

THE MOTIF OF KOINŌNIA IN T. F. TORRANCE'S ECCLESIOLOGY

Kate Dugdale, PhD (University of Otago)

katedugdale@gmail.com

Abstract: *In this article, we explore the dialogue between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Church as exemplified in the work of Thomas F. Torrance. The article begins with a concise introduction to the contours of Torrance's trinitarian theology, focusing on the terms ousia, hypostasis, and perichoresis. It unfolds the correlation between Torrance's view of God's being and the nature of the Church by evaluating two different ways in which Torrance uses the motif of koinōnia to develop the relationship between the triune communion and its human parallel. The article concludes with some observations about how Torrance's use of koinōnia shapes his view of structure and order in the life of the Church.*

Introduction

There were a number of factors which contributed to ecclesiology becoming a key topic of theological dialogue in the twentieth century. In particular, the 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference heralded the rise of the ecumenical movement, which was paralleled by a significant resurgence in commitment to foreign missions. Although war delayed its formation, the World Council of Churches was officially inaugurated in 1948 and throughout the post-conflict years, advocates of ecumenism continued to work for interdenominational unity. It was in this context that Thomas F. Torrance published many of his ecclesiology-oriented works. However, somewhat surprisingly for such a prodigious theologian, it is only in the last few years that researchers have widely begun to engage with Torrance's ecclesiology and to develop its potential for the Church in the twenty-first century.

Our goal in this article is to contribute to this discussion by exploring the dialogue between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Church as exemplified in the work of Thomas F. Torrance. We will begin with a closer look

at Torrance's doctrine of the Trinity, which will enable us to better describe the various models centred around the concept of *koinōnia* which Torrance uses in order to highlight the correlation between the triune communion and the created communion of the Church. The article will conclude by offering some reflections on the pragmatic significance of this approach to ecclesiology, including how Torrance's use of *koinōnia* offers a response to the fragmented state of the body of Christ, and an evaluation of whether we should classify Torrance's approach as a communion ecclesiology.

A brief methodological aspect should be mentioned at the start. One of Torrance's favourite phrases was to speak about a given object's "inner logic." Walker helpfully clarifies what Torrance means by this. Inner logic is

a concept which is central to Torrance's theology and which he uses at key points to denote the essential structure and inherent significance of something. The word 'inner' refers to its intrinsic nature, underlying fundamental pattern, and the precise relations embedded within and constitutive of it, while 'logic' refers to its meaning and significance, the rationale and intelligibility inherent in it and its internal structural relations.¹

Although Torrance frequently refers to the inner logic of the incarnation, or the inner logic of Scripture, he does not explicitly use the phrase, "the inner logic of the Trinity;" however this concept can be profitably applied to his work, for although Torrance recognises that the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly mentioned or systematically laid out in Scripture, he is still emphatic that the Bible witnesses quite directly to the fact that God is a Trinity.² This concept of inner logic will act as a subtle guide to our ecclesiological explorations, for although Torrance never directly made the claim, it is consistent with his use of the concept to suggest that the doctrine of the Trinity forms the inner logic of the doctrine of the Church.

Consequently the starting place for an investigation of Torrance's ecclesiology—in fact, for his approach to the whole theological task—is found at the beginning of *The Christian Doctrine of God* with the affirmation that the doctrine of the Trinity is the "most profound article of the Christian Faith,"³ and can only be "understood from within the unique, definitive and final self-revelation of God in

1 Robert T. Walker, "Incarnation and Atonement: Their Relation and Inter-Relation In the Theology of T. F. Torrance," *Participatio* 3 (2012): 5.

2 See Torrance's chapter "The Biblical Frame" in Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1996), 32–72.

3 *Ibid.*, ix.

Jesus Christ his only begotten Son.”⁴ This lends credibility to Walker’s observation that Torrance’s work does not coalesce on the basis of logic or rational doctrinal development, but rather “in the object to which his theology points, the incarnate Christ in the heart of the Trinity.”⁵ This christocentric and trinitarian starting point forms the basis of how Torrance chooses to answer the question, “What is the Church?” Even though the Church has an empirical and visible existence, its historical actuality is subordinate to its derivation from the divine being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

For Torrance, reflecting upon the nature of the Church without considering it in its full theological relation to the doctrine of God would result in a truncated ecclesiology. A merely sociological approach to ecclesiology fails to appreciate the grand scope of God’s redemptive plans, and undercuts itself by being unable to respect the role which the Church is given to play in the journey of the cosmos towards redemption. This is why he has a theological approach to ecclesiology, beginning with the doctrine of God, an ecclesiology from above, rather than an ecclesiology from below. It is to his doctrine of God that we now turn.

