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Torrance on the Ascension

AAR, Atlanta, 29.10.10

First, let me express my thanks to you for this invitation to speak at the Torrance Fellowship today. Tom Torrance was one of my most distinguished predecessors at New College and, although he retired during my time as a student in the late 1970s, I am glad to name him as one of my teachers. His portrait by Geoffrey Squires was painted in 199? and it is one of the finest in our collection. When I attend meetings, TFT broods over me from the far side of the New College Senate Room. Dressed in his moderatorial robes, he has an air of authority and seriousness. There is something compelling about him which cannot be ignored, even if it makes one occasionally uncomfortable. In the background of the portrait are the bookshelves of his private library. These draw the eye and make their own statement, particularly the white elephant, the volumes of the original Kirchliche Dogmatik with their unmistakable appearance. Other pursuits were important to him, particularly his church commitments, but nothing was allowed to displace the high priority attached to reading and writing. Theological work was of the utmost significance both for its own sake – it was a happy and beautiful science, to paraphrase Barth – but also because of its service to the gospel and the church.

It has been said in different contexts that the two most formidable personalities of British theology in the twentieth century were Donald MacKinnon and Tom Torrance. John Webster noted this in his obituary notice when he spoke the theological intensity of Torrance being matched only by the bleak genius of MacKinnon. (IJST, 10, 2008, 371) They displayed many similarities – the rigour of their scholarship, a wide-ranging erudition, a commitment to the traditions of the church, and a theological seriousness. In other respects, however, MacKinnon and Torrance functioned quite differently. MacKinnon’s influence was probably most keenly felt through the example of his teaching. He shaped a generation of theologians, especially during his Cambridge years, in terms of the questions he tackled, the commitments he displayed, and a searching interrogative method that resisted any easy or bland closure on intractable problems. Torrance was no less demanding, but I would judge that his longer-term influence on the discipline has been facilitated more by his publications than his teaching. Having been somewhat eclipsed in the years after his retirement, his work in the last decade has attracted renewed attention from a younger generation of scholars, particularly in North America and Asia. The success of this society and its electronic
journal are indicators of a growth of interest. This has been further facilitated by the posthumous publication of two large volumes of his New College lectures at a surprisingly affordable price, and for this we are heavily indebted to the years of labour invested by Bob Walker, Torrance’s nephew. In the meantime, the Torrance archive has now been catalogued and opened for study in Princeton, a substantial resource that future students of his work will need to explore.

My subject today is Torrance’s theology of the ascension. It’s a subject to which he returned in various places and one on which he had rather more to say than most modern theologians. His devotion to this topic is indicative of several features of his theology: it registers the impact of both local and ecumenical influences upon his work; it expresses his commitment both to Christian dogmatics and theological science; and finally it enables us to identify not only his indebtedness to Karl Barth, but one of his two most critical departures from his theology.

The ascension has been a minor if persistent note in the church’s Christology, often closely linked with the theology of the resurrection. In modern times, it has suffered neglect owing to several factors. The seeming indebtedness of earlier accounts of the ascension to a Ptolemaic worldview led to some scepticism in a post-Copernican age. The heaven of Scripture could no longer be understood as spatially located to this world by virtue of its position at the outer reaches of the cosmos. This generated a problem for any notion of the body of Jesus going somewhere along a spatial trajectory at a time subsequent to the resurrection. For Schleiermacher, this required a deflated account of the ascension as adding nothing significant to doctrines of the person and work of Jesus. His significance was experienced by his disciples independently of their awareness of the ascension. (CF, Para 99). Later in the 19th century, this sceptical take on the ascension would be compounded by historical criticism of the New Testament with a recognition that resurrection, ascension and exaltation are generally conflated in the New Testament, except for the later formulaic history of Luke-Acts with its more stylised forty-day interval between the two events (at least in those narratives that link the gospel and its sequel). Only here is the event fore-grounded and even then with a reticence and sobriety that make this quite unlike later apocryphal descriptions of Christ’s rising from the dead and soaring through the air. Rudolf Bultmann had little hesitation in assigning NT accounts of the ascension to his elastic and surprisingly capacious category of ‘myth’.
In other writers, however, a more cautious and positive approach has been adopted, recognising both that we are here at the very limits of human speech and knowledge but that nevertheless substantive claims about identity of the risen Christ in relation to God and the church are at stake in the creedal affirmation that ‘he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.’ Most recently, Robert Jenson has posed the question ‘what happened to the body’? If we affirm that the tomb was empty and that an embodied Christ appeared to his followers, we have the residual problem of what we can say about where that body went. Jenson’s subtle but recognisably Lutheran response is that the risen Christ as God had the capacity to be available everywhere and that it is in the body of the church and especially its eucharistic elements that his bodily presence is now be found. (ST, Vol 1, 205) The ascension, therefore, although closed to speculative enquiry, is vital to the shape of Christian faith and to the role of Christ as an active subject in the life of the church and the world. We will return to this account later.

