

**A RADICAL NEW HUMANISM:  
Thomas Torrance's Mission of the Church**

**Stanley S. Maclean, PhD**  
**Keimyung University,**  
**Assistant Professor of Christian Studies**  
*stanley.maclean@gmail.com*

**ABSTRACT:** *This essay is an investigation into the formation and shape of Thomas Torrance's doctrine of the mission of the Church. While situating his doctrine within its historical context, the essay demonstrates that Torrance's doctrine is determined by his high Christology and his concept of the Church as the Body of Christ that participates in the risen and ascended Christ's teleological movement towards pleroma (fullness). This unique movement is the universalization of the new humanity of Christ. The essay also shows that Torrance's doctrine is grounded in a Trinitarian concept of the missio Dei that safeguards the central role of Christ and his Church in mission. It concludes by addressing concerns about the doctrine and by underlining the value of it for the Church today.*

After centuries of neglect, missiology came to the forefront of theological reflection in the twentieth century. David Bosch's magisterial work, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (1991)<sup>1</sup> is arguably one of the most profound and comprehensive studies on the subject. A paradigm shift in this field occurred in the twentieth century. It was one that marked the end of the "age of missions" and the birth of the "age of mission."<sup>2</sup> Missiology and ecclesiology were reconciled, so that mission was no longer viewed as a fringe activity of the Church but as essential to the nature of the Church. Now, in fact, everything about the Church was interpreted as an expression of its

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1 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991).

2 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1966), 572.



mission. The watershed event of this period was the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Conference in 1952. Here the concept of *missio Dei* (the mission of God) entered the discourse on mission and began to reshape it.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter the preference was to view the mission of the Church as the outworking of God's grand mission towards all creation. This perspective remains dominant, as reflected in a recent World Council of Churches (WCC) paper on missiology. Mission, it tells us, is the "overflow of the infinite love of the Triune God."<sup>4</sup>

This essay is an investigation of Thomas Torrance's doctrine of the mission of the Church, in the context of the ecumenical movement, where it took shape, and in light of the paradigm shift in missiology that occurred in the twentieth century. The essay demonstrates that Torrance's doctrine is determined by his high Christology and the related concept of the Church as the Body of Christ that participates in the risen and ascended Christ's teleological movement towards *pleroma* (fullness). This movement towards *pleroma* is the universalization of the new humanity of the risen Christ, a humanity that the people of God partake of through the Holy Spirit, Baptism, and the Eucharist. Finally, the essay shows that Torrance's doctrine is rooted in an understanding of the *missio Dei* that safeguards the centrality of Christ and his Church in mission.

### **The Church as the Leaven in Society**

Torrance molded his doctrine of mission in the 1950s (the second decade of his long career) when he was a leading member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. His interest in this subject, however, long predates his formal involvement with the WCC. This interest can be partly attributed to his background. Torrance was born in 1913 on the missionary field of China to Scottish missionary parents. He moved to his parents' motherland for his theological education, but with the intention of returning to China to follow in the footsteps of his parents. The Communist revolution in China torpedoed his plan. Torrance would remain instead in Scotland, where he became an ordained minister in the Church of Scotland and eventually a professor at the University of Edinburgh.

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3 Wilhelm Richebacher, "Missio Dei: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?" *International Review of Missions* 92, no. 367 (2003):367; David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 379, 400.

4 The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, "Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," (05 September 2012), <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes> (accessed 18 May 2016).

Yet Torrance never lost the missionary's zeal for the spread of the Gospel, a zeal that stemmed, it seems, from his irrepressible hope in the final advent of Christ. At Alyth church—his first pastoral charge—he spoke about the Church's need to "capture again" the "note of the utmost urgency of the Gospel", because the kingdom of God "draweth nigh."<sup>5</sup> Mission, he explained, is not merely a task of the Church. It is the "cause and life" of the Church.<sup>6</sup> The Church "exists only by mission,"<sup>7</sup> so that the missionary task is one that is placed upon the whole people of God. Echoing Emil Brunner's famous words<sup>8</sup> Torrance exclaimed that the "Church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning."<sup>9</sup> "But to burn," he added, "the fire must have fuel to burn—that is why it must be always be reaching out and out and out."<sup>10</sup> The Church "needs to be turned inside out; her whole effort and life must face outwards."<sup>11</sup>