Towards a Trinitarian Ecclesiology

We have established that Torrance is convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity “expresses the essential and distinctively Christian understanding of God by which we live, and which is of crucial significance for the evangelical mission of the Church as well.”⁶ We now turn our attention to how Torrance applies this to developing his ecclesiological content. As we progress, a clarificatory comment on Torrance’s interaction with the term *koinōnia* will be useful, as this is the prevalent motif which Torrance utilises in relating the Church to the Trinity. *Koinōnia* can be translated in several different ways; indeed, Torrance uses “fellowship”, “communion” and “participation” interchangeably. However, he appreciates the Orthodox perspective that “fellowship” is a superficial translation of *koinōnia*, and tends to observe their preference to talk of the Triune “communion.”⁷ We will follow his lead on this.

Torrance rejects any approach to ecclesiology which is based upon order,

4 Ibid., 1.

5 Robert T. Walker, “Introduction,” in Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), xxx.

6 Ibid., 10.

7 Thomas F. Torrance, “Trinity Sunday Sermon on Acts 2:41–47,” *Ekklesiastikos Pharos* 52 (1970): 194.

ministry, practices, or varying doctrinal formulations—in short, on anything temporal—feeling that these foundations are theologically inadequate. The primary basis on which an understanding of the Church is to be sought is not in the Church as an institution, but in God's triune being. More simply stated, Torrance holds that "the Church is the work of the three divine persons,"⁸ and is adamant that this trinitarian approach is faithful to the New Testament, to the apostolic tradition, and to the Fathers' teaching.

Torrance's primary contention is that because God is essentially a "Communion of Love," then God "not only creates personal reciprocity between us and himself but creates a community of personal reciprocity in love, which is what we speak of as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ living in the Communion of the Spirit and incorporated into Christ as his Body."⁹ Torrance develops his theological account of the relationship between the Trinity and the Church in such a way as to emphasise that the Church is a community created and sustained by God, correlative to the communion that God enjoys in the fullness of his triune being. Because the Church's being is ontologically derived from the divine being, the relationship between the Triune God and the Church is more than a "relation of likeness." This relationship cannot be reduced to the suggestion that the relations between humans in the Church mirror those of the Triune God—although this is true in a simplistic sense. Torrance instead prefers the concept of participation. It is through an actual relation to Christ on the basis of the incarnation that humanity is able to participate through the Holy Spirit in the union and communion of the Holy Trinity.¹⁰

It is necessary to qualify the relationship between the Church and the Trinity and to differentiate it from the eternal, internal relationships of the Holy Trinity, with the recognition that God's being is not constituted by his relationship to others, for the free outflow of God's love towards us is determined by God's being *ad intra*.¹¹ "We must think of his Being for others as grounded in the transcendent freedom of his own Being."¹² As Torrance explains further,

The real meaning of the Being or I am of God becomes clear in the two-way fellowship he freely establishes with his people as their Lord and Saviour, for it

8 Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 360.

9 Ibid., 6.

10 For more on this actual relationship, see Torrance's comments in Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 40–41, 67–70.

11 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 132.

12 Ibid., 131.

has to do with the saving will or self-determination of God in his love and grace to be with them as their God as well as his determination of them to be with him as his redeemed children. The Being of God is to be understood, therefore, as living and dynamic Being, fellowship-creating or communion-constituting Being, but if it is communion-constituting Being toward us it is surely to be understood also as ever-living, ever-dynamic Communion (*koinonia*) in the Godhead. By his very Nature he is a Communion in himself, which is the ground in the Being of God for his communion with his people.¹³

God only acts to establish communion with humans because this is unchangingly who God is in God's own eternal life. God's love is "not that of solitary inactive or static love, whatever that may be, but the active movement of reciprocal loving within the Being of God which is the one ultimate Source of all love . . . he is the eternally loving One in himself who loves through himself."¹⁴ The Church reposes upon God's eternal purpose in creating humanity to share in his own life and love, which is grounded in God's *ousia* as "being for others," for "if he were not Love in his innermost Being, his love toward us in Christ and the Holy Spirit would be ontologically groundless."¹⁵ However, since God is not dependent upon, nor is his essential nature changed, by his relationship with humanity, his choice to be the God who creates and loves is "sheer gratuitous grace . . . the transcendent freedom of his self-determination in love for us."¹⁶ This makes it all the more startling that God was not *required* to create, but still freely *chose* to create. Our response to this can only be one of awe, thanksgiving, and worship. As Torrance summarises,

Since God the Father has communicated himself to us through the saving economy of his Son, the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ, it is the incarnate Son who naturally constitutes the real focus for the doctrine of the Trinity, and the regulative centre with reference to which all the worship, faith and mission of the Church take their shape: from the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, and to the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit. It is correspondingly the New Testament teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ incarnate, crucified and risen, that provides the immediate focus and controlling centre of reference for a doctrine of the Church founded and rooted in the self-communication of the Holy Trinity. It was a Christocentric doctrine of the Church along these lines, reached under the constraint of God's revealed nature as the consubstantial communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one indivisible Trinity, that was brought to fruition in the mind of the Church through the work of the great Greek

