



## Review article



**Thomas F. Torrance, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry* (Thomas F. Torrance Collected Studies I; ed. Jock Stein; Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2012), pp. 292. Retail price: £21.00; Web price: \$25.60 (at [www.wipfandstock.com/](http://www.wipfandstock.com/))**

*Gospel, Church, and Ministry* is a fascinating, instructive and revealing collection of lesser-known writings by T. F. Torrance spanning a period of almost sixty years. It is the first of a three-volume series gathering together some of the most significant of his out-of-print or otherwise not easily accessible writings. Jock Stein has done a fine job of selecting, tracing and editing what is a very readable and handsomely-produced volume. He contributes an excellent and informative introduction.

*GCM* comprises twelve very different chapters, arranged roughly chronologically (1940–97):

1. My Parish Ministry: Alyth 1940–43 [memoirs]
2. The Church in the World
3. The Humanity of Christ in the Sacramental Life of the Church
4. The Meaning of Order
5. Consecration and Ordination
6. Service in Jesus Christ
7. The Church in the Last Quarter of the Twentieth Century
8. God, Destiny, and Suffering
9. Eldership in the Reformed Church
10. The Ministry of Women
11. Preaching Christ Today
12. Legal and Evangelical Priests

Diverse in subject, size, occasion, and type of composition, these seminal articles and addresses illustrate Torrance's vision of theology, prayer, church and ministry (in the wider sense) as bound up essentially together in the service of the gospel.

The result is that *GCM* is something of an eye-opener. It provides a highly revealing picture not simply of Torrance's theology but of Torrance the man, and equally of the way in which his theology, even when difficult, was never 'ivory tower', but acutely engaged with fundamental issues and indeed prescient in foreseeing, for example, the increase in state control, the collapse of communism and the rise of militant Islam.

*GCM* is significant in two further ways: (i) it highlights, often more fully and powerfully than elsewhere in Torrance, well-known features of his theology, e.g. the radical significance of Christ's humanity; (ii) it brings to the fore fundamental but neglected or little-known aspects of his theology, such as the diaconate, eldership and the ministry of women.

The following is a select summary of key points from the various chapters.

1. The memoirs are a truly absorbing read. Not written until forty or so years later, they are in their detail a remarkable testament to Torrance's prodigious powers of memory and keen interest in the people, places, history and events of parish ministry. More importantly, these hitherto unpublished memoirs provide a vivid picture of his own ministry. Paramount was not just the time spent in sermon preparation ('most of each morning and afternoon') but in visiting and praying with people in their homes ('a major part of my ministry'). Again and again he found it was the combination of preaching, prayer and personal contact which brought the gospel home to people, a lesson further reinforced for him at New College. He also found '[T]he correlation of Holy Communion with pastoral visitation [...] a very enriching experience'.
2. This notable wartime address to the Presbytery of Meigle makes three main points. It calls for (i) a recovery of the distinctive message of the gospel with its revolutionary transforming power; (ii) a radical overhaul of the church's organization, finance, education and communication (if she is to lead society and not lag terribly behind it); (iii) a recovery of foreign mission. The powerful

and prophetic nature of Torrance's address gave him the reputation of being a political radical(!): 'By throwing the social environment into ferment and upheaval, by her aggressive evangelism with its faith that rebels against all wrong and evil, and by a new machinery through which her voice will be heard as never before, the Church will press toward a new order.' (81)

3. Torrance argues that the Sacraments are concerned not 'only with two dimensions, with the act of God and the act of human response' but 'above all with the third dimension [...] the new humanity in Christ who is God and man'. The real substance of the Sacraments is the new, risen humanity of Christ and Torrance analyses the reasons why, when strongly present in Calvin, John Knox, Robert Bruce and others, this has been so neglected in Scottish theology to the great impoverishment of devotion, Christian life and understanding of the Sacraments.
4. Torrance has a full discussion of the nature and meaning of order, the order of creation, the restorative order shadowed forth in the Old Testament, the new order in Christ, and the ordering of the church as she shares in the order of Christ. Throughout, Torrance is vividly aware of the importance of good order, and yet of the essentially ambiguous and provisional nature of church order in space and time as she waits for the final order of the new creation.
5. "Consecration and Ordination" is an examination of the doctrine of ministry, biblically, historically and theologically. It considers the biblical evidence for the meaning and manner of consecration in the Old Testament (priest, king and prophet) and New (ministry of Word and Sacrament), and at how the various passages have been interpreted historically. Torrance then gathers up the discussion in a valuable theological account of the nature, purpose and manner of ordination in Reformed understanding and the Church of Scotland.
6. Christ's *preaching* ministry has not been seen in its integral relation to his *diaconal* ministry and hence the Church's ministries, of service of Word and Sacrament and of service to others, have

been allowed to drift apart with ‘disastrous consequences’ for each (158). Torrance writes, ‘It is an immense tragedy that throughout its history the Church has so often lacked a proper *diaconate* to guide and prompt it in the ministry of the divine mercy [...]’ (157). Torrance’s analysis of the mission of the Church and his passionate plea that the ‘two ministries are essentially complementary and mutually dependent’ (156), that ‘Christ clothed with his gospel’ cannot be separated from ‘Christ clothed with [human] need’, has radical and far-reaching implications.