Torrance, anticipating Lesslie Newbigin's missiology,<sup>12</sup> thought that the mission of the Church must have as its object the Christianized West as well as the Global South. Britain needed to be re-evangelized, he felt, because it had become deaf to the real meaning of the Gospel. In his view, the Church in Britain had become scarcely distinguishable from the surrounding culture. He faulted it for having "degenerated" to a point where it was a "bulwark of national order and life."<sup>13</sup> When the Church is out of touch with the Kingdom of God, it is powerless to transform the surrounding culture. It was so deeply "identified with the present shape of the nation that she can't change it . . . can't strike at the heart of contemporary civilization, culture and society."<sup>14</sup> The Church had to be reminded that it is not the Kingdom of God but rather an "instrument" of the Kingdom of God.

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5 Torrance, "God's arrows," Unpublished sermon on Philippians 3:8, 12–14, Alyth Barony Parish, Scotland, 1942 (*Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Princeton, NJ*).

6 T.F. Torrance, "The Church in the World," in *Gospel, Church, and Ministry*, ed. Jock Stein (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 83.

7 Torrance, "The Church in the World," 84.

8 Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), 108.

9 Torrance, "The Church in the World," 83.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 84.

12 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1986).

13 T.F. Torrance, "The Leaven and the Loaf," Unpublished sermon on Matthew 13:33, Alyth Barony Parish, Scotland, 1941 (*Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Library, Princeton, NJ*).

14 Torrance, "The Leaven and the Loaf".

Finding a lesson in the parable of the leaven in Matthew 13, Torrance was convinced that the Church's mission includes being the "greatest disturbing factor on earth."<sup>15</sup> Given that his years at Alyth overlapped with WWII, he did not shy away from using militant language to underline the Church's highest calling:

Once again, the Church must become militant, aggressive. Away with all comfortable, complacent "Christianity" and stick-in-the-mud Churchmanship! Let the Church remember that she is committed to everlasting war; that her function toward society and State is to throw them into upheaval, to disturb them, and into that fermentation to interject the living word of God whose impact upon society and state will mean a better order and shape for things in the future.<sup>16</sup>

As the last line of this quote indicates, the proclamation of the word of God is the core of the Church's mission. It is what makes the Church a disturbing and reordering force.

### **The Body of Christ and Mission**

The mission of the Church was something Torrance took very seriously from the beginning of his career in Scotland. Yet it was only after he became involved in the ecumenical movement in 1948 that he began to develop his own theology of mission. Torrance was immersed as an official participant in the ecumenical movement for more than a decade, from 1948 to 1962, through his membership in the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. His thoughts on the mission of the Church were largely a byproduct of his efforts to advance the unity of the Church at that time. However, the Church's unity and mission were inseparable for him. He recognized that the "great impetus" in the ecumenical movement had been "decidedly missionary."<sup>17</sup> This impetus for Church unity arose when overseas missionaries realized that their witness to the "one Lord, one faith" and "one God" was seriously undermined by Christian disunity. This led to the first World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, which is regarded as the official birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement.

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15 Ibid.

16 Torrance, "The Church in the World," 79.

17 T.F. Torrance, "Concerning Amsterdam I: The Nature and Mission of the Church," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1949), 242.

Torrance dealt with unity and mission in his first paper for the Faith and Order Commission in 1949.<sup>18</sup> It was written in response to the first meeting of the World Council of Churches, held at Amsterdam in 1948, where delegates discovered that the deepest division within the Church was the result of conflicting "catholic" and "evangelical" definitions of the Church. For Torrance both the unity and mission of the Church were dependent on a profound appreciation of the Christological nature of the Church. At Amsterdam, delegates had hoped that a clearer conception of the divine and human dimensions of the Church would promote the cause of Church unity. Torrance had shared that hope, but he now believed that the divine and human dimensions must be understood by means of the "analogy of the hypostatic union" in Christ, not by means of the difference between God and humanity.

The hypostatic union explains the uniqueness of the person of Jesus Christ where, per its Chalcedonian definition, the divine and human natures in Christ are united in one person, without change (*immutabiliter*) or separation (*inseparabiliter*) of the natures, and without confusion (*inconfuse*) or division (*indivise*) of them. The uniqueness of the hypostatic union in Christ must be preserved, but at the same time it warrants, Torrance believed, an "analogical extension into the sphere of the Church."<sup>19</sup> This extension means Christ and the Church can be related in a way that is *similar to* how God and humanity are related in Christ.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the relation between Church and Christ is neither one of identity nor of difference.<sup>21</sup> The Church and Christ must not be elided, so that the Church becomes another Christ (a Catholic temptation). Nor must the Church become separated from Christ, which can happen when it is viewed as another voluntary human association (a Protestant temptation). Christ loves the Church, rules it, and has bound himself to it.

