

MACKINTOSH, TORRANCE AND REFORMULATION OF REFORMED THEOLOGY IN SCOTLAND

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ABSTRACT: *H.R. Mackintosh (1870–1936) was an early and profound theological influence on T.F. Torrance. A leading proponent of the “liberal evangelicalism” of the late nineteenth century, Mackintosh in the latter stages of his career came to embrace the emerging theology of Karl Barth. His influence on Torrance’s thinking can be clearly detected in their common critique of rationalist dualism and abstraction, found in both Protestant scholasticism and liberal modernism. Mackintosh’s soteriologically accentuated understanding of the incarnation and his pneumatological emphasis on the participation of the believer in Christ through the unio mystica are themes that Torrance developed much further.*

1 Mackintosh and Scottish Theology in the Early Twentieth Century

H.R. Mackintosh played a pivotal role in the development of Reformed theology in the English-speaking world in the first half of the twentieth century. From 1904 to 1936, he held the prestigious chair in systematic theology at New College, the United Free Church of Scotland theological seminary in Edinburgh. Already well known as a preacher and scholar at the time of his appointment, his influence grew steadily throughout Britain and the dominions, the continent, and the U.S.

Among Mackintosh’s many famous students, T.F. Torrance is undoubtedly the best known. And Torrance often referred to his mentor



in his books and lectures. Next to Karl Barth, Mackintosh was probably the most significant influence on the young Torrance.

When Prof. Mackintosh died in June of that year (1936), I was devastated. I had been wandering about the Middle East so that news of his death took some time to reach me. He and his teaching meant so much to me that suddenly New College seemed quite empty. As I asked myself what I had learned from him my thoughts kept returning to the unconditional grace of God freely poured out upon us in Jesus Christ his incarnate Son. The primary emphasis was on the supreme truth that it is none other than God himself who has come among us in Jesus Christ, and who in the crucifixion of his incarnate Son has taken the whole burden of our sin and guilt directly upon himself – all in such a way that the passionate holy love of God the Father enacts both the judgment of sin and the forgiveness of the sinner.¹

It was, of course, Mackintosh who introduced the young Torrance to Karl Barth. His teacher's engagement with Barth's maturing theology made a profound impression, as he sensed a transformation was going on in his revered professor's mind and heart.

During the previous academic session, 1934–35, Mackintosh's lectures had made an unusually disturbing and profound impact, and we became aware in the College that a theological revolution was in process, clearly evident in the excitement and transformation of our seniors. This must undoubtedly be linked with the impact upon New College of the first half-volume of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics, The Doctrine of the Word of God*, which had just been translated by G.T. Thomson and published in Edinburgh by T&T Clark. This had the effect of reinforcing the strong biblical and incarnational emphasis of H.R. Mackintosh in which he had anticipated Barth's reaction to the liberal teaching of Ritschl and Schleiermacher.

Some days he would come into the lecture room clearly troubled as though still wrestling in his mind and soul the truth which he sought to express, but on other days he would come

¹ T.F. Torrance, "H.R. Mackintosh: Theologian of the Cross," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 5 (1987): 162.

mastered by profound serenity of spirit which was almost awesome as we were ushered through his teaching into the presence of God.²

Mackintosh's transformation and embrace of Barth, which influenced Torrance and many other New College students of that era, is all the more remarkable when one realizes that Mackintosh was for twenty-five years the leading expositor of theological developments on the continent, particularly in Germany. He had translated the third volume of Albrecht Ritschl's *Justification and Reconciliation*, and Friedrich Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* with James S. Stewart. Additionally, he wrote dozens of reviews of other works from major and minor German and Swiss theologians.

Although he was born into the austere theological world of Westminster Calvinism, Mackintosh came of age, so to speak, during the rise of a broader "liberal evangelicalism" represented by a host of Scottish pastor-scholars, including A.B. Davidson, J.H. Hastings, Marcus Dods, Robert Rainy, William Robertson Nicoll, and Alexander Whyte. The fruit of their work can still be found in many theological libraries, including a number of encyclopedias edited by Hastings, and the journals *The Expositor* and the *Expository Times*, among others.