Karl Barth of course stands a forefront of this more recent reception of the ascension. It is a necessary theme to bring to completion the movement of Christ’s earthly ministry, and also to provide a proper account of its relationship to the life of the church. This is particularly apparent in the language of Ephesians. The work of Christ having been perfected, he is exalted to the heavenly places. Yet this is not merely the conclusion to a story and the signalling of the absence of his bodily presence in its previous form. His ascension is also the enabling condition for his presence to his followers across time and space. He ascended on high that he might fill all things. Although one cannot specify the event of the ascension or the position of the ascended subject without recourse to highly symbolic language, it occupies a vital place in thinking about the eternal location of the risen Christ and his significance for the life of the church in the world until the parousia. In this respect, the ascension connects Christology with ecclesiology, the Christian life and eschatology, although the manner in which this connection is understood varies. In what follows, I shall argue that Torrance’s theology of the ascension is one of the richest treatments of the subject in modern theology and that while it shares much with Barth it is developed in ways that take his theology decisively beyond and away from some convictions of his Basel teacher. Here more than anywhere else, we are faced with significant adjustments to Barth’s theology despite the many similarities. While Torrance ventured the hope that Barth might just have approved of his reintegration of natural theology within the parameters set by divine self-revelation, he clearly harbours no illusion about a final
rapprochement on the doctrines of church, sacraments and ministry all of which are crucially related to his account of the ascension.

The doctrine of the ascension has featured prominently in the Scottish Reformed tradition. Torrance notes its significance in the theology of John Knox, particularly in a Eucharistic context and in Robert Bruce’s sermons on the Lord’s Supper. One effect of this stress is to provide a strong sense of the work of Christ and its Eucharistic reception as a bright rather than a dark mystery. The work of Christ neither begins nor ends on the cross, but it is a function of his person as the living and active Word of God. His work therefore continues in his ascended existence although his relative absence from our midst requires a constant reference to the gospel record and the eternal significance of that once for all work. A particular stress in Torrance is upon the liturgical and sacramental significance of the ascension, a view that is adumbrated in William Milligan’s late 19th century study on the priestly ministry of the exalted Christ.

Torrance was a longstanding member of the Scottish Church Society, founded in the late Victorian period by leading figures such as Milligan. The goals of the Scottish Church Society included a more Catholic reading of the Reformed tradition that sought liturgical renewal, frequent celebration of the Lord’s Supper, and a Calvinist (as opposed to a Zwinglian) account of sacramental grace and the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements. It is this configuration of influences that enabled Torrance to move beyond Karl Barth in some important respects. In particular, his commitment to the ministry of the ascended Christ made present by the Holy Spirit led to a stronger ecclesiology, sacramentalism and eschatology than we find in Barth himself. This is apparent in works such as Royal Priesthood, and also in those mild criticisms he ventures of Barth. In recalling their last conversation, he wrote,