7. It is hardly surprising that several deep-rooted convictions came together in Torrance’s Moderatorial Closing Address to the Church of Scotland General Assembly of 1976: the spiritual crisis gripping the church; the bankruptcy of Marxism and of narrow ‘scientism’; the need to move beyond ‘ecclesiastical pragmatism and legalism’ to bring ‘the great truths of Christ clothed with his gospel to bear directly upon the heart and soul of our people’ (166); and the imperative to ‘recover both genuine preaching of the Word and genuine pastoral visitation’ together with ‘the eldership revitalized as a spiritual office’ (169 f.). Despite the depth of the challenge, Torrance remains ‘full of hope for the future’.
8. Of his Moderatorial visit to the Middle East, Torrance has three abiding impressions: the continuing presence and witness of the Orthodox Church through their far-sighted and tenacious retention of churches and property; the obscenity of Christian division at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; and the horror of the *Yad Vashem* Holocaust Memorial where the only possible response is to point to Jesus’ cry of dereliction as that of God himself sharing our suffering with us. As Torrance reflects on mission to Arab and Jew, he says ‘much deeper dialogue is needed than ever before between Jew and Muslim about God and suffering, about God and destiny, about the unappeasable agony and guilt of mankind’ (179). Torrance believes there is an unparalleled opportunity here for Christian engagement with Arab and Jew but one in which, without imposing Western culture, the message of reconciliation

is really lived out, in word and in act and in combination with medical care.

9. A careful analysis both of the biblical evidence for elders and of the history of the eldership in the church, particularly in the Reformed tradition and the Church of Scotland, leads Torrance to the conclusions that 'there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call 'elders' (188) and 'it would seem to be the case that our elders now fulfil a ministry that in the New Testament itself is ascribed to deacons' (193). The transference of many of the functions of deacons to elders (such as assisting at the Lord's Supper) has left the eldership 'without biblical support as an evangelical office' and room being made for deacons 'only in a very attenuated form' (199). Torrance therefore argues that the two offices should be integrated as 'elder-deacons' (193 f.) and that this would not only restore the wholeness of the evangelical *diakonia* but deepen the 'mutuality and complementarity between the presbyteral ministry of Word and Sacrament and the diaconal ministry of shared obedience to Christ' (199 f.).
  
10. '[I]n Christ there is no intrinsic reason or *theological* ground for the exclusion of women, any more than of Greeks or Gentiles, from the holy ministry, for the old divisions in the fallen world have been overcome in Christ and in his body the Church' (206). In his powerful treatment of the ministry of women and of the various arguments against it (such as that it is unwarranted by biblical or church tradition, or that only a man can represent Christ at the Eucharist and be his 'image' at the altar), Torrance examines the biblical and historical precedents and discusses at some length the nature of human imaging of God and the role of the celebrant at the Eucharist. Torrance concludes that far from there being 'no intrinsic theological reasons why women should not be ordained to the holy ministry of Word and Sacrament [...] there are genuine theological reasons why they may be ordained and consecrated in the service of the gospel' (218).

11. 'Preaching Christ is both an evangelical and a theological activity' for in the New Testament it is both *kerygmatic* and *didactic*, 'both *evangelical* and *theological*', involving 'the proclamation and teaching of Christ as he is actually presented' there (220). If there is one chapter in *GCM* which most deserves to be most studied and read again and again it is "Preaching Christ Today". Torrance makes three main points with vivid clarity and force:
- (i) *The need to recover the biblical wholeness*. The disastrous separation of *kerygma* and *didache*, the historical and the theological, tears Christ apart and emasculates the gospel: 'The historical Jesus and the theological Christ cannot be separated from one another without grave misunderstanding of the gospel and serious detriment to the faith of the Church' (228 f.);
  - (ii) *The unbroken relation between the sheer humanity of Jesus and God*. Torrance outlines at some length here what it means to assert, in the context of modern scientific culture, the absolute oneness in being between Jesus and God: '[I]f Jesus Christ really is God incarnate, and divine and human nature are inseparably united in his one person in an utterly unique way, then Jesus Christ himself in the undiminished fullness of his humanity and deity becomes the very centre of the Church's mission' (245);
  - (iii) *The Cross of Christ and the radical significance of his humanity*. The centrality of the Cross, the fact that it is both *God* on the Cross for us in Jesus Christ and *Jesus as man* in our place, this for Torrance is the uniqueness of Christ, *God as man* in radical substitution for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. 'Now in preaching this, I believe that it is concentration upon the vicarious humanity of Christ in the Incarnation and atonement, in death and resurrection, that is particularly important for us today' (248). Torrance then elaborates, more fully, trenchantly and powerfully than he does anywhere else, the significance of the vicarious humanity of Christ (248–56). Nowhere else does Torrance unpack so fully its radical implications or how they are to be properly understood, and no other pages in *GCM* deserve such concentrated attention or such careful thinking through.

12. *GCM* ends with a short but highly instructive account of Calvin's understanding of priesthood as revealed in his homilies and prayers. The primary office of the priest is as *teacher*, bringing and interpreting the Word of God to the people (265) but it is also as *mediator*, ministering the response of the people to God in the daily oblation of prayer and the Eucharistic sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving at the Lord's Supper, in both of which the priestly office in mediation is to 'offer the death of Christ by faith and prayer' (267–9). It is notable that for Calvin, daily offering 'the death of Christ by faith and prayer' is also enjoined on all the Church as part of our regular worship (268 f.). Christ remains the once-for-all and one true priest, but into his priesthood the whole Church has been called as a royal priesthood, while within that some are called to a special office of priesthood in teaching and Eucharistic mediation.

Although richly diverse in its range of topics, *Gospel, Church, and Ministry* nevertheless hangs cohesively together with minimum overlap through the way in which the same theology is brought to bear on and illuminate the various issues. It can be highly commended as a fine example of theology in the service of the Church and as a most readable book which merits and will certainly repay careful study.

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