In Scotland, the liberal evangelical movement was fueled by a negative reaction to traditional Westminster Calvinism and a keen appreciation for developments in biblical, historical, and systematic theology on the continent, particularly in Germany. Like many of his contemporaries, Mackintosh was ambivalent about Westminster Calvinism. In his earlier years, he was often highly critical of what he termed "scholasticism." In *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, published in 1912, Mackintosh captured the prevailing attitude of liberal evangelicalism when he referred to scholastic christological formulations as an obstacle to genuine theological reflection.³ The rigidity and

² *Ibid.*, 161–62.

³ For what follows, see my study of Mackintosh's Christology and soteriology, *Reformulating Reformed Theology: Jesus Christ in the Theology of Hugh Ross Mackintosh* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 36–38.

dogmatism of the older orthodoxy in the face of scientific advances and historical criticism and high-profile heresy trials like that of John McLeod Campbell had a chilling effect on a generation of pastors and theologians who thought of themselves as theologically orthodox but open-minded on different views of creation, atonement and justification, and even the historicity of certain biblical accounts.

1.1 Reformed scholasticism

Mackintosh perceived two main problems with Reformed scholasticism. The first is what he termed an “incredible and thoroughgoing dualism” in scholastic christological formulations that separated the divinity and humanity of Christ. It created an artificiality that “leaves a profoundly disappointing sense of unethical mystery and even, in a sense, duplicity.”⁴ The humanity of Christ in particular seemed to Mackintosh to recede behind his divinity in scholastic Christology. “Always the result has been that deity and humanity in Christ are joined in ways so external that either may be contemplated and (so to speak) analyzed in abstraction from the other.” This tendency to separate the human and divine natures betrayed the confident witness of New Testament writers like John and Paul to the fullness of God in Jesus Christ.

This tendency to dualism is akin to scholasticism’s other chief weakness, namely, the tendency to abstraction. In the hands of the Protestant scholastics, basic biblical realities become bloodless propositions and dry formulations. Referring to another theologian’s treatment of humanity, Mackintosh complained, “What we vaguely call ‘human nature’ is not human nature in the least. It is at most hypothetical raw material, which . . . is no more human nature than hydrogen by itself is aquatic nature.”⁵ In particular, scholastics were prone to neglect the dynamic dimension of human personality, resulting in an “impersonal manhood” that hindered more than it helped a proper understanding of the humanity of Christ.

⁴ H.R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), 294.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

Throughout his career, Mackintosh was keenly sensitive to docetic tendencies in Christology, particularly among the Protestant scholastics. In his view they clung formally to christological orthodoxy by affirming the divine and human natures of Christ but held to abstract notions of humanity that made it difficult for them to work out the incarnation as a real event in history.

1.2 Nineteenth-century liberalism

Despite his difficulties with Reformed scholasticism, Mackintosh was also deeply ambivalent about German liberalism. While he was without peer among English-speaking theologians in his knowledge of German biblical and theological scholarship, he was often sharply critical of its results, particularly of three trends or approaches.

First, the original quest for the historical Jesus and its attempts to "reconstruct" the life of Jesus "beneath" the overlay of the church's beliefs was one such approach. On the one hand, Mackintosh applauded its anti-docetic emphasis and its effort to make the humanity of Jesus more human. The quest ensured that "certain aspects of Jesus' human experience are made to stand out with extraordinary freshness."⁶ But the quest was doomed to fail in Mackintosh's estimation, following the lead of his teacher Martin Kähler, because its humanistic view of Jesus undermined the process of christological reflection by insisting that the witness of the church is at best superfluous and at worst misguided. The inflation of the humanity of Jesus Christ came at the expense of his divinity, a move that put the quest at odds with the basic nature of the Christian message. "For the apostles Christ filled the whole sphere of God, and the settlement of fundamental issues between divine holiness and human sin rested in what He was and had accomplished. Not less than for us today faith in God means faith in Jesus . . . To alter this is to alter the religion."⁷

⁶ H.R. Mackintosh, "The Liberal Conception of Jesus in Its Strength and Weakness," *American Journal of Theology* 16 (1912): 411.

⁷ Mackintosh, *Doctrine*, 288.

