

## **THE RELUCTANT MINISTER**

**Memoirs by David W. Torrance**

*Edinburgh, The Handsel Press Ltd, 2015, 309p*

In this fascinating and informative autobiography David Torrance relates in self-deprecating and simple style the story of a life lived in the service of Christ. In anecdote after anecdote, he describes the joys and challenges of well over fifty years of ministry in Scotland in the latter half of the twentieth century. Spanning the years from his birth in 1924 as the youngest of the six Torrance children born in China to his retirement in 1991, the memoirs are packed with the distilled wisdom of one of Scotland's most distinguished ministers. Here is an account of the way in which the same theology that was worked out by his two elder brothers, first in the ministry and then in the university, was worked out in the day-to-day reality of parish ministry.

Although originally written for the family record and not intended for publication, there is nevertheless plenty here to enjoy, both for the general reader and for those with a particular interest in Torrance theology. His vivid memories of early childhood and youth, his parents, brothers, friends, and wider family offer a snapshot of the Torrance family in China and pre-war Scotland. And while not overtly theological, the theology underpinning Torrance's faith and understanding of ministry is implicit throughout. One of the Appendices contains a beautifully concise summary of the person and work of Christ and Torrance's own reflections on the task of ministry.

Despite having committed his life to Christ at the age of five "at my mother's knee," Torrance resisted the call to ministry for some years. It was not until he was in India as a soldier during the Second World War that he finally accepted his vocation. Returning to his unit after contracting and surviving smallpox, he experienced a crisis. "Toward the end of the third day, as I approached my tent and entered, I knew that God was in that tent. I did not see him but I felt as if physically I could touch him." God said, "The ministry!" Torrance said, "No!" In the ensuing struggle, Torrance felt God catching him "by the scruff of the neck" and, knowing that he would have no peace if he continued to refuse, he knelt on the bare ground and prayed "the most disgruntled prayer" he had ever prayed: "All right Lord, I will be a minister and it's your look-out!" (pp. 58-9).

After leaving the army he returned to Edinburgh to recommence his university studies. Like his brothers Tom and James before him, David was Dux of New College. He notes with quiet satisfaction that his total marks over all three years of study beat those of his brother Tom by half a mark. He graduated in 1953 with an honours BD with Distinction, having won ten prizes and scholarships. Although his student marks were just as good as those of his brothers, he was convinced that God was calling him to parish ministry and evangelism and not to an academic career. He broke off his doctoral studies under Barth and Cullman to enter parish ministry and later turned down a lectureship at New College in order to remain in ministry, a decision he has never regretted.

Throughout the book, the record of Torrance's work as a minister is interwoven with his invaluable insights into ministry itself. For Torrance, there is only one minister; our ministry is participation through the Holy Spirit in the one ministry of Jesus. Burn-out in the ministry happens when we think and act "as though it is we who are ministers and that the work of the church depends on us" (p. 283).

At the heart of ministry is prayer. "The men and women who have accomplished most in the ministry are the men and women who each day have spent time in prayer" (p. 270). As ambassadors for Christ, ministers are "called to live close to the Lord" (p. 269), to know him intimately, encounter him day by day in prayer and scripture and experience his grace in their own and others' lives. Wherever at all possible or appropriate, Torrance prayed and read the bible in every home he visited.

Preaching should focus all attention on Christ. Torrance notes with sadness that "the vast amount of our preaching as ministers is concerned with telling people what to do," which just encourages "a subtle form of works and not a gospel of grace" (p. 124). The task of preaching is to proclaim Christ in his finished work and to encourage people to live out the new life which Christ has lived out vicariously for us. Instead of drawing attention to themselves, preachers must slip into the background. True preaching "is where people hear God speaking, not man" (p. 136).

Ministry can never be a one-man show, but is to be shared by the whole congregation. There is a great need today to enable all the members of the Church to exercise their gifts. A measure of Torrance's success in equipping members of his congregations to use their gifts is the sheer number of them who entered the ministry. Thirteen became ministers, three trained as lay readers, five became overseas missionaries, some ten or eleven took evening

classes in theology at New College, five of whom gained a diploma, and many others took up positions of leadership in the church.

Torrance insists that the foundation of faith is laid in childhood and youth. In all his charges a major part of his work was youth ministry. Concerned with the theological meaning and interpretation of what was being taught to the children in Sunday School, he prepared the lessons in advance with the teachers and personally led the bible classes, youth fellowships, and youth camps.

Running through the book is a strong vein of humour, often directed at himself. He describes clinging helplessly to his horse's neck as it bolted on an expedition in India. He recalls a summer mission in Sutherland, braving the single-track highland roads in an antiquated car, his seat precariously propped up on a pile of hymn books to prevent his toppling over on the bends. As a student assistant minister, no weakling and still fresh from army service, he confesses to having simultaneously wrestled three unruly youths to the ground to restore order at a youth club. Two of the boys in that club subsequently entered the ministry. One evening, rushing to tend his bees before taking a service, he was so badly stung that he almost fainted during the service. He ruefully remarks, "Each time a bee stung what hurt me most was my conscience!" (p. 202)

Torrance often took up causes, at times pursuing them with dogged determination. He successfully challenged the breweries in court to prevent a license to sell alcohol being granted in Livingston New Town. He took on the case of someone he believed had been poorly treated by the Scottish Bible Society and persevered until he won. He succeeded in persuading a reluctant local education authority to remove the progressive headmaster of a school in which discipline had been thrown to the winds.

Not one to obfuscate, Torrance could be forthright if he felt the need. He told one agnostic that he was "either on the road to heaven or to hell" and that he was on the road to the latter. Another agnostic was informed that a more accurate description was "ignoramus." A mother who complained about her sons refusing to attend church was told that she was setting a bad example by not attending herself.

At a time when the Church is facing enormous challenges and often seems tempted to regard theology as being of little practical value, here is a vivid reminder of the harvest to be reaped from holding together the theological, pastoral, and corporate aspects of ministry. Torrance's unswerving focus on Christ and trust in the relevance of his gospel for every single person he met had a profound impact. In encounters with people from all walks of life and

all backgrounds, churchgoers, the unchurched, atheists, agnostics, humanists, and bigots, he communicated Christ in ways that related theology to peoples' everyday experience. This was a ministry that touched and changed lives.

Jennifer Floether