What justification is there for the analogical application of the hypostatic union to the Church? For Torrance, it resided in the fact that the Church is truly the *Body* of Christ.<sup>22</sup> In his view, this biblical image of the Church is unique. It is not just another metaphor for the Church. Rather, it discloses the Church's ontological nature. Unlike other images, he argued, only this one can be applied to both the Church and Christ, while forcing us to give priority to Christ over the

18 Ibid., 241–70.

19 Ibid., 248.

20 It would be a mistake, though, to interpret the analogical extension to mean that the divine and human are related in the Church in a similar way to how God and man are related in Christ.

21 Torrance, "Concerning Amsterdam," 248.

22 See his essay "What is the Church?" *The Ecumenical Review* 11, no.1 (1958).

Church. Christ is and always will be the ruler of the Church as surely as he is the head of his Body.

If we take seriously the notion that the Church is the Body of Christ then, from Torrance's perspective, the mission of the Church will be ultimately about the humanization of humankind. Today the word "humanization" suggests the removal of God from human existence, since humanization is close to humanism, which is associated with atheism and secularism. For Torrance, though, humanization would mean more of God, not less of God. This is because for him Jesus Christ is the God-Man and the true measure of what being human is all about.

Indeed, Christ is more than a measure of what it is to be human. He remakes us into his image. It is for this reason Torrance called Christ the "humanizing man";<sup>23</sup> and his Church the "new humanity" in "eschatological concentration."<sup>24</sup> Although humanity was made in the image and likeness of God, sin has disfigured and dehumanized the human being. We cannot fulfill our moral obligations to other people, much less our moral obligations to God. The resurrection of Jesus Christ not only affirmed and healed human nature, it gave it a new glory, since in Christ the human nature is now permanently united with the divine nature. The human being now bears the "image of the man of heaven."<sup>25</sup> The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the beginning of a new type of human being and represents, in Torrance's words, a "radically new humanism."<sup>26</sup>

The humanity of the Church and the mission of the Church are, moreover, deeply interrelated. The Church that refuses to engage in world mission, that turns inward, "cuts the roots of the Church" from the new humanity of the risen Christ that seeks universalization through the Church, his Body.<sup>27</sup> The ascension of Christ means this new humanity is hidden from the world, yet the Church as the Body of Christ is an anticipation of this new humanity. The Church though must never be thought of as a *Christus prolongatus*, since its relation to Christ is analogous to the hypostatic union in Christ. The Church thus must never be separated from Christ, its head, or confused with him.

From Torrance's vantage point in the 1950s, the humanity of the risen Christ (and thus our new humanity also) was besieged by two nefarious forces: docetic interpretations of the resurrection and the Communist collectivization of

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23 T.F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (1983; repr., Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), 69.

24 Torrance, "Concerning Amsterdam," 267.

25 1 Cor 15:49 (NRSV)

26 T.F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert Walker (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 239.

27 Torrance, "Concerning Amsterdam," 267.

humanity across the globe. He also feared that the Faith and Order Commission's tendency to think about the Church as the Body of the Trinity or the Body of the Spirit would detract from the importance of the humanity of Christ.<sup>28</sup> In order to safeguard the new humanity, Torrance called for the doctrine of the Church to be reconstructed on the pattern of a "triangular relation" between the Church and the historical Christ, the risen and ascended Christ, and the Church and the advent Christ in his full humanity and deity.<sup>29</sup>

This triangular relation means that the Church in one sense is the Body of the suffering Christ. The veiling of Christ in the ascension forces the Church to look backward to the Jesus of history. In its mission on earth the Church participates in the suffering of Jesus. This happens especially when the Church candidly proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, because when it does this it provokes the hostility of the world by convicting people of their sinfulness and by summoning them to a decision for Christ. The mission of the Church involves, as the Epistle to the Hebrews teaches, going "outside the camp" to where Jesus was crucified, to share in the "shame he bore."<sup>30</sup> This mission will continue as long as there is spiritual darkness, alienation, and rebellion in the world.