Second, Adolf von Harnack's magisterial three-volume *History of Dogma* was without doubt the most influential book of historical theology of the period. It represented the high-water mark of an approach that might be termed "the history of dogma as the criticism of Christology." Harnack and others believed that their genetic approach to christological doctrine would set it in the context of historical development. Mackintosh saw in this effort a thinly veiled prejudice against the church as an agent of doctrinal development. Here Mackintosh followed the lead of his Marburg mentor Wilhelm Herrmann in appealing to the vital experience of the church as the foundation of doctrine. "Explaining away a doctrine, however successfully," he observed in a review of a book by Harnack's disciple Gustav Krüger, "is not the same thing as disposing of the *experience* in which the Christian mind has always felt itself to possess a real basis for doctrinal assertion, and out of which doctrine spontaneously arises."⁸

Third, the history of religions school offered yet another approach to christological reflection, and its results were the most difficult for Mackintosh to accept. In much the same way that the Harnackian historical theologians sought to account for the development of christological doctrine, the history of religions school sought to explain the development of Christianity itself as a purely historical phenomenon. To scholars like Otto Pfleiderer and Ernst Troeltsch, Christianity was essentially a syncretistic religion that assimilated ideas and beliefs from a variety of Near Eastern sources. But they went even further, advancing an extreme form of historicism to match their extreme relativism. Locked into a closed universe, from which God must be excluded, Christian faith could only be accounted for from the flow of human events. Traditional Christology can only be mere wish projection, since modern man knows that God cannot become human and dead men don't rise. For Mackintosh, this was too much. "For my own part,

⁸ H.R. Mackintosh, "Review of Gustav Krüger, *Das Dogma von der Dreieinigkeit und Gottmenschheit*," *Expository Times* 17 (1905-6), 302.

I feel this is an exceedingly grave charge to bring against the Christian intelligence. It is much . . . if the charge does not cover Jesus himself, since it is conceivable that he shared the church's error. Taken all together, suggestions of this sort come tolerably near an impeachment of the providential order."⁹

Interestingly, Mackintosh's rejection of the excesses of liberalism came early in his career. By 1912, he had concluded that there was little in the quest, the Harnackian approach to the history of doctrine, or the history of religions school to guide christological reflection in the twentieth century. No wonder, then, that a little more than a decade later, Mackintosh enthusiastically welcomed Karl Barth's full-scale assault on the liberalism of the nineteenth century:

To a Humanism which understands itself, the ideas of God, sin and death have lost all importance, except as symbols which proved of temporary advantage in the past, Barth replies that there is a living God, and that God has spoken. With a volcanic vehemence – feeling that passion alone is suited to the occasion – he is endeavouring to draw the Christian mind of his generation back to the truth in which all other truth that counts is embraced, viz., that in the Bible God has uttered His absolute and ineffably gracious will.¹⁰

Mackintosh and Barth were thus of one mind in rejecting the radical and extreme tendencies of religious humanism and affirming traditional Christology from the New Testament on.

2 Features of Mackintosh's Theology

Mackintosh's christological and soteriological thinking was characterized by two primary themes, which, as we will see later, had a lasting impact on Torrance. They are his resolute emphasis on the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and his call to rethink our participation in the atonement, death, and resurrection of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Mackintosh, "Liberal Conception," 417.

¹⁰ H.R. Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet, 1937), 317–18.

2.1 The humanity of Christ

Mackintosh was troubled by the docetic character of traditional Reformed scholasticism and sought to account fully for the humanity of Jesus in his Christology. However, it was not strictly speaking an attempt to reconstruct Christology “from below,” as some have concluded. He did not, for example, subscribe to the notion that “high Christology” in the New Testament is late and that “low Christology” reflects the earliest strata. He did distinguish between “immediate utterances of faith” and the “transcendent implicates of faith” in his textbook *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, but this distinction does not correspond to either a high or low Christology.

The more germane issue for Mackintosh was the reality of God in Christ. The earliest church was confident, as Paul proclaimed, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It is in this regard that we can appreciate Mackintosh’s development of the *kenosis* motif. Unlike much kenotic theorizing of the nineteenth century (particularly in Germany), Mackintosh understood *kenosis* primarily as a soteriological principle rather than a christological theory.