13 Ibid., 124.

14 Ibid., 5.

15 Ibid., 4.

16 Ibid.

theologians of the fourth century, but as a by-product of their determination to preserve the evangelical substance of the faith.¹⁷

Torrance's Doctrine of the Holy Trinity

In Torrance's work a complex synthesis of sources takes shape. He integrates material from theologians like Athanasius, Calvin, and Barth—alongside many others—who each played a significant role in their own historical period of theological and cultural transition. He pays particular attention, however, to the Fathers and the work they did in formulating the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.¹⁸ Torrance's retelling of the development of Patristic theology makes it clear that by the time that the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed had been revised and ratified in 381 AD, the doctrine of the Trinity had become something of immense, definitive, and irreversible significance for the Church.¹⁹

Knowledge of the Triune God was an essential foundation of Christian doctrine, since the "pattern and order of God's Triune Life" imposed itself upon the early leaders of the Church.²⁰ Torrance highlights that we must not only pay attention to what the Fathers left in written credal form, but also on what they did *not* say. Their emphasis on both *eusebeia* (piety) and *thesebeia* (godliness) created a deep sense of reverence towards the transcendent nature of God, which meant that there had to be appropriate boundaries maintained in all inquiries into the mystery of the Trinity.²¹ Torrance retains this reluctance to intrude into the mystery of God's being, but this certainly does not limit his verbosity; rather he makes much of the distinction between the self-revelation of God and what we may say in response to that revelation.²² He frequently employs the Athanasian aphorism, "Thus far human knowledge goes. Here the

17 Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 263.

18 Readers familiar with T. F. Torrance's corpus will no doubt be aware of Torrance's work *The Trinitarian Faith* in which he attempts to set forth the doctrine of the Trinity by allowing the Fathers to speak for themselves. There is some debate about how objective his reading of the Fathers actually is – see Jason Robert Radcliff, *Thomas F. Torrance and the Church Fathers: A Reformed, Evangelical, and Ecumenical Reconstruction of the Patristic Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014).

19 Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, ix.

20 Ibid.

21 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 17.

22 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 281.

cherubim spread the covering of their wings."²³

The centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity for Torrance's ecclesiology therefore makes sense. Torrance describes the Holy Trinity as "the innermost heart of Christian faith and worship, the central dogma of classical theology, the fundamental grammar of our knowledge of God."²⁴ The term "trinitarian" is consequently an absolute descriptor for Torrance's knowledge of God, for

If God is triune in his nature, then to really know God means that we must know him in accordance with his triune nature from the start . . . that means we must know him as the Triune God who within himself has relations between Father, Son and Holy Spirit; so that for us to know that God, we must know him in a mode of understanding on our part appropriate to the Trinity of Persons in God. There must be a 'trinitarian' character in our knowing of God, corresponding to the trinity of relations in God himself.²⁵

Having established the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity for Torrance, we turn now to discuss how Torrance constructs his doctrine of the Trinity. We will build this around three key theological terms—*ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *perichoresis*—and the key Torrancian concept of "onto-relations."

Ousia and *hypostasis* were used as cognate terms in the original text of the Nicene Creed, where they both referred to "being." Initially, theologians such as Athanasius preferred to allow the meanings of these terms to remain fluid, until it became clear that this could lead to theological confusion and inadvertent heresy.²⁶ The theological connotations of these terms were then more precisely defined, so that *ousia* came to refer to being in relation to its internal reality, and so had a primarily inward reference, while *hypostasis* came to refer to the outward reference of being, and was used to describe the three divine persons who only exist in relation to each other.²⁷ In more common terms, *ousia* denotes the one being or nature of God, while *hypostasis* came to signify the three distinct persons. However, while *ousia* has to do with God's "internal relations," and *hypostasis* is "being as otherness," both *ousia* and *hypostasis* have to do with the Triune God and are thus theologically inseparable terms.²⁸

23 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 81, 151, 193.

24 *Ibid.*, 2.

25 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1980), 148.

26 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 128–29. Torrance identifies the "twin errors of tritheism and modalism" as the danger here.

27 *Ibid.*, 128–33.

28 *Ibid.*, 131.

Torrance never considers the one *ousia* (being) of God apart from the three *hypostases* (persons), or the three persons apart from the one being. He prefers not to use the language of “whole” and “part” when writing about the Trinity, because Father, Son, and Spirit are each wholly God; we cannot think of God’s being as an undifferentiated wholeness. We can only think of three-in-one, a fullness of personal being.²⁹ Since they share the same *ousia*, each triune person is simultaneously whole, and part of a whole. This is an example of where Torrance acknowledges the limitations of human language, and the way in which it is incapable of describing divine realities.