In another sense, the Church is the Body of the risen and ascended Christ. The Church is alongside Christ in God's place outside created time and space. The Church is "with Jesus before God... gathered up in him and included in his own presence before the Father."<sup>31</sup> Members of the Body on earth can thus experience the power of the resurrection on earth. Yet because the Church is the Body of the ascended Christ, the humanization of humankind cannot be fully realized this side of the final advent of Jesus Christ.

As the Body of the coming Christ, the Church is given its eschatological orientation. This has three implications. One, the Church is called to live in anticipation of Christ's final judgement, which begins at the house of God.<sup>32</sup> As the Church engages continuously in its mission to the world, it engages continuously in its own repentance. This means that it participates in the dying and rising of Christ, until it overcomes all conformity to the fallen world. Two,

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28 T.F. Torrance, "Where do we go from Lund?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953), 58.

29 Ibid.

30 William Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Historical and Theological Reconstruction* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1951). Manson's commentary on Hebrews was an important resource for Torrance in his study of the priesthood of the Christ (*The Royal Priesthood*).

31 Torrance, *Atonement*, 294.

32 1 Peter 4:17.

the Church's Eucharist should be open to the advent presence (*parousia*) of Christ. This means that the eucharistic liturgy will "anticipate and echo that final Messianic Supper," where everyone who thirsts for the risen life is invited to come and drink.<sup>33</sup> Third, this eschatological orientation guides and shapes the mission of the Church. The mission is temporary. It is for the time of grace and repentance, the time between the ascension and the final advent of Christ. The Church's mission should be animated by the expectation of the *eschaton*. So as the Church reaches out to the world with the gospel, it ought to be reaching out to the Coming One in faith and hope.

Word and Sacrament are instrumental to the fulfillment of the Church's mission and hence to the humanization of humankind. Christ is the head of the Church, his Body, but the Body is "gathered up" into the head through the proclamation of the Word. "Just as a body is gathered up into a head without which the body is nothing, so the Church is by the Word gathered up as His Body in Christ the Head."<sup>34</sup> In this matter, Torrance follows closely his theological master at Basel, who was also lending his voice to ecumenical discussions in the 1950s. In fact, Karl Barth defines the mission of the Church as the proclamation of the Word,<sup>35</sup> which produces the "gathering together" (*congregatio*) of the Church into Christ.

However, Torrance diverges from Barth on the matter of the sacraments and their relation to the nature and mission of the Church. While Barth tends to view the sacraments as basically human responses to Christ,<sup>36</sup> Torrance, tends to view them as signs of the Christ-event, specifically as a union of divine action and the human response to that action through participation in the vicarious humanity of Christ.<sup>37</sup> This explains why Torrance sees the sacraments as essential to completing the mission of the Church. The sacraments mark the outer and inner limits of the Church. Baptism "marks the outer frontier of the Church"; it is where the Church announces the Gospel to the world and where people are incorporated into the Body of Christ. The Lord's Supper "marks the inner

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33 T.F. Torrance, "Liturgy and Apocalypse" *Church Service Society Annual* 24 (1954), 1-18.

34 Torrance, "Concerning Amsterdam," 256. Torrance understands the "Word" as Christ himself, or more specifically in this case, as the "Mind of Christ," which he puts in parenthesis.

35 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 743-96.

36 George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth on the Lord's Supper: An Ecumenical Appraisal," *Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie*, Supplement Series 5 (2003), 152.

37 T.F. Torrance, "Eschatology and the Eucharist," in *Intercommunion*, ed. D.M. Baillie and J. Marsh (London: SCM, 1952), 311.



frontier" of the Church, since it is here that Christ is sacramentally present and where believers spiritually feed on the flesh and blood of Christ. In short, Baptism brings people into Christ, while the Lord's Supper continually nourishes them with Christ, so that they become "bone of His bone and flesh of his flesh."<sup>38</sup>

Word and Sacrament also "reveal and shape the form" of the Church's mission in the world.<sup>39</sup> It is essentially a mission of reconciliation. The Church is a holy community where people have been reconciled to God, and each other, through Christ. Yet it is the duty of this community to share the news of this reconciliation, for this reconciliation applies to the whole world (2 Cor 5:19). Moreover, the Church is called to participate in Christ's reconciliation of the world through sacrificial service in the world. In sum, "the Church must proclaim the reconciliation by which it lives and live out the reconciliation it proclaims."<sup>40</sup> This explains why Torrance was a passionate and indefatigable advocate of Church unity. Healing the divisions within the Church was the most important demonstration of reconciliation within the world.

