation to fundamentalist-evangelicalism, Christian dogmas or doctrines are not to be read directly off the pages of Scripture in a propositionalist kind of way:

The assumption that the Scriptures are impregnated with universal, changeless divine truths which can be read off the sentential sequences of the inspired text, provided that it is properly or authoritatively interpreted, is admittedly the view

⁶⁸ Torrance, "Christ in the Midst of His Church," 110.

⁶⁹ For more on the ultimate goal of salvation see Myk Habets, *Theosis in the Theology of Thomas Torrance* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).

⁷⁰ For his articulation of this point see Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (ed. Robert T. Walker; Downers Grove: IVP, 2009), 333–40.

⁷¹ Torrance deals with both fundamentalism and liberalism on many occasions. See for instance Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 36; *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 1–26; and *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 52–83. Barth avoided both positions as well but in Hunsinger's words he labelled the two extremes "literalism" and "expressivism." See George Hunsinger, "Beyond Literalism and Expressivism: Karl Barth's Hermeneutical Realism," in *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 210–25. In his own work John Webster labels both poles as objectification and spiritualisation respectively, and argues that both are pneumatologically deficient. See Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 33–36.

that was long held, and often still is held, by Roman Catholic and Protestant fundamentalism alike.⁷²

Fundamentalisms of this sort result in a position in which faith is placed *in* Scripture directly rather than in that to which Scripture bears witness – God’s being and act. To mistake the text of Scripture for the truths they seek to reveal is to adopt some form of nominalism or extreme realism.⁷³ According to Torrance:

in a scientific theology, on the contrary, we are concerned not with thinking thoughts, far less with thinking statements themselves, but with thinking realities through thoughts and statements, and with developing an understanding of God from his self-revelation mediated to us by the Holy Scriptures in the Church, in which the connections we think are objectively and ontologically controlled by the intrinsic connections of God’s *self*-communication as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁷⁴

The second position Torrance distances himself from is that of liberalism or neo-Protestantism in which Christian dogmas or doctrines are reached by simple empirical observations of uninterpreted facts, that is, simply existentially.⁷⁵ This form of neo-Protestantism is considered the by-product of the scientific world of

⁷² Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 7-8. Similar ideas are expressed in Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, see especially 17.

⁷³ As background to Torrance’s discussion on truthfulness and the Truth see Thomas F. Torrance, “Truth and Authority: Theses on Truth,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (1972): 215-42, especially thesis 5. Torrance’s commitment to critical realism is also at play here.

⁷⁴ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 8.

⁷⁵ Torrance believes contemporary existentialists to have distorted the referring function of language so that people are thrown back upon themselves to supply meaning, something already seen in the late medieval times. Torrance concludes that modern exegesis has much in common with the allegorical exegesis of the Augustinian tradition and that “as we look back upon allegorical exegesis with a little pathetic ridicule, so they in the days ahead will look back upon modern existentialist exegesis with the same sort of pathetic ridicule because it was oblique and rejected the *intentio recta*.” Torrance, “Truth and Authority,” 221, cf. 219.

Newton. This was a radically dualist conception of science that carried over into theology, exemplified, as Torrance notes, by Hermann's distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*.⁷⁶

Depth exegesis

In distancing himself from these two positions Torrance argues that what the theologian is really seeking to do is to penetrate the depths of meaning that Scripture is witness to. Thus a genuinely theological reading of Scripture is attempted. The theologian "operates with the whole apostolic tradition in its stratified depth in order to allow himself to be directed from all sides to the objective realities under the creative impact of which all the apostolic tradition incorporated in the New Testament took its rise and shape in the primitive church."⁷⁷ Throughout this process the theologian is under the influence of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, through Scripture and beyond. This process involves a form of spiralling upwards from one level to another as successive layers of meaning and order are uncovered. This is the essence of Torrance's depth exegesis, realist hermeneutics, and theological interpretation of Scripture.⁷⁸

Torrance is highly indebted to Barth's doctrine of Scripture, especially his 1930 work on Anselm, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, which Torrance considers to be the turning point in Barth's theological method.⁷⁹ Scripture contains a word of God in rational form. This word is not an end in itself but is accompanied by the

⁷⁶ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 8-9; and *Preaching Christ Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 42-43.

⁷⁷ Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 10.

⁷⁸ See Richardson, "Revelation, Scripture, and Mystical Apprehension of Divine Knowledge," 185-203; and Colyer, *The Nature of Doctrine in T.F. Torrance's Theology*. I am aware that the metaphors suggest an incompatible spiralling "upwards" and a burrowing "downwards," but these are simply analogies and thus spatial imagery is just that, imagery.