Perichoresis is the third term that we must turn our attention to, which has to do with the coinherence of the three triune persons, or their “mutual indwelling.”³⁰ *Perichoresis* refers to the way in which the triune persons contain each other without commingling. The key point is that they dwell *in* and *with* each other.³¹ As Torrance explains, “the three divine Persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another.”³² Father, Son, and Holy Spirit remain distinct *hypostases*, and yet share completely in the same *ousia*. *Perichoresis* affirms the unity and Triunity of God, and that there is only ever one divine activity, “that of God the Father through the Son and in the Holy Spirit.”³³

The key concept which Torrance uses to hold these three terms together—*ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *perichoresis*—is the idea of the ontological relations which are intrinsic to the divine life. Referring to these as “onto-relations,” Torrance observes that the three divine persons are what they are only in relation to each other—they are persons-in-relation, for “the relations between the divine Persons belong to what they are as Persons—they are constitutive onto-relations.”³⁴ Since we never know one person in abstraction from the other persons, all three are

29 Ibid., 24, 28.

30 Ibid., 168–70. Athanasius provided the basis for the doctrine of coinherence (without providing the specific vocabulary) which was not merely a linking of the distinctive properties of the Father, Son, and Spirit, but a fully mutual indwelling. Hilary of Poitiers—who is a Western scholar but draws from Eastern theology due to his exposure to the Eastern Fathers during his exile—develops this further by stating that the three divine Persons are uniquely able to mutually contain each other. We cannot think of this in the sense of physical objects and their ability to contain each other. See also Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 32–33.

31 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 172.

32 Ibid., 102.

33 Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 234.

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

worshipped as a “circle of reciprocal relations.”³⁵ Thus, as Torrance observes, whenever we speak about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, we are not simply using metaphors or images to describe God. These are more than

modes, aspects, faces, names or relations in God’s manifestation of himself to us, for they are inseparable from the hypostatic Realities of which they are the distinctive self-presentations of divine Being—the three divine Hypostases or Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit who in their differentiation from one another and in their communion with one another are the one eternal God.³⁶

This point about the communion which the triune persons have with each other is vital for understanding Torrance’s trinitarian perspective. Through giving definition to his use of *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *perichoresis*, and noting the concept of onto-relations, we come to understand that the triune life is a life of communion, leading to the assertion that for the Triune God, “Being and Communion are one and the same.”³⁷ We may not think of God’s being in static terms, as the Hellenistic philosophical tradition does with its abstract definitions of being as essence or substance. Instead, we are to think of the *movement* of God’s life, as moving in the *direction* of the redemption of humankind.³⁸ This is not a first-order movement in and of itself, but is rather the overflow of God’s own inner life, the relations which eternally and unchangingly exist between the three Triune persons. God’s life has its own time—an eternal time which is different to created time in that it lacks the distinction of past, present, and future, but a time which nonetheless has movement and constancy, which is what Torrance describes as its direction. Thus, while God does not change, remaining “who he is in the undeviating self-determination of his own Life and Activity,”³⁹ God is nonetheless redemptively at work within space and time, bringing creation towards the *eschaton*. Events like the incarnation and Pentecost demonstrate “the movement and activity of God towards the fulfilment of his eternal purpose of love.”⁴⁰ The steadfastness of God as the one who actively creates and redeems is fostered as a key tenet in Torrance’s trinitarian ecclesiology.

Complementary Ecclesiological Models: *Koinōnia*

35 Ibid., 174.

36 Ibid., 92.

37 Ibid., 104.

38 Ibid., 241.

39 Ibid., 235.

40 Ibid., 242.

Koinōnia, along with *mystērion* and *prothesis*, are three Scriptural terms which Torrance selects to show how Christ's incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension all play a role in fulfilling God's eternal purpose.⁴¹ Each of these three terms has a primary and a secondary usage. *Mystērion* refers primarily to the union of God and humanity in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and secondarily to the union of Christ and his Church through the Spirit. Torrance attributes *mystērion* primarily to the work of the Son.⁴² This mystery is part of the veiling and unveiling of God's eternal purpose, his *prothesis*. The primary sense of *prothesis* is the eternal, redemptive plan of God which is set forth in Jesus Christ, and then reaches out to its fulfilment and consummation in the Church. The secondary sense of *prothesis* is the way that the Church sets forth, or proclaims, the mystery of the Gospel particularly through Word and Sacrament.⁴³ Torrance attributes *prothesis* primarily to the work of the Father. Finally, *koinōnia* has the primary sense of humanity's participation in the Trinity through Jesus Christ's completed work of atonement, and the secondary sense of the fellowship or communion which exists between members of Christ's body, and is attributed primarily to the work of the Holy Spirit. Together, these three terms summarise the teaching of Ephesians 1 and 2 where Paul explains that through Christ and in the Spirit we have access to the Father.⁴⁴

Torrance describes *koinōnia* as both a matter of knowledge and of being. It is a matter of knowledge, because no one knows the Father except through the revelation of the Son. Humanity's participation in the *koinōnia* of the Trinity is how they receive knowledge of the oneness of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ It is also a matter of being, because the oneness of God and humanity in Christ is inserted right into humanity's sinful existence, and "that insertion of oneness by atonement results in *koinōnia* . . . [*koinōnia*] is thus created by the atonement and resurrection of Christ."⁴⁶ This is in keeping with Torrance's premise that epistemology follows ontology; true knowledge of *koinōnia* only follows from participating in *koinōnia*.