### **Incarnation, Atonement, and Mission**

While the "triangular relation" between the Christ and the Church may help to safeguard the new humanity, it could not on its own, Torrance felt, explain the complex relationship between Christ and the Church, or clearly determine the Church's mission in the world. We showed above how Torrance made use of the analogy of the hypostatic union to explain the relationship between Christ and his Church. In order, though, to account for the complex relationship of the two, Torrance called for a more "dynamic" understanding of the classical concept. This would capture the "mutual involution" of Christ's incarnation and atonement, or, in other words, the intertwining of his life and death. This dynamic concept also does justice to the entire mission of Jesus Christ, for it entails thinking about it in terms of Christ's ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and final advent. When a dynamic concept of the hypostatic union is applied by analogical extension to the Church, it will help to ensure that the mission of the Church corresponds more closely to Christ's mission to the world. The Church then will be understood as wholly constituted and wholly directed on the basis of Christ's

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38 Torrance, "Eschatology and the Eucharist," 337.

39 T.F. Torrance, "The Mission of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19, no. 2 (1966), 142.

40 *Ibid.*, 141.

"incorporating and atoning action."<sup>41</sup>

Jesus' life and mission is about the "One" incorporating himself into the "Many." Jesus formed a new Israel out of the twelve disciples of old Israel. He also formed a new human nature when he incorporated into himself not only the sinful nature of Israel but the sinful nature of all humanity. Jesus' birth and Baptism were corporate events that point backward and forward. Through them Jesus recapitulates in himself the "chosen people," and embodies in himself "the new humanity of the future."<sup>42</sup> Jesus' death on the cross was a substitutionary and representative death. It was the death of the "One for the Many." The corrupt human nature that Christ made congregate with himself is put to death. Thus, the Many are remade in the One. The upshot is that the "One and the Many is the doctrine of Christ," while the "Many and the One is the doctrine of the Church, the Body of Christ."<sup>43</sup> In the former, Christ represents humanity; in the latter, the Church represents Christ to the world.

Torrance's Christological understanding of the Church and its mission did not end with his employment of the hypostatic union. In order to give the Church a deeper grounding in Christ, he also harnessed for his analogical purpose the classic *anhypostasis-ehypostasis* formula. To think of the Church's relation to Christ *anhypostatically* then is to think of the Church as having "no *per se* existence, no independent hypostasis, apart from Christ's atonement."<sup>44</sup> To think of the Church's relation to Christ *ehypostatically* is to think about the Church as having "a real *hypostasis*" only through incorporation in Christ and as a consequence of "a concrete function in union with Him."<sup>45</sup>

These analogical extensions of Christology to the Church have profound implications for the mission of the Church. The Church is the Body of the risen and ascended Christ, but in light of the dynamic concept of the hypostatic union, the Church must now be regarded as participating in Christ's teleological movement towards fullness. Within the Church this movement is intensive, for the Body of believers grows into "a perfect man, to the measure and stature and fullness of Christ."<sup>46</sup> Through the Church's mission, this teleological movement occurs

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41 T.F. Torrance, "The Atonement and the Doctrine of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (1954), 246.

42 T.F. Torrance, "The Foundation of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953), 122.

43 Thomas Torrance, "The Atonement and the Doctrine of the Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954), 249.

44 Torrance, "The Atonement," 254.

45 Ibid., 255.

46 Ephesians 4:13 (NKJV).

extensively in the world, "reaching out to all men in all ages in a movement as expansive as the ascension of Christ to fill all things."<sup>47</sup> The movement towards fullness is the universalization of the new humanity of the risen Christ. Universalization does not mean universalism, the certain redemption of every human being, but it does mean that redemption is extended to all through Christ and his Church.

At Pentecost, the mission of the Church began when it was sent into the world as the Many representing the One. The Church, though, can have neither an independent nature nor an independent mission, because its life and mission hinge on its incorporation in Christ and its participation in his way of humiliation and obedience.