I then ventured to express my qualms about his account of the ascended Jesus Christ in CD IV/3, in which Christ seemed to be swallowed up in the transcendent Light and Spirit of God, so that the humanity of the risen Jesus appeared to be displaced by what he had called “the humanity of God” in his turning toward us. I had confessed to being astonished not to find at that point in Barth’s exposition a careful account of the priestly ministry of the ascended Jesus in accordance with the teaching of the Epistle

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to the Hebrews about the heavenly intercession of the ascended Christ.²

The quotation is found in Donald McKim’s collection How Karl Barth Changed My Mind. Some wit suggested that Torrance’s contribution have been entitled ‘How I changed Karl Barth’s mind’. Whether he did is doubtful, but what remains the case is that it is in the liturgical and sacramental aspect of his theology of ascension that Torrance’s departure from Karl Barth is most marked.

Let me first offer a brief exposition of some of the features of his theology of the ascension as this is set out in Chapter Nine of Atonement and Chapters 5–6 of Space, Time and Resurrection. I had originally planned to compare these two treatments of the ascension, until I discovered that they were almost identical, save the more extensive footnoting in the latter. That these chapters contain pretty much the same material indicates that the latter volume published in 1976 was based on New College lectures that he had developed over many years.

The ascension is treated as a discrete event to be distinguished from the resurrection although closely related to it. Torrance speaks of ‘the ascension event’ – this is the title of Chapter 6 in Space, Time and Resurrection, although elsewhere he refers to ‘the fusion of resurrection with the ascension in one indivisible exaltation’. (270) The ascension is not the conclusion of Christ’s ministry, a resting place from which his completed work can be viewed passively. While the ascent completes a pattern or movement that began with the descent of the Son of God, it does not signal the ending of the work of Christ. Instead, we should view the ascension as the commencement of his kingly ministry which now moves forward in anticipation of his parousia. This kingly ministry does not exclude priestly and prophetic elements also, but in setting the context in which these are exercised it consequently assumes a priority in the order of exposition. (265)

The one who ascends is not the disincarnate Son of God, but the one who is also called Son of Man and Lamb of God. (270) So the ascension, for all that we must speak of its mystery in language heavily laden with symbolism, is not the ascension of One whose humanity is shed like an

outworn garment. The spiritualising of the event which we find in Origen is to be avoided at all costs. The exalted Christ is one who has a human identity that continues to be determined by his saving work. Expounding the Epistle to the Hebrews, Torrance argues that Christ exercises a priesthood that transcends that of Old Testament types both in offering his life as a perfect sacrifice to God and in becoming as true God a priest for us. This dual aspect of his priesthood is ‘hypostatically united in his own person’. (273)

It is of course quite difficult to present this notion without appearing to lapse into an anthropomorphic and or even Arian account of the Father-Son relationship, as if the ascended Christ were a unique member of the heavenly council, a kind of chief executive (and Torrance actually uses this expression on p 273) whose function was to plead celestially on our behalf with the chairman of the board. The imagery is risky here, but Torrance is quite adamant that if we properly integrate the person and work of Christ then we have to commit to expressing such notions, hazardous though they are and prone to misinterpretation. His point is that the ascended Christ is the same acting subject who is with us and for us in all that he does. He does not cease to be our advocate upon his ascension, but must be held to exercise this function in a different mode. His work is not detachable from descriptions of his person, and therefore with the ascension of his person we must continue to think of his action as continuing, albeit in the enactment of the eternal significance of his once-for-all work in history. Elsewhere Torrance speaks more elusively about there now being space and time within the life of God for our human condition. In God’s eternal life, God is always and only for us as we have found God to be revealed in the life of Jesus. The human face of God is real and eternal – there is no God behind God, nothing inscrutable, passive and remote in the divine life.