⁷⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (1962 repr.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 183.

living Word of God in the *event* of revelation.⁸⁰ Due to this event true knowledge of the Object of our study is also true knowledge of the Subject – God himself. This involves penetrating into its inner rationality: the practice of depth exegesis.⁸¹ Elsewhere Torrance refers to depth exegesis as a “cross-level movement of thought” in which we understand the text and the *realities* to which it bears witness.⁸² It is also a “bi-polarity” (dialectic) between the words and the Word, the worldly form of revelation and its divine content that renders Scripture a *witness* to the self-revelation of God.⁸³ Torrance traces his method of depth exegesis back to the Athanasian difference between *lalia* and *Logos*, according to which the *lalia* or

⁸⁰ See the articulation of this in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD] (4 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956-1975), I/1, 113. According to a Barthian exposition of revelation as event which Torrance subscribes to, “the term revelation refers *not to the objective self-manifestation alone, but equally to the act of faith in which it is heard and received and obeyed.*” Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of his Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 30 (italics in original). See Christina Baxter, “The Nature and Place of Scripture in the Church Dogmatics,” in *Theology Beyond Christendom: Essays on the Centenary of the Birth of Karl Barth* (ed. John Thompson; Allison Park: Pickwick, 1986), 35. In a sermon Torrance explains this event when he says, “That is how God always speaks to us, not directly out of the blue, as it were, nor simply through the witness of others. It is when both these come together, the vertical Word of God from above, and the horizontal witness of others, that we know God and hear His Word personally and directly for ourselves.” Torrance, “The Lamb of God,” in *When Christ Comes and Comes Again*, 56.

⁸¹ The term “depth exegesis” is taken from William Manson. See Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 110; and Thomas F. Torrance, “Introduction,” in William Manson, *Jesus and the Christian* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1967), 9-14. The idea, however, is directly attributed by Torrance to the Greek Fathers. See Thomas F. Torrance, “Introduction: Biblical Hermeneutics and General Hermeneutics,” in *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 5.

⁸² Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 99.

⁸³ T.F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), 111-12.

human words are to be interpreted in terms of the *Logos*.⁸⁴ On other occasions Torrance refers to this method as a “stereoscopic” reading of Scripture in which the *scope* of the Bible means its sacramental frame of reference, so that we must look not only at the text of Scripture but through it to the reality it signifies. When theologically interpreted, Jesus Christ becomes the *skopos* of the Bible.⁸⁵ Torrance is explicit at this point:

Strictly speaking Christ himself is the scope of the Scriptures, so that it is only through focusing constantly upon him, dwelling in his Word and assimilating his Mind, that the interpreter can discern the real meaning of the Scriptures. What is required then is a theological interpretation of the Scriptures under the direction of their ostensive reference to God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ and within the general perspective of faith.⁸⁶

Accordingly, the function of theological understanding or *intelligere* is the act of reading (*legere*) the text embedded within (*intus*) the object. Torrance remarks:

God reveals himself to us by his Word in the Holy Scriptures, but our task in reading the outward text is to get at its inner meaning and basis, to read it at the deeper level of the solid truth on which the text rests. By a special act of the understanding that goes beyond mere reading, we penetrate into the objective *ratio* of the Word which enlightens and informs us.⁸⁷

Ratio carries within it a three-fold sense: first, it refers to the means we employ (noetic *ratio*); and, second, the end of our quest (ontic *ratio*); but ultimately, third, to the transcendent rationality of God behind all this (*ratio veritatis* or *ratio* of God). “*Ratio* is used then in a dimension of depth,” writes Torrance, “of the ultimate

⁸⁴ See Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 5, 167.

⁸⁵ This is articulated in Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 100-107; *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 166-169; and *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 88-89.

⁸⁶ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 107.

⁸⁷ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 186.

Truth, the *ratio* of God himself; of the words and acts of God in Revelation, the *ratio* proper to the object of faith; and of man's knowledge of the object, the knowing *ratio* which corresponds to the *ratio* of the object."⁸⁸

This final *ratio veritatis* is identical with God's being; it is the Divine Word consubstantial with the Father. Theological activity is derived from and is determined by the activity of God himself in his Word, for it is that Word (Christ) communicated through Holy Scripture which is the real object of our knowledge. When our statements are simply and formally identical with statements of the text of Scripture in which Christ speaks his Word to us, they are directly authoritative. Any other theological statements have a derived and thus lesser authority status and are constantly open to revision in light of the Word of God. Recall the distinction of Vanhoozer's between the magisterial authority of Holy Scripture and the ministerial authority of churchly interpretations.⁸⁹ But theology is not content merely to recite or repeat biblical texts but rather seeks to make statements about the truth revealed in the inner text, and so must seek a conformity to the truth at a deeper level beyond formal conformity to the external text. "Hence, scientific theological activity begins where straightforward biblical quotations end, precisely because it is the task of theology to penetrate to the solid truth upon which biblical statements rest."⁹⁰ Torrance's method of depth exegesis or realist hermeneutics thus involves taking the biblical text and seeking to discern the inner, deeper structures of reality or truth inherent in it. It never leaves behind the

⁸⁸ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 187.