The only way the Church can follow Him is by way of *anhypostasia*, by way of self-denial and crucifixion, by letting Christ take its place and displace self-assertion; and by way of *enhyposstasia*, by way of incorporation and resurrection.<sup>48</sup>

Apart from incorporation and participation in Christ, the Church is a fallen human institution and its mission is a disordered human mission. This is because, in Torrance's final analysis, "Christ is the Church."<sup>49</sup> That is because the Church begins with him, in the hypostatic union of God and man. The inverse though is not true: the Church is not Christ. The Church, to be sure, is the Body of Christ through Christ's election, by its grafting into Christ, by its participation in him. Yet in another sense, because it is both an eschatological and teleological reality, the Church must also *become* the Body of Christ by growing up into Christ, by sharing in Christ's work of reconciliation, and by overcoming its scandalous disunity and division. Only as the Church becomes the Church of Christ can it truly represent Christ to the world.

The Church, Torrance insists, can have no divine mission apart from Christ. Yet given that Christ has ascended from the world, one might be tempted to doubt the extent of the Church's participation in Christ's mission of reconciliation. There is no need to doubt, for two reasons. The first is the apostolic foundation of the Church:

Jesus Christ laid the foundation of the Church and its mission in the apostles to whom He gave authoritative commission and whom he appointed as the wise master-builder to order and direct its mission. The Church continues

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47 Torrance, "Mission of the Church," 132.

48 Torrance, "The Atonement," 252.

49 Torrance, "What is the Church?" 9.

throughout all ages to be apostolic in that it remains faithful to its foundation in the apostles and fulfills its mission within the sphere of the commission they received from the Lord for the Church.<sup>50</sup>

The second is the work of the Holy Spirit, which we shall turn to next.

### **The Spirit and Mission**

It is obvious that Torrance's doctrine of the mission of the Church is heavily determined by his Christology. The Church's mission is basically a matter of participating in Christ's mission to reconcile all things to himself and to reproduce the new humanity of Christ within creation. Torrance earned a reputation as a great Trinitarian theologian, so we should expect a role for the Holy Spirit in his doctrine of the mission of the Church. He does not disappoint us, although a historical event seems to have given impetus to the matter in this case. He was a member of the Theological Commission on Christ and the Church (TCCC), which operated from 1955-1963, which had as its mandate the study of the "doctrine of the Church in close relation to both the doctrine of Christ and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit."<sup>51</sup> Since his theology was unabashedly Christocentric, Torrance was clearly comfortable with exploring doctrine of the Church in relation to Christology. He was, however, less comfortable at first with the relationship between the Church and pneumatology. He was concerned that discussions about the Spirit and the Church could lead to attempts to "de-christologize ecclesiology," and he also sensed an insidious tendency to confuse the Holy Spirit with created spirits, since the Holy Spirit lacks the obvious and familiar objectivity of the Son. He believed that Protestants were prone to confuse the human spirit ("a *homineque*") with the Spirit of God; while Catholics were prone to confuse the spirit of the Church with the Spirit of God ("an *ecclesiaeque*").<sup>52</sup>

Torrance had good reason to be worried. Starting in the latter half of the twentieth century, theologians who had been inspired by the *missio Dei* motif began to give more attention to the role of the Spirit in mission. In some cases, unfortunately, this had the knock-on effect of undermining the necessity of the Church's mission, since it was presumed that the Spirit of God is already carrying

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50 Torrance, "The Mission of the Church," 142.

51 Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches: Minutes, Commission and Working Committee, no. 17 (1959):19.

52 Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), 228.

out God's redemptive work independently of the mission of the Church.<sup>53</sup> Torrance in contrast was careful to keep together the activities of Christ, the Spirit, and the Church. This means the mission of the Spirit is correlative to the work of Jesus Christ. As Christ is the mediator between people and God, so the Spirit mediates between Christ and his Church. Torrance gave the Spirit Christological content, because he took very seriously the idea that the Church is the Body of Christ, not the Body of the Spirit. In other words, he believed the divine nature of the Church originated with the Word incarnate, not the Holy Spirit.<sup>54</sup>

The Spirit is nonetheless indispensable to the mission of the Church. To begin with, the Spirit is instrumental in establishing the Church's apostolic mission. "Thus through the Spirit the apostolate is constituted the foundation of the Christian Church, the Body of Christ in history through which Christ makes His own image appear, His own voice to sound, His own saving work to be effectively operative on men."<sup>55</sup> The Holy Spirit is "the One supremely sent by Christ, the Apostle-Spirit who represents Christ," but who is at the same time one with God the Son and God the Father.<sup>56</sup> Torrance would also have us believe that the Spirit, along with the Word and Sacrament, has an essential role in the gathering together and the gathering up of the Church into Christ.<sup>57</sup> It might appear that the Spirit plays a secondary role here to that of the Word and the Sacrament, since these are more clearly associated with the Church's incorporation into Christ. The power of the Word derives from the Word that was made flesh, and the physicality of Baptism and the Lord's Supper testify to their intimate connection to that Word made flesh.