In a similar manner, just as Christ’s priestly ministry must be presented as a continuing ministry enabled by his ascension and royal enthronement, so too his prophetic ministry continues in a different mode. Now absent from his disciples, they proclaim him as Lord. This proclamation, however, is one in which Christ is not only object but also subject. The church speaks of him, but in this action he speaks through the church to the world. In other words, through the Spirit, Christ himself is present and active in the church’s kerygma. In the ministry of proclamation, Christ as the true Word of God, is again heard. Similarly, in the eucharist, Christ as our incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Lord becomes sacramentally visible and tangible. Torrance speaks of those ‘pledges of his body and
blood which he puts into our hands that with them we might appear before the Father.’ (276)

The ascension is presented both an event subsequent to the resurrection and a state of the exalted Christ. In describing this, Torrance is quite clear that we cannot think of an immaterial or disembodied subject. The ascension is not an exercise in learning to think of Christ apart from his incarnate condition, although in avoiding this we are taken into difficult conceptual territory. Here he commits himself to the extra Calvinisticum, arguing that it is the settled view of Patristic and Reformed theology that the Word of God through whom all things were created became a human creature while never ceasing to be that Creator Word by whom all things continue to have their being. The Lutheran view, despite its legitimate intention to safeguard the incarnation, is committed to a receptacle view of space as a container of bodies. This led both to a kenotic view of the self-emptying of divine omnipresence on the part of the incarnate Word, or else in the case of the risen Christ to an extension of the receptacle containing his body to include all space. Hence there emerges the idea of the ubiquity of Christ’s body with its attendant danger of monophysitism. In modern Lutheranism, these metaphysical problems are resolved by recourse to a strategy of demythologising. Here Torrance appears to draw a dotted line from Luther to Bultmann. (I once recall Alan Lewis pondering with his students at New College why TFT held such a one-sidedly negative attitude to Luther. He came to the tentative conclusion that it must be because Bultmann was a Lutheran.)

To think adequately of the person of Jesus Christ we have to hold together his identity as the eternal Son of God and as a human creature of space and time. This twinning of eternal transcendence and particular location becomes especially difficult with respect to thinking of the ascended Christ. It is the converse problem of the incarnation. Instead of thinking of how the human Jesus of Nazareth could simultaneously have been the eternal Son, we must now conceive of this Jesus primarily as the transcendent Son but without ceasing to regard him as a human being. This can best be achieved, Torrance suggests, by a relational view of space and time. Here he draws upon relativity theory, although he makes uses this only analogically to describe the relation of God to space-time. Time and space are not absolute containers, independent of the objects which they happen to contain. Instead, they are to be viewed as functions of those principles or forces that by their actions define their form. Although space-time in a four dimensional continuum does not determine the identity and activity of God, nevertheless we should speak of “the ‘place’ and ‘time’ of God in terms of his own eternal life and his eternal
purpose in the divine love, where he wills his life and love to overflow to
us whom he has made to share with him his life and love.” (290) The
divine life itself provides the coordinates or framework that can situate
God’s actions in eternity, just as the space-time continuum of the created
world is a framework relative to creaturely events and forces. In the latter,
we can assign a historical date and place to the life of Jesus. In the
former, we must think of the place and activity of the ascended Christ.
(Torrance also distinguishes here between fallen and unfallen space-time,
although it is not clear how far this takes us.)

This has two important theological consequences which lie at the heart of
Torrance’s doctrine of the ascension and which are vital to the Christian
life. On the one side, we must think of there always being a place or room
for humanity in the life of God. This is one important way of
understanding the symbolism of the ascended Christ seated at the right of
the Father. Our humanity is accommodated in the life of God – it is
neither too remote or mysterious or self-sufficient to lack a place there.
By the work of Jesus this is accomplished and announced. An interesting
feature of this is the way in which the concept of heaven is ha
ndled. It is
not viewed as an empty or partially inhabited space into which the
ascended Jesus is admitted. Instead, the shape or form that heaven takes is
itself determined by the action of the ascended Lord. Again the language
is apocalyptic and baffling, but it signals the intention to think of heaven
as Christ-shaped, as ensuring a place in the eternal life of God for
creatures. In Space, Time and Resurrection, Torrance commends the
article in Sacramentum Mundi written by Joseph Ratzinger. ‘What the
“Ascension” tells us about heaven is that it is the dimension of divine and
human fellowship which is based on the resurrection and exaltation of
Jesus. Henceforth it designates the “place” (in the strictly ontological
sense) in which man can have eternal life’ (Joseph Ratzinger,
Sacramentum Mundi, vol 1, 110, cited in ST&R, 130). Ratzinger is
presumably cited with approval because of his criticism of Bultmann’s
demythologising of the ascension.