⁸⁹ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Interpreting Scripture Between the Rock of Biblical Studies and the Hard Place of Systematic Theology: The State of the Evangelical (Dis)union," delivered at *Renewing the Evangelical Mission* Conference held at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary from October 13-15, 2009.

⁹⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 188.

text for another for this is *Holy Scripture*.⁹¹ But it never rests content on the mere *ipssima vox*.

Torrance is insistent on the fact that the “voice” of God must be heard through Scripture alone – *sola scriptura*, but not *nuda scriptura*. In a sermon on Christ the redeemer Torrance asserts that “We cannot see Jesus just by piecing together picturesque historical detail about Him,”⁹² clearly a rejection of the historical-critical method as an end in itself in biblical exegesis. Rather, “Jesus must be transfigured before our very eyes.”⁹³ This is accomplished through his cross and resurrection, by means of which he now stands at the door of the church and knocks, and whose voice is heard inside the church “speaking to us out of the pages of the Bible.”⁹⁴ Torrance speaks of this as a miracle:

We cannot see Jesus, for He has withdrawn Himself from our sight; and we will not see Him face to face until He comes again – but we *can hear* His *voice* speaking to us in the midst of the Church on earth. That is the perpetual miracle of the Bible, for it is the inspired instrument through which the voice of Christ is still to be heard... The Church is, in fact, the Community of the Voice of God...⁹⁵

Theology is an inherently rational discipline for the precise reason that faith itself is inherently rational. In revelation God himself is being communicated so that in the Word we are confronted with an Object which is Subject, that is, with one who is both person and message. “Hence, Christian Theology cannot tolerate the idea that faith is not rational in its own right and that it is the task of theology to give it rational interpretation through employing conceptual forms drawn from elsewhere.”⁹⁶ From this premise Torrance concludes that the real issue is one of *ratio*, in

⁹¹ For a recent account of what it means to call Scripture “holy” see Webster, *Holy Scripture*.

⁹² Torrance, “When Christ Comes to the Church,” 26.

⁹³ Torrance, “When Christ Comes to the Church,” 26.

⁹⁴ Torrance, “When Christ Comes to the Church,” 27.

⁹⁵ Torrance, “When Christ Comes to the Church,” 27.

⁹⁶ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 182.

both senses of the word, *rationality* and *method*, and this is what defines a scientific theology or dogmatics. Scientific theology or dogmatics is thus different from biblical theology which remains content with the linguistic and phenomenological exegesis of the Scriptures. Theology must press on to inquire into the relation between biblical thought and speech and their source in the truth and being of God. It is the specific task of theology to inquire into what we ourselves have to say on the basis of the biblical revelation, and to articulate its relation to the object in such a way that our knowledge may be established as true. Torrance goes even further in suggesting that unless this happens “we have not engaged upon genuine exegesis, for then we are setting aside the all-important relation between the external text and the inner meaning and objective basis upon which it rests.”⁹⁷ We may conclude from this that Torrance would only consider *theological* interpretation of Scripture as ultimately worthy of the epithet “Christian exegesis.”

Torrance is trying to clarify how an exegesis of Scripture by a believer is different from that of the unbeliever. One could rephrase this somewhat to show that Torrance was pointing out the necessary ecclesial commitments and contexts for a correct reading of Scripture. According to Torrance “the decisive point in interpretation is not reached until there is inquiry into the reality signified. True interpretation arises where perception of the meaning of the letter of Holy Scripture and understanding of the reality it indicates are one.”⁹⁸ This form of argument is another application of one of Torrance’s fundamental commitments in theological science: the *kata physik* nature of scientific inquiry in

⁹⁷ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 189. This is followed by a clarification: “No exegesis that is content only with noetic rationality can be regarded as properly scientific, for scientific activity must penetrate through noetic rationality into the ontic rationality of its basis and so lay bare its inner necessity.”