Yet the Word that is proclaimed by the Church is referred to as the "Sword of the Spirit" that comes out of the mouth of Christ, which convicts the world of sin and of God's righteousness and judgement. It is through the Spirit of Pentecost that the Church's relation to Christ becomes "actualized as a concrete reality within the conditions of human history."<sup>58</sup> The Spirit forges the "organic union" that exists between the Church and Jesus Christ. Christ's comprehensive atonement means the Church's mission, to reiterate, can only be a participation in Christ's mission to the world. The Church's mission is not identical to Christ's

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53 See Johannes Aagaard, "Trends in Missiological Thinking During the Sixties," *International Review of Missions* 62 (1973): 8-25.

54 Torrance, "Where Do We Go," 58.

55 Torrance, "The Mission of the Church," 132.

56 Ibid., 131.

57 Ibid.

58 Torrance, "The Mission of the Church," 134.

mission, however. Rather, it exists in “contrapuntal relation” to Christ’s heavenly mission, and it is the Holy Spirit that establishes this unique relation.<sup>59</sup>

The outward mission of the Church, as we learned, is the expansion of the new humanity that happens through the Church’s sharing in the ascended Christ’s teleological movement to towards fullness. Following his work for the TCCC, Torrance began to accent the Holy Spirit’s role in the Church’s share in this movement. The Church’s activity is made possible through the “one universal Spirit of God.”<sup>60</sup> The Holy Spirit is the key to the universalization of this new humanity. “What has been fulfilled intensively in the Church through the operation of the Spirit must be fulfilled extensively in all mankind and all creation.”<sup>61</sup>

We must bear in mind that the new human nature is not simply our old nature cloaked with immortal flesh. This new human nature is essentially relational, because it begins with Christ, who is the “One and the Many”; while the Church, his Body, is the “Many and the One.” Thus each member of the Body of Christ has a personal, vertical relation to Christ, as evident in Baptism; and all members of the Body have a public, horizontal relationship to Christ as well, as signified by Holy Communion. The Holy Spirit actualizes both forms of relationships, and that is what makes the Church a “communion of the Holy Spirit.” We should not imagine, though, that there are two holy unions—one with Christ and another with the Holy Spirit. Torrance is adamant that the union that the Spirit establishes is “correlative” to the corporate union people have with Jesus Christ. So, it is better to say that the Church is a “corporate union” with Christ “through the communion of the Spirit.”<sup>62</sup>

Yet the Spirit’s role in mission is not merely functional. The Spirit shares in the final goal of mission, since corporate union with Christ through the communion of the Spirit ultimately leads to a participation in the eternal communion of love—the life of the Triune God. Decades after he wrote about the mission of the Church, Torrance described the perfect love that characterizes the Triune God as an overflowing love that “freely and lovingly moves outward toward others, whom God creates for fellowship with himself so that they may share with him the very Communion of Love which is his own divine Life and Being.”<sup>63</sup> The

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59 Torrance, *Atonement*, 281.

60 Torrance, “The Mission of the Church,” 138.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., 133.

63 T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London, New York: T&T Clark 1996), 6.

Church's expansion towards *pleroma* or fullness then is ultimately about growth into the fullness of the love of God "in all its height and depth and length and breadth" as it gathers up all nations into the Body of Christ through the Spirit.<sup>64</sup>

### ***Missio Dei***

As was noted at the outset, the biggest change in missiology occurred in the middle of the last century when instead of the mission of the Church people began to focus on the *missio Dei*. This change helped to divert attention away from the stigma of colonialism that was attached to the Church's mission. *Missio Dei* implied, in the words of missiologist David Bosch, that mission was "not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God."<sup>65</sup> "God is a missionary God" suddenly became a refrain in the 1950s. While this refrain may have died out, the theological notion lived on to leave its mark on the Church, as indicated by the statement issued by the WCC at the beginning of this paper.<sup>66</sup> It would be beneficial then to try to understand Torrance's doctrine in light of that momentous change in mission theology.