There are two different but complementary ways in which Torrance uses *koinōnia*. He writes about a "threefold communion," and also about the "two

41 Torrance, *Incarnation*, 161–62.

42 Ibid., 174. Torrance insists that we must be cautious around this attribution of terms to distinct persons, because we may not suggest that the triune persons work in isolation from each other.

43 Ibid., 168–70.

44 Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God*, 2.

45 Torrance, *Incarnation*, 172.

46 Ibid., 173.

dimensions of *koinōnia*.” These parallel models must both be unfolded to aid in understanding Torrance’s trinitarian ecclesiology. The former is the more foundational model—threefold communion is the primary structural undergirding of Torrance’s ecclesiology, and it displays how Torrance maps out the mediatorial role of Christ in forming the connection between the Triune God and the Church and in bringing the Church into existence as a community within space and time. However, Torrance’s use of this threefold model is supplemented by explaining the two complementary dimensions of *koinōnia*. These are the vertical dimension of humanity’s relation to God, and the horizontal dimension of humanity’s relation to each other. We will explore these two models in turn.

The Threefold Communion

Torrance explains the concept of a threefold communion by beginning with a description of the consubstantial communion or *koinōnia* of God *in se*, Father, Son, and Spirit, who are an eternal *perichoretic* communion of love. This was what we discussed in the first section of this article. Next, Torrance discusses how the eternal love of the Godhead—the love which *is* the Triune Godhead—overflows and is embodied in humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. This takes place through the hypostatic union, for in Jesus Christ, divine and human nature are united and brought into *koinōnia* throughout his whole atoning work, in his life, death, and resurrection. Christ has healed our sinful humanity, and made it possible for humans to participate in the communion of the Holy Spirit with the sanctified human nature of Jesus. Finally, Torrance emphasises that on the basis of Christ’s atoning reconciliation, the same Holy Spirit who is the bond of love within the Trinity, pours out the love of God within the Church, so that through the communion (*koinōnia*) of the Spirit, the Church is made able to participate in the eternal love of God. The Church is formed as a community of love on earth as it participates through Christ and the Spirit in the communion of the Trinity.⁴⁷ Jesus Christ “identified Himself with us, made Himself one with us, and on that ground claims us as His own, lays hold of us, and assumes us into union and communion with Him, so that as Church we find our essential being and life not in ourselves but in Him alone.”⁴⁸ We must keep in mind here our earlier material

47 Torrance, *Atonement*, 360. A more imaginative analogy of the threefold communion model is offered by Kye Won Lee, who likens Torrance to Ben Hur, as the champion of the Trinity, with *perichoresis*, the hypostatic union, and *koinōnia* as the three wheels of his chariot—see Kye Won Lee, *Living in Union with Christ: The Practical Theology of Thomas F. Torrance* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 317.

48 Thomas F. Torrance, “What Is the Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 11, no. 1 (Oct 1958): 9.

on God's being as communion.

The basis for this threefold model is that through Christ's incarnational atonement, believers are united to God, so that they "organically cohere with and in him as one Body in one Spirit."⁴⁹ Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human; in him the eternal relations of the Triune Godhead assume an economic form and yet remain immanent, "thus opening out history to the transcendence of God while actualising the self-giving of God within it."⁵⁰ In a corresponding way, through the Spirit God unites us to Christ, "in such a way that his human agency in vicarious response to the Father overlaps with our response, gathers it up in its embrace, sanctifying, affirming and upholding it in himself, so that it is established in spite of all our frailty as our free and faithful response to the Father in him."⁵¹ Our reading of Torrance here is supported by Hunsinger, who acknowledges that for Torrance, Christ's vicarious humanity is the point of contact between the Trinity and humanity, for "we share in the communion of the Trinity as we are joined to the person of the incarnate Son by virtue of our participation in his vicarious humanity."⁵² The key thing to note here is that humankind do not respond to God independently; we require a divine work of grace to enable us to acknowledge his Lordship.

We can think out this threefold model more fully by focusing on how Torrance describes the communion of the Trinity as flowing into and shaping our human life—again, filling out our earlier material. The relationship that exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit is intrinsic to their *ousia*, but has become embodied in our humanity through the incarnation and the uniting of divine and human nature through the hypostatic union. As we have noted, *koinōnia* is a matter of both knowledge and being. Through Jesus' assumption of human nature, God "has once and for all assumed human nature into that mutuality and opened his divine being for human participation."⁵³ It is through the life of the incarnate Son that the Holy Spirit has "accustomed himself" to dwell with humanity, and "adapted human nature to receive him and be possessed by him."⁵⁴ The incarnate Son accomplishes atoning reconciliation in his own person, and this is actualized

49 Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 254.