God in Christ, we believe, came down to the plane of suffering men that He might lift them up. Descending into poverty, shame, and weakness, the Lord was stripped of all credit, despoiled of every right, humbled to the very depths of social and historical ignominy, that in this self-abasement of God there might be found the redemption of man. . . . Hearts have thrilled to this message that Christ came from such a height and to such a depth! He took our fragility to be His own. So dear were human souls to God that He travelled far and stooped low that he might thus touch and raise the needy.¹¹

The *kenosis* motif, then, was not a theory that explained how the incarnation happened within the limitations of space and time and human personhood but was rather a declaration of divine

¹¹ Mackintosh, *Doctrine*, 466–67.

accommodation that underscored the unity of the divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, a hitherto problematic theme in Reformed Christology.¹²

2.2 Participation in the atonement

Mackintosh was uncomfortable with both the Reformed scholastic approach to the atonement and the liberal attempts to replace it. The traditional penal substitution theory, with its notion of imputation of our sin to Christ and his righteousness to us, seemed to regard salvation as a forensic transaction rather than an actual event. At the same time, the moral influence theory lacked sufficient biblical warrant. Mackintosh was, however, cautiously appreciative of John McLeod Campbell's bold view, offered a generation earlier, of the atonement as a vicarious sacrifice.

For Mackintosh, the key to a proper understanding of the atonement was to be found in the biblical motif of the *unio mystica*, the believer's spiritual union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.¹³ The relationship between Christ and the Christian is a real spiritual relationship; the New Testament depicts it as an experiential reality, not symbolic or metaphorical. Mackintosh thus deepened the traditional view of penal substitution by viewing it from the perspective of our union with Christ rather than the other way around. And Mackintosh managed to keep Christ and the Christian together in such a way that an experiential reconciliation takes place on the objective basis of the historical crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 2.6.1. Donald Baillie's complete misreading of his teacher's position on *kenosis* is hard to understand. See *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement*, 3rd ed. (London: Faber, 1961), 96–97. Baillie's protégé John McIntyre unfortunately followed suit in *The Shape of Christology* (London: SCM, 1966), 133.

¹³ Mackintosh developed this in a programmatic essay, "The *Unio Mystica* as a Theological Conception," *The Expositor* 7, no. 7 (1909), 138–55; and in *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1927).

3 Torrance and the Influence of Mackintosh

Summarizing Torrance's christological and soteriological thinking in a few paragraphs is risky; the way in which he frames his understanding of the person and work of Christ in the larger contexts of historical and ecumenical theology and the dialogue with natural science often leaves his readers feeling overwhelmed. But we can highlight a few key features of his thought that bear the distinctive marks of Mackintosh's influence.

3.1 *Incarnation in space and time*

Torrance deepened Mackintosh's emphasis on the centrality of the incarnation by thinking it out in the light of new insights into the nature of space and time suggested by modern science, particularly physics. Torrance joined modern physicists and philosophers of science in rejecting the receptacle view of space and time as an absolute framework independent of what is contained in it. With this assumption, God is restricted by space and time and must accommodate himself to its limits if he is to enter into it.

Instead, Torrance adopts a relational view of space and time, in which they are relative and dependent upon events occurring within their framework. On this view, God is the creator of space and time, which is contingent upon him, although he remains free of spatial and temporal necessity in relation to his creation. Thus space and time are created in such a way that they allow for his incarnate presence in the world without violating the limits of space and time and without violating God's freedom.

On the basis of this relational view of space and time, Torrance can speak of the incarnation as "the place in all space and time where God meets with man in the actualities of his human existence, and man meets with God and knows him in his own divine being."¹⁴ Although the incarnation is located in a specific time and place, it nevertheless has universal significance without disrupting the structures of space and time because it is God who meets humanity in Jesus Christ. This position reflects (albeit

¹⁴ T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford Uni. Press, 1969). 75.

in a more satisfactory form) Mackintosh's understanding of *kenosis*, which is not a limitation of divinity in order to fit somehow into space and time but rather presupposes a dynamic understanding of the relationship between God and creation.¹⁵