At first one might be surprised by the absence of the term *missio Dei* in Torrance's doctrine, especially given that the term made its splash onto the theological scene just as Torrance began writing about the Church and its mission, and also given that the new use of the term owes something to Karl Barth's influence.<sup>67</sup> Yet although Torrance does not use the term *missio Dei*, his doctrine is certainly shaped by a concept of the *missio Dei*. As we have seen, Torrance believed that God's love is freely directed toward the world for the purpose of drawing people into fellowship with himself. Torrance moreover discerned a continuity between this mission of God and the mission of the Church. Sometimes he described this continuity in binitarian terms: "As the Father loves the Son, so the Son loves the Church; as the Son was sent by the Father, so the Church is sent by the Son."<sup>68</sup> Yet he also described it in Trinitarian terms, so Christ's commission to his apostles is to be attributed to God's "twofold sending"

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64 Torrance, "What is the Church?" 17.

65 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

66 The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, "Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes," (05 September 2012), <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes> (accessed 18 May 2016).

67 Karl Barth is known to have given a lecture on mission theology in 1932.

68 Torrance, *Atonement*, 373.

of the Son and the Spirit. Christ is described as “the Apostle from the Father sent into the world on the mission of love”; while the Holy Spirit is identified as the “Apostle-Spirit” who is the “One supremely sent” by Christ.<sup>69</sup>

The Church then, for Torrance, is the fruit of God’s mission. It is a “divine creation”; it does not derive “from below” but “from above.” Indeed, Torrance saw the Church as “grounded in the Being and Life of God.” Yet the Church is not a mystical reality. There is no Church to be found outside of history or creation, or outside of space-time. The Church is formed out of people in the world, and people are brought into the Church through the Word and Sacrament.

Torrance might have been simply unaware of what was happening in the wider discussion of mission in the 1950s. In hindsight, missiologists could have benefited from a greater awareness of what Torrance was saying about the Church’s mission, for the term *missio Dei* has proven to be a mixed blessing for the Church. It may have helped to rescue mission from its association with European colonialism and the “white man’s burden,” but it has also been used to sanction very divergent theologies of mission. The problem with the term was neatly summed up by German missiologist William Richebacher, when he stated that “everyone reads into and out of the ‘container definition’ whatever he or she needs as the time.”<sup>70</sup> *Missio Dei* would in time be interpreted basically in one of two ways: one “Cosmocentric”, the other “Christocentric.” The Cosmocentric way highlights God’s mission to the world outside the Church. As Thomas Wieser puts it, “the Church serves the *missio Dei* in the world . . . (when) it points to God at work in world history and names him there.”<sup>71</sup> The Christocentric way, on the other hand, highlights God’s mission through Jesus Christ and the Church, since they are seen as God’s only chosen means for fulfilling his mission to the whole world. It goes without saying that Torrance’s doctrine of mission represents a Christocentric understanding of *missio Dei*, although it would be more accurate to describe his doctrine as an expression of a Trinitarian *missio Dei*.

## Conclusion

Torrance’s doctrine of the mission of the Church is a small part of his theology, and the theologian’s ruminations on mission are confined largely to the earliest

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69 Torrance, “The Mission of the Church,” 130–31.

70 William Richebacher, “*Missio Dei*: The Basis of Mission Theology or a Wrong Path?” *International Review of Mission* 92, no. 367 (2003): 589.

71 Thomas Wieser, ed., *Planning for Mission: Working Papers on the Quest for Missionary Communities* (New York: U.S. Conference for the World Council of Churches, 1966), 52.



stages of his career—although the basic theology behind this doctrine can be traced through to the end of Torrance’s career. For those reasons, his doctrine of mission will usually escape the notice of admirers of his theology, not to mention missiologists. This is unfortunate, because Torrance’s doctrine could help to promote the renewal and revival of mission, especially in the older churches of the West, where the word ‘mission’ is scarcely even uttered anymore. Where the missionary impulse still exists in those churches it is often indistinguishable from the humanitarian impulse outside them, an impulse that is rooted in secular humanism. What the world must hear about, and receive, is the reality of the radical new humanism that is found only in Jesus Christ and his Church.

One at first might fault Torrance’s doctrine of mission for having no practical value for the Church, because it suggests that God is the only real subject of mission. Torrance would make no apology for this characteristic, because to say God is the subject of mission is to uphold the Christian doctrine of salvation through grace alone. People nonetheless have a vital role to play in God’s mission. However, they can only fulfill that role by denying themselves, by becoming part of the Body of Christ and participating in the God-Man’s mission to the world through the proclamation of the Gospel, the enactment of reconciliation, and sacrificial works of love.