50 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 101.

51 *Ibid.*, 103.

52 George Hunsinger, "The Dimension of Depth: Thomas F. Torrance on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (May 2001): 166.

53 Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 101.

54 *Ibid.*, 102.

in individuals through the work of the Holy Spirit. Through the redemptive work of the Trinity, humans are transformed by a divine work of sheer grace, no longer separated from God by the consequences of sin.

Nevertheless, it is not simply that all humanity is part of the Church, even though Christ has assumed the humanity of all rather than the humanity of some. It is obvious that Torrance cannot be described as a universalist,⁵⁵ for he notes that “whether a man believes or not, the creative Word continues activity . . . some eat and drink salvation; others out of the same cup and the same plate eat and drink damnation.”⁵⁶ While the Church is comprised of those who have been baptised in the name of the Trinity, there is also the expectation that members will bear witness to their union with Christ as they “live in faith and obedience to him.”⁵⁷

Torrance describes the Church as the “universal family of God” adopted as God’s children, the “community of the reconciled” who are united to Christ and through him find redemption, and the “communion of the saints” who are filled with the Spirit in such a way that they may be sent out in power “to live out the divine life and love among humankind as the bodily instrument and image of Christ in the world and the one comprehensive communion of the Spirit.”⁵⁸ These phrases all denote a visible aspect to membership in the body of Christ, which is outworked through participation in the life of the Church, in worship, baptism, and the eucharist.

The Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of Koinōnia

While the threefold communion model explicitly incorporates both trinitarian and christological foci and helps us to shape our thinking about the unequivocal way in which Torrance sees the doctrine of the Triune God as shaping the doctrine of the Church, we must remain careful not to confuse the *koinōnia* of the Church, as that which is formed between humans through the work of the Spirit, with the *koinōnia* of the Triune God *in se*. These are distinctly different. Our ability to maintain this essential distinction will be strengthened by examining

55 Torrance addresses the issue of universalism in Thomas F. Torrance, “Universalism or Election?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2, no. 3 (1949): 310–18.

56 Thomas F. Torrance, *Conflict and Agreement in the Church: The Ministry and Sacraments of the Gospel* vol. 2, 2 vols. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 72-73.

57 Torrance, *Atonement*, 362.

58 Ibid. To “live out the divine life” is a reference to the Church’s role of bearing witness, and proclaiming the Gospel. It is not to suggest any synthesis of divine and human agency.

the other model of *koinōnia* which Torrance uses – the two dimensions of *koinōnia*. The vertical dimension is another name for the threefold communion model that we have just explored; through union with Christ, humans are able to participate as the church in the triune *koinōnia* through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. The important counterpart to the vertical dimension, which is as yet unexplored, is the horizontal dimension, the communion formed among humanity. As God communicates himself to humanity in a movement of love which is received in the Spirit, this generates a reciprocal community of love, the Church.⁵⁹

The personalising incorporating activity of the Spirit creates, not only reciprocity between Christ and ourselves, but a community of reciprocity among humankind, which through the Spirit is rooted in and reflects the Trinitarian relations in God himself. It is thus that the Church comes into being and is constantly maintained in its union with Christ as his Body. This is the Church of the triune God, embodying under the power of the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, the divine *koinonia* within the conditions of human and temporal existence.⁶⁰

These two dimensions are inseparable from each other. The horizontal derives from the vertical, but at the same time, the horizontal bears witness to the nature of the vertical relationship between God and humanity.

It is only through vertical participation in Christ that the Church is horizontally a communion of love, a fellowship of reconciliation, a community of the redeemed. Both these belong together in the fullness of Christ. It is only as we share in Christ Himself that we share in the life of the Church, but it is only as we share with all saints in their relation to Christ that we participate deeply in the love and knowledge of God.⁶¹

Jesus Christ is the true nexus of the vertical and horizontal dimensions, for he became physically present within space and time without distorting his relationship to the Father and the Spirit.⁶² While the Church exists in space and time, it has its ultimate being in the Triune God, and so also exists—in a way appropriate to its creaturely status—at the intersection of the vertical dimension and the horizontal dimension.

59 Thomas F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 178–85.

60 Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 251.

61 Torrance, "What Is the Church," *Ecumenical Review* 11, no. 1 (Oct 1958), 6-21.

62 Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*, Logos Electronic Edition ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1997), 14.

In Dialogue with Communion Ecclesiologies

The final task that remains for us is to briefly bring Torrance's ecclesiology into dialogue with the wider field of communion ecclesiologies, and to examine what particular contribution his use of the *koinōnia* motif offers to the Church today. This is particularly relevant given the way that the doctrine of the Holy Trinity became a central theme of theological reflection in the twentieth century, leading, as Ralph Del Colle observes, to the "near consensus that the nature of church life and order is a matter of *communio* or *koinonia*."⁶³ However, despite a renewed appreciation for the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Church that emerged, the definition of a communion ecclesiology is far from a precise science.