On the other side, we must also think of God’s activity towards the world
as that of the ascended Christ. This is a ubiquitous action (even though
we cannot think of the ubiquity of a body) since Christ is now the
presence of God for the world. The ascension represents the withdrawal
of one mode of presence for the enabling of another one. It is now a
differentiated sign of absence and presence. And since this is the action of
the incarnate Son of God now ascended, we are referred always to his
once-for-all historical work as the enactment of his identity and mission.
This is a further implication of the refusal to immaterialize the ascension
of Christ. The Son of God is not now detached from a rootedness in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. On the contrary, the ongoing action of the ascended Christ carries a constant reference to the gospels. ‘All contact with the majesty of God as of the glorified Lord is in and through the crucified one.’ (293) To speak further of this, we have recourse to the language of Word and Spirit. It is the outpouring of the Spirit that links the ascended Christ to his people, and also binds us to the Word by which his presence is ever thereafter mediated. (294) The ascended Christ thus has an indispensable historical relation by virtue of his person and work. His eternal humanity prevents any abstracting of his identity from that of the gospel record of his earthly life, death and resurrection. We cannot think of God without reference to Jesus.

The resurrection and ascension together also have an eschatological reference. This is clear from the New Testament which sees the appearance of the risen Jesus as an eschatological sign, foretaste and down-payment of the general resurrection of the dead. His exaltation is part of a movement that will culminate in his final reign over all things in heaven and on earth. Jesus’ resurrection is not a private event for himself alone. It has a corporate character that heralds a new age in which his kingship will be universally acknowledged and accomplished. However, the ascension not only signifies this coming reign of Christ with the parousia, but it also generates a kind of hiatus in which this is deferred for the time being. Torrance speaks about the ascension introducing ‘an eschatological pause’. (303) There is to be a prolonged time of waiting and hoping in anticipation of the fully manifested reign of Christ. In the meantime, the mission of the church in history is to be carried out. The space in which this is to be undertaken is made possible by the ascension, in particular with the interruption that it introduces between the first and the second advents of Christ.

Nevertheless, this ‘space’ is not a vacuum. It is not that Christ has emptied the world of his presence, leaving us alone for the time being, as if creating a hollow in the landscape which is to be filled instead by the action of the church. The ministry of Christ continues in ascended mode, particularly in the set of relations that are established in church, sacraments and ministry. So we now have three set of relations that are established by the ascension – the historical relation to Jesus of Nazareth as he is attested in Scripture; the eschatological relation to the final perfected reality of Christ; and the sacramental relation of the church to the crucified and risen Christ in the time between the ascension and the parousia.
Torrance’s treatment of the ascension is replete with doxological and sacramental references. Indeed, there is a developing theology of church, sacraments and ministry that emerges from this rendition of the ascension and which might be described as both Reformed and catholic. A sacramental relation is affirmed between the church as body of Christ and Christ as the head of that body. (279) ‘As king and head of the church, Christ has instituted the ministry of word and sacrament within history, whereby he continually nourishes, sustains, orders and governs his people on earth.’ (279) Within the royal priesthood of the whole church some are set apart for a distinctive ministry of word and sacrament. They are ministers not priests, but the office they hold is necessary to the life and well-being of Christ’s church. It is here that Christ’s own ministry continues. In this respect, the church is a divine institution always pointing not to its own significance but to that of Christ. The ascension is not a resting place for the Son of God, but the locus of a continuing and unceasing activity.

As we have already noted, Torrance makes extensive reference in this context to the priestly ministry of the ascended Christ in the Hebrews. This is vital to an understanding of the doxological and sacramental life of the church which is both continuous with the work of Christ yet in a relationship that is marked both by distinction and dependence. Here Torrance treads a careful path between those views that disjoins the work of Christ from the life of the church (attributed to sectarian traditions on the evangelical wing of the church) and other views that tend to conflate this by failing to distinguish with sufficient clarity between the work of Christ and that of his church. Roman Catholicism is here his main target with notions of the church as the extension of the incarnation or as part of the totius Christus.