⁹⁸ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*.

which the method of inquiry is dictated by the object under study.⁹⁹ “It belongs to the rationality of theology that the reason should operate only with objects of faith, for faith is the specific mode of rationality which is demanded of the reason when it is directed to the knowledge of God.”¹⁰⁰

A depth exegesis of Scripture can be illustrated by employing an analogy that Polanyi used in communicating what he meant by “tacit knowledge” and “indwelling,” that of a blind man’s walking stick. Gunton summaries it in the following way:

When a blind man uses a stick... he learns about the world by their instrumentality, *from* them *to* the object of the knowledge. Employing these tools tacitly, we *indwell* them, “this indwelling being logically similar to the way we live in our body... [Indwelling] applies here in a logical sense as affirming that the parts of the external world, when interiorised, function in the same way as our body functions when we attend from it to things outside”. It is the fact that there is a real relation, in which there is a rational linkage between mind and matter, that makes the generalisation from body to tool to sophisticated theory a possibility... The way in which our bodies and by extension our tools, both physical and theoretical, make a real indwelling in the world possible is fundamental to Polanyi’s case. Without it, there would be no knowledge of the world at all. Thus the theory of indwelling is the obverse of the theory of tacit knowing.¹⁰¹

When applied directly to a realist hermeneutics, Scripture is the walking cane, the medium through which reality can be conceived,

⁹⁹ Or alternatively: the nature of the object prescribes the mode of rationality proper to its investigation. See a potted summary of this position in Torrance, “Truth and Authority,” 223-24.

¹⁰⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 192.

¹⁰¹ Colin E. Gunton, “The Truth of Christology,” in *Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi’s Thought for Christian Faith and Life* (ed. T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: Handsel, 1980), 98.

and yet it is not the reality itself but points to it.¹⁰² According to Polanyi, things are only understood by indwelling them, not merely by observing them.¹⁰³ Hence, when Torrance applies this philosophy of science, or epistemology, to theological method, he concludes that we only know the truth through indwelling the Word, both written and incarnate.¹⁰⁴ In this light evangelical exegesis should not be the mere study of a text but a way of life in which God, through Christ, and by the Holy Spirit, leads us into a deeper communion with himself through the Word written.¹⁰⁵ The ends of exegesis are thus kept squarely at the forefront of Torrance's theological interpretation of Scripture.

Inspiration and revelation

Torrance's revised Barthian doctrine of Scripture regards revelation as dynamic because it is initiated by Christ and enabled by the Holy Spirit. This means Scripture is not, strictly speaking, revelation but a vehicle for revelation or a medium through which God's revelation in Christ and by the Spirit can be given. Donald Bloesch is one of a number of contemporary evangelicals who follow this line of reasoning carefully. Bloesch maintains that "The Bible in and of itself is not the Word of God – divine revelation – but it is translucent to this revelation by virtue of the Spirit of God working

¹⁰² It is Webster's contention that "the referential or signifying function of Scripture is... a primary element in Torrance's understanding of biblical interpretation." John Webster, "T.F. Torrance on Scripture," Keynote address at the annual meeting of the T.F. Torrance Theological Fellowship, Montreal (6 November 2009), 12.

¹⁰³ Michael Polanyi, "Science and Man's Place in the Universe," in *Science as a Cultural Force* (ed. H. Woolf; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1964), 54-76; and Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 21.

¹⁰⁴ Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 68-106, presents a similar view.

¹⁰⁵ Though not identical, see the sort of participatory exegesis recommended by Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

within it and within the mind of the reader and hearer.”¹⁰⁶ Scripture is a human medium of the divine Word and as such cannot be, according to Torrance, simply mistaken for God’s living eternal Word who is Jesus Christ. All human speech must have a reservation about it until all is revealed by God. Torrance brings out this eschatological character of revelation in his early work *Theological Science*:

While God has made His Word audible and apprehensible with our human speech and thought, refusing to be limited by their inadequacy in making Himself known to us, He nevertheless refuses to be understood merely from within the conceptual framework of our natural thought and language but demands of that framework a logical reconstruction in accordance with His Word. Hence a theology faithful to what God has revealed and done in Jesus Christ must involve a powerful element of apocalyptic, that is epistemologically speaking, an eschatological suspension of logical form in order to keep our thought ever open to what is radically new.¹⁰⁷

The relation between God’s self-revelation and Scripture is fundamentally asymmetrical.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Torrance is even willing to describe the Bible as a product of human authorship and thus

¹⁰⁶ Donald G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration, and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 27. Bloesch’s use of “translucent” is reminiscent of Torrance’s language of Scripture as a “transparent medium” through which “the divine Light shines from the face of Jesus Christ into our hearts.” Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, 12, and *Theology in Reconstruction*, 257. In addition to Bloesch see other contemporary evangelical theologians who share the same basic convictions, especially: Grenz, *Renewing the Center*; and Alister E. McGrath, *A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 53-118; and *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

¹⁰⁷ Torrance, *Theological Science*, 279-80.