3.2 Incarnation in history

Torrance inherited his teacher's allergic reaction to docetic tendencies in modern Christology. The incarnation is not a metaphor but rather God's arrival within history, in particular, in the context of God's historical interaction with Israel. The Old Testament provides a twofold context for the incarnation. On the one hand, the Old Testament reveals the pattern of divine interaction with humanity. In loving-kindness, God moved ever closer to Israel, which in turn led Israel to become increasingly rebellious and unfaithful.¹⁶ On the one hand, in a mysterious and paradoxical way, Israel's rejection of her Messiah becomes her salvation, since Christ has taken that rejection upon himself and thrust himself into the void of Israel's lostness. On the other hand, the Old Testament prepares the way for the incarnation by providing the conceptual tools with which the incarnation and atonement are to be understood. Its language and concepts are not in themselves the final form of divine revelation, yet without them we are unable to grasp adequately the fulfillment of God's promise to be God with his people.

3.3 The unity of the natures in Christ

Although Torrance was a leading advocate of Reformed theology, he moved away from Reformed scholasticism on several points, including the older concern for the sharp distinctions between the divinity and humanity of Christ. Instead, following Mackintosh, Torrance favored a

¹⁵ I have argued at length in *Reformulating Reformed Theology* that Donald Baillie badly misunderstood his teacher on this point, imputing in *God Was in Christ* to Mackintosh a view of *kenosis* that reflects a receptacle view of space and time.

¹⁶ T.F. Torrance, "Israel and the Incarnation," in *Conflict and Agreement in the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), vol. 1 :291: "The self-giving of God in holy love not only revealed Israel's sin, but intensified it."

renewed emphasis on the unity of the natures on soteriological grounds. Against Harnack and other historians of early Christianity, Torrance argued that the *homoousion* does not represent the hellenization of the gospel but rather the evangelization of Greek thought, the transformation of Greek concepts to serve the gospel.¹⁷ The ultimate significance of the term *homoousion* for Torrance is soteriological, since the unity of divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ ensure that the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus are really divine acts. Unless Christ and God are of one being, Jesus's words of forgiveness are merely human words without any connection to divine pardon. In words that are strongly reminiscent of Mackintosh, Torrance wrote: "Then Jesus Christ, even in the midst of our death which he made his own, even in the midst of our betrayal of him, is the Word and Hand of God stretched out to save us, the very heart of God Almighty beating with the pulse of infinite love within the depth of our lost humanity in order to vanquish and do away with everything that separates man from God."¹⁸ The soteriological significance of God in Christ – their essential identity – and its implications for the Christian understanding of God were central themes in Torrance's theology throughout his career, as they were for his teacher.

3.4 Union with Christ

Without a doubt, Mackintosh's understanding of the *unio mystica* had a profound impact on Torrance. Like Mackintosh, Torrance worked christologically from the unity of divine and human natures in Christ and also soteriologically from the spiritual union between Christ and the Christian. But while Mackintosh tended to view union with Christ in terms of the individual believer, Torrance expanded its emphasis to include its ecclesiological significance as well. Through the Spirit, the church is founded on the person and ministry of the historical Jesus; his career of preaching the kingdom, healing, and forgiving is not merely an example

¹⁷ T.F. Torrance, introduction to *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981), xii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

for the church; it is the reality in which the church shares.¹⁹ Torrance never tired of insisting on the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in mediating Christ to Christians in an ecclesial context: "In coming upon the Church the Holy Spirit constitutes it the Body of Christ on earth in union with its Head, the risen and ascended Lord."²⁰ In this way, Torrance was able to draw ecclesiology into the sphere of the incarnation and atonement even more thoroughly than Mackintosh had been able to do.

4 Conclusion

In this brief article it has been possible only to highlight the most obvious features of Mackintosh's theology in their relation to Torrance's theology. While Barth was a far more comprehensive influence on Torrance, it was the key christological and soteriological insights he learned from Mackintosh that enable him to move beyond Barth in those areas. It is beyond our scope to determine whether Torrance was a Barthian. But we can say with confidence, however, that he carried forward his New College teacher's most vital concerns until the end of the century in which both flourished.

¹⁹ T.F. Torrance, "The Foundation of the Church: Union with Christ through the Spirit," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 204–8.

²⁰ T.F. Torrance, "Come, Creator Spirit, for the Renewal of Worship and Witness," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (see note 19), 249.