Torrance’s commitment to a strong christological view of worship and the sacraments determines his doctrine of the ascension. Worship is an action in which the ascended Christ is not only the object but also the subject. It is a performative event in which the exalted Lord is present in and with our glorifying of God. Writing in his book Scottish Theology (1996), he sees this as one of the distinctive features of Knox’s thought in the 16th century. The ascension and advent of Christ are restored to a central place in the Eucharistic liturgy. ‘Ascension introduced the ‘distance’ between the symbols of bread and wine on earth and the ascended Christ, but nevertheless a ‘distance’ bridged by the real presence of the risen and ascended Christ through the Spirit. Hence the place of the sursum corda in the heart of the Reformed Eucharistic Rite –
the ascension with Christ became of primary importance again: we are made to sit with Christ in heavenly places.’ (Scottish Theology, 40)

This high sacramental theology is a pervasive theme in Torrance’s writings and it is generally associated with his doctrine of the ascension. Baptism is the sacrament of our once-for-all participation in Christ whereas the Lord’s Supper is that of our continuous participation, these two corresponding to our justification and sanctification and expressing our relationship with the crucified, risen and ascended Lord. (307–8) In maintaining the sacramental nature of our participation in Christ, Torrance typically appeals not so much to early church tradition, although he is able to draw upon this, but to the ministry of Jesus and the practice of ancient Israel. Significantly, in his revision of Wotherspoon and Kirkpatrick’s Manual of Church Doctrine, he introduces a new section on the sacraments of the Old Testament (Manual of Church Doctrine, London, OUP, 1960 13-14) in which he characterises the ‘sacraments’ of circumcision and Passover as marking out the ‘covenanted sphere of union and communion with God’ and as constituting divinely appointed ordinances that extended to the people of God a promise of blessing and salvation for all nations. (13) In the ministry of Jesus, table fellowship, the eschatological imagery of the banquet, the feeding of the multitude, the Last Supper, and the breaking of bread at Emmaus, all point to a sacramental continuation of the ministry of Jesus in the life of the church. Hence that historical work of Christ, to which the ascension refers us, also carries the promise of the ongoing presence and action of Jesus amongst his people. (Cf Conflict and Agreement in the Church, Vol 2, London: Lutterworth, 1960), 135.

There is a careful mapping here of the relations between the actions of Christ and those of the church. While positioning himself within the Reformed tradition, Torrance is at pains to stress the ecumenical and catholic dimension of that tradition. We see this for example in Royal Priesthood (Edinburgh: Oliver & Body, 1955). In relating the ministry of the church to that of Christ, he sets down two governing principles. (38) 1. There can be no relation of identity between these. A distinction has to be maintained that prioritises the once-for-all work of Christ. 2. The ministry of the Church is not another ministry different from that of Christ and separable from it. The church engages in the ministry of Christ in a manner that is appropriate to its derivative status as his body. Conversely, Christ continues his ministry in the church but in a manner that is appropriate to his identity as its Head and Lord, as the one who was baptised in the Jordan for us and who gave his life as a ransom for
many. The ascension thus signifies an ongoing ministry but one that has a constant reference to the historical *eph hapax*.

George Hunsinger has helpfully written about this mapping of relations by Torrance in his book on *The Eucharist and Ecumenism* (CUP, 2008) that will be discussed tomorrow morning. There is one priestly sacrifice of Christ in two temporal forms. He writes that the ‘Eucharistic form here and now participates in, manifests, and attests the incarnational form of the sacrifice there and then.’ (151–2) What takes place is neither a repetition nor a wholly different type of activity, but instead it is to be understood in terms of participation, manifestation and witness to that upon which it is dependent and to which it constantly returns.