Rather than seeking a strict definition, communion ecclesiologies might be better described as a generously-defined theological family. On one hand, we have definitions such as those offered by Roman Catholic theologian Dennis M. Doyle. Although Doyle's work focuses upon Roman Catholic communion ecclesiology, his definition is sufficiently broad to speak cross-denominationally. He appreciatively notes that communion ecclesiology

represents an attempt to move beyond the merely juridical and institutional understandings by emphasising the mystical, sacramental, and historical dimensions of the Church. It focuses on relationships, whether among the persons of the Trinity, among human beings and God, among the members of the Communion of Saints, among members of a parish, or among the bishops dispersed throughout the world.⁶⁴

Offering a similar but rather more critical definition, Protestant theologian Nicholas Healy notes that there are at least four different types of communion ecclesiologies, each with its own suggestions about the kind of reform which is needed in the contemporary Church,⁶⁵ and at least six different ways of developing a communion ecclesiology.⁶⁶ Healy's definition is simpler overall than

63 Ralph Del Colle, "The Church," in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, eds. Kathryn Tanner, John Webster, Iain Torrance (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 253.

64 Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000), 12. He notes particularly in regard to his own tradition that that "Catholic theologians cannot interpret either Vatican II or communion ecclesiology apart from each other." (2)

65 Nicholas M. Healy, "Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note," *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 4 (1995): 449–50.

66 Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical–Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6–8, 26–51.

Doyle's, suggesting that

communion ecclesiologies relate the primary reality of the church to the Trinity as such. The true identity or reality of the church lies in its participation in the inner-trinitarian *koinonia* or communion. That is, this participatory relation is at the same time the mode of our salvation, which is therefore realized in an ecclesial and communal form.⁶⁷

These citations from Doyle and Healy demonstrate their shared understanding; communion ecclesiologies are those which give pre-eminence to the trinitarian life of God, and seek to unfold its direct implications for the life and existence of the Church. This gives us a framework by which we may note the particular contribution which Torrance's approach to a communion ecclesiology makes to the life of the Church.

Although Torrance's emphasis that the renewed doctrine of the Church must have a christocentric and trinitarian basis as the basis for ecumenical development was not unique, bringing his work into the ongoing dialogue of communion ecclesiology is a profitable undertaking because it gives us a very specific perspective on the way that this core theological relationship developed. Every theologian is a product of many different influencing factors; examining a specific facet of their thought in the systematic way that we have done in this article enables us to understand both the individual's thought and the wider context of theological development in a more robust way.

It is at this point that we may reintroduce the concept of onto-relations into our consideration of the life of the Church. Torrance claims that the idea of onto-relations within the Trinity is what gave rise to the idea of person, which could also be "applicable to inter-human relations, but in a created way reflecting the uncreated way in which it applies to the Trinitarian relations in God."⁶⁸ Following this train of thought, Torrance further proposes that the concept of personhood, or of personal being, "actually arose only along with the doctrines of Christ and of the Holy Trinity,"⁶⁹ since we are "people who are personal primarily through onto-relations to him as the creative Source of our personal being, and secondarily through onto-relations to one another within the subject—subject structures of our creaturely being as they have come from him."⁷⁰ Torrance also relates this to Clerk Maxwell's scientific insistence that "the relations between things, whether so-called objects or events, belong

67 Healy, "Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note," 442.

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

69 Ibid., 119.

70 Ibid., 160.

to what things really are."⁷¹ The alternative to an understanding of "person" shaped by the doctrine of the Trinity, is that which was "logically derived from the notions of individuality and rational substance and not derived ontologically from the Trinity."⁷²

Although we may not directly apply the *perichoretic* onto-relations of the Trinity to humanity's relationships, the Christian concept of the person is shaped by this idea of relationships, so that to be a person is to be in relationship with others, to be in community.⁷³ The doctrine of the Holy Trinity shapes

the distinctively Christian concept of the person, deriving from the community of love in God and defined in onto-relational terms in which the inveterate egocentricity of the self-determining personality is overcome, which demands and gives shape to a new and open concept of human society.⁷⁴

We may explore in a more extensive way this idea of a "new and open concept of human society" which is grounded in the community of love that is God himself by turning to a series of articles entitled the "Real Crises" that Torrance wrote at the start of the 1990s. Published in *Life and Work*, the monthly newsletter of the Church of Scotland, they are brief—no more than three pages in length—and aimed at a less academic audience. This should not be taken as suggesting that they are less than robustly theological, for they do a wonderful job of summarising the pragmatic thrust of Torrance's ecclesiology.