¹⁰⁸ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 96.

“faulty and errant.”¹⁰⁹ However, due to the dual-authorship of Scripture, Torrance regards its human imperfections as the very means through which God lays hold of our sinful, fallen human condition and redeems it. This is yet another reason he sees for not regarding the text of Scripture as the truth or as the Word of God in any absolute or final sense. Scripture points to, and is the divinely chosen medium for, the revelation of God’s eternal Word. I at least would want to affirm that it would thus be closer to the truth to say Holy Scripture *is* revelation, but must not be misunderstood as the *end* of revelation or as authoritative as Christ the Word.

Torrance develops this realist hermeneutic more fully in a discussion on the referring relation of language. If statements are absolutely adequate to the object, asks Torrance, then how can we distinguish the object from statements about it? If language and statements are to perform their denotative function adequately, directing us to reality/truth beyond themselves in such a way that there takes place a disclosure of reality/truth, then, Torrance concludes, they must have a measure of inadequacy in order to be differentiated from that to which they refer.¹¹⁰ “The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments rightly evoke from us profound respect and veneration not because of what they are in themselves but because of the divine revelation mediated in and through them. This is why we speak of them as ‘Holy’ Scriptures.”¹¹¹ Barth’s formulation of the dynamic between God’s revelation in Christ and in Scripture was to propose his famous three-fold distinction of the Word: the living Word, the written Word, and the proclaimed Word. Barth understands that only when the written or proclaimed Word is united with the revealed Word does it become revelation proper. Torrance, in line with Barth, considers the Word written to point to God’s revelation, yet for Torrance, revelation cannot be detached from the Bible for in space-time this is how God has “uniquely and

¹⁰⁹ Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics*, 10.

¹¹⁰ See the discussion in Torrance, “Truth and Authority,” 229-31, especially 231.

¹¹¹ Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, 95. In a footnote Torrance then directs the reader to Barth’s *CD*, I/2, Ch. III on “Holy Scripture,” 457–537.

sovereignly coordinated the biblical word with his eternal Word, and adapted the written form and contents of the Bible to his Word, in such a way that the living Voice of God is made to resound through the Bible to all who have ears to hear.”¹¹²

Critical conclusions by way of a summary

As I conclude, it is clear that I am favourably disposed to the theological methodology of Torrance, as opposed to that of Henry. Henry’s theological method does fall foul of what Kevin Vanhoozer has dramatically termed “epic classicism,” Lindbeck’s “cognitive-propositional” approach.¹¹³ It is also clear where I disagree with Henry and where I might want to push back on his fundamentalist-leaning ideas.

However, before Carl Henry is dismissed as some fundamentalist fossil of an embarrassing history, I do think there are aspects of his critique and his perspective which are important to note and which most evangelicals will appreciate.

It can appear that Torrance sees Scripture as less than revelation and that it only *becomes* revelation through personal communion with Christ by the Spirit. Indeed, if that is the case then evangelicals would want to push back, with Henry, and say that our response to revelation does not make it revelation but rather makes it *revelatory* and personally affective. We must say, then, that Scripture *is* divine revelation regardless of whether or not one is in union with Christ. In the words of McCall:

Perhaps what Torrance needs is a strong dose of his own epistemological medicine. The trajectory of his thought might well result in belief in scripture as the written revelation standing

¹¹² Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, 88.

¹¹³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 83.

in a direct but subordinate relation to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.¹¹⁴

If this were the case then Torrance would be able to affirm, with Carl Henry, that Scripture *is* revelation, without this being a denial that ultimate or final Revelation is found in Jesus Christ alone. Scripture is revelation as far as it is a divinely given witness to the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the Spirit.

I conclude with the words Marguerite Shuster used to finish her short article on Torrance's theological method: "What is truth? The True Man said, 'I am the truth.' True men, responding in the faith of God's grace, can start nowhere else than to proclaim, 'Indeed, *he* is the truth.'"¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ McCall, "Ronald Thiemann, Thomas Torrance and Epistemological Doctrines of Revelation," 167.

¹¹⁵ Marguerite Shuster, "'What is Truth?' An Exploration of Thomas F. Torrance's Epistemology," *Studio Biblica Et Theologia* 3 (1973): 56.