From what has been set out here, it is clear that Torrance’s theology of the ascension is significantly different from that of Barth even if much of the thrust of Barth’s theology is apparent (e.g. the positive appropriation of ascension language over against strategies of demythologising, the prioritising of the once-for-all work of Christ, the integration of his person and work, and the enabling condition of the ascension for church proclamation. Where the difference resides is in the stress upon the doxological and sacramental significance of the eternal ministry of the ascended Christ. It is evident that Torrance sees himself as filling a lacuna in Barth’s thought or perhaps better adjusting its trajectory in some significant ways. Writing in the Expository Times in 1955 (Karl Barth, ExpT 66, 1955, 205–209), Torrance offers a very positive appropriation of Barth’s theology but concludes with some interesting comments. He states that if he were asked to venture his main criticism of Barth he would say that he requires to offer us a more adequate doctrine of the Spirit alongside a clearer exposition of our living union with Jesus Christ. This weakness informs his ‘strange view of Baptism’ (209) and reflects a gap in much continental thought between scientific theology and worship. What we are offered in Torrance’s doctrine of the ascension is an important work of repair. While maintaining a characteristically Reformed stress upon the once-for-all work of Christ, he seeks to offer an account of worship, church and sacraments that recovers the best insights of the ecumenical traditions of the church.

Recent critics such as Healy and Hütter have complained that Barth’s ecclesiology creates too much of a disjunction between the completed work of Christ and the Spirit’s gathering of the church. Torrance’s work, it seems to me, is not vulnerable to this criticism while yet remaining within a paradigm that prevents any dissolution or spiritualising of the risen identity of Jesus, or a blurring of the lines between Christ and the
church. Here his dogmatic instincts remain essentially correct. One might attempt to see his relational account of space and time as obscuring rather than resolving the fundamental problem of what we can say happened to the body of Jesus. In this respect, Jenson’s proposal is cleaner and neater in some respects. Nevertheless, while positioning himself in territory that is difficult to describe satisfactorily Torrance is right to resist any assimilation of the body of Christ to that of the church or the eucharist. This generates further (Hegelian) problems at the expense of resolving a metaphysical conundrum. Better perhaps to admit that our language and imagination break down at this juncture, than to seek a premature closure that will destabilise other elements of theological discourse.

Despite, occasional warnings Torrance perhaps underplays the extent to which our discourse is inevitably tentative, broken and provisional in this area of dogmatic thought. The apparent resolution of problems may be too premature in places. This may largely be a matter of style or temperament or the less self-confident setting of modern theology in more secular and plural western societies. Yet it is instructive to follow the more measured tone of Hans Frei when writing of the ascended humanity in a commentary on the Thirty Nine Articles. ‘It is well to understand this powerful assertion religiously rather than metaphysically, for metaphysical schemes, like myths, change but the Word of God abides. In his eternal rule Jesus Christ maintains that solidarity with us that he established in the days of his flesh. That is the point of this matter. (Theology and Narrative, NY, OUP, 1993, 205-6) There is a simplicity and caution here that is not always apparent in Torrance.

More troubling to me is the relative absence of the ethical and political significance of the ascension, not least give its prominence in Karl Barth. For Torrance, the divine-human relation tends to be a private one, although his strong sense of the corporate nature of worship might have taken him in a different direction. Only occasionally are hints given out, e.g. for we cannot be pessimistic about the world since it is loved by Christ. Yet the important relations and movements in Torrance are, as it were, vertical rather than horizontal. His occasional excursions into Christian ethics tend to be confined to areas of private rather than social morality, e.g. marriage and abortion. There is little about social justice, human equality, or the peaceable kingdom.

Nevertheless, for all its semantic and technical detail and the preponderance of notions that are difficult to explicate in preaching, Torrance’s theology of the ascension offer some significant existential and pastoral gains. Here we are given the theological space within which
we can make sense of quite simply notions such as God is with us, we are not left alone, we matter to God, our future is guaranteed by the love of God, and that our surest proxy for the life to come is the risen Christ. These are secured by a rich account of the ascension that is unrivalled in modern theology.