In the first article, entitled "The Kirk's Crisis of Faith," Torrance argues that the Church's obsession with cultural and societal relevance has resulted in the loss of the Church's distinctiveness, observing that "the more the distinctive doctrines of divine revelation are set aside in the obsession of the Church to be socially relevant, the more the Church disappears into secular society."⁷⁵ He continues the same thread in the second article, "The Crisis of Morality," noting that the separation of moral law from theological truth has resulted in a loss of morality based in the redemptive narrative, and based instead in the utilitarian ethic of human well-being. Because of this, the Church is no longer a transformative agent of culture and society, but has instead become enslaved to political ideals.⁷⁶ In these first two articles, Torrance draws primarily on the

71 Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1996), 285.

72 Ibid.

73 Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Theology and Scientific Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 50–51.

74 Ibid., 287.

75 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Kirk's Crisis of Faith," *Life and Work* (Oct 1990): 16.

76 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Crisis of Morality," *Life and Work* (Nov 1990): 14–15.

doctrine of the incarnation.

In the third article Torrance turns his attention to "The Crisis of Community." Drawing explicitly on the doctrine of the Trinity, Torrance contends that there is substantial divergence between a political society which relies upon legislative compulsion, and the Christian community which is formed through participating in the divine *koinōnia* of the Holy Trinity. In Torrance's opinion,

Everything goes wrong whenever the Church relies upon secular power to order human life and legislate community into existence, for that would substitute social mechanisms for the unifying and transforming operation of divine love which alone can provide community with its inner cohesive force . . . we may be joined together as persons in community only on supernatural grounds . . . [that] is why any decentralising of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity in the life and faith of the Church leads to the crisis of community and the depersonalisation of society that we experience today.⁷⁷

Elsewhere, Torrance also contrasts society and community, suggesting that the Church "is the medium by which society is transmuted into community. Indeed, the Church as such is precisely the new community in the heart of our human society."⁷⁸ As such, the Church must remain distinct—it is to be like salt, as a preserver, and like yeast, or any form of fermenter, bringing change. It is simultaneously the most radical and the most conservative force in society. When the Church disregards the status quo and the popular forms and fashions of the world, it will be able to truly live out its calling as a new community,⁷⁹ and society "may at last be transmuted into a community of love centring in and sustained by the personalising and humanising presence of the Mediator."⁸⁰ God's life is one of communion, the eternal perichoretic love which enfolds the triune persons; consequently it makes sense for the Church's life to be characterised by its reflection of the triune love. Torrance suggests that this divine love is "the very esse of the Church given to it through union with Christ," which "manifests itself in the Church in the form of self-denial, suffering and service."⁸¹ In the Church, "everything must be subordinate to love, in which each serves the other and is subject to the other."⁸²

77 Thomas F. Torrance, "The Crisis of Community," *Life and Work* (Dec 1990): 17.

78 Thomas F. Torrance, "Answer to God," *Biblical Theology* 2, no. 1 (1951): 13.

79 Ibid., 14.

80 Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, 72.

81 Ibid., 66.

82 Ibid., 67.

Concluding Reflections

Torrance's embrace of the concept of *koinōnia* as a central principle in his ecclesiology results in a vision of the Church which is grounded in the Triune God rather than in human society. The Church is a creaturely community, but one which is divinely formed, for it is only as humans participate in the communion of the Holy Trinity that they may simultaneously participate in a correlative community in space and time. We will conclude this presentation of this facet of Torrance's thought by reflecting on the anticipatory nature of the motif of *koinōnia*.

While the Church experiences the joy of already living in the new age that began with the resurrection, it must simultaneously embrace the challenge of that new age not yet being fully realized. The Church's existence as a community of love, reflecting the Triune *koinōnia*, will not be fully realised until the *eschaton*. Although the Church already exists in its vertical dimension and participates in the new creation as it shares in Christ's self-sanctification, it simultaneously exists in its horizontal dimension as a pilgrim people, composed of sinful men and women awaiting the day of their redemption, who are subject to the limitations and frustrations of fallen time.⁸³

However, this is not to suggest that this time is a time without purpose. In the current period of history between the two advents of Christ—which Torrance names the "eschatological pause"⁸⁴—the Holy Spirit is sent from the Father, through the Son, to sustain the Church.⁸⁵ It is only because God has already moved towards humanity in Jesus Christ, and is present with humanity through the Spirit, that the Church "becomes itself a communion of love through which the life of God flows out in love toward every human being."⁸⁶ This is the work of the Spirit in the time between, for it is only through the Spirit that humanity is able to participate in the *koinōnia* of divine love that is the triune being of God, and thus only through the Spirit that the Church may live out the love of God as a visible witness. Although the Church can only imperfectly and finitely embody the love of the God who calls it into being, as the body of Christ it is to live in such a way that everything it does, whether as individuals or corporately, eagerly anticipates Christ's second advent.

83 Torrance, "What is the Church," 12.

84 Torrance, *Atonement*, 302–3.

85 T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 25.

86 Torrance, *Atonement*, 374–75.