



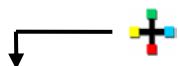
*A review of "Theology in Reconstruction" by T.F. Torrance*

1968

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

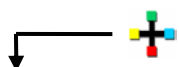
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This volume consists of 15 papers written for various occasions, all of which deal at a profound level with the task of theology in the modern world. The first, entitled 'Theological Education Today', sets the present task of theology in the context of the dominant role of service in our society, the questions raised by linguistic analysis, the problem of history and the needs of the modern world. The next five papers deal in one way or another with the existence of God and the way in which human speech can be used of God. Then follow four essays on Christology, justification and grace, and four on the doctrine of the Spirit. The book closes with a chapter entitled 'A New Reformation?', in which Dr. Torrance gathers up a great deal of the argument of the book, shows the way in which reformation is taking place in the Church, and comments critically on what is being taught today by such writers as Bishop Robinson. A sentence from the closing chapter will indicate the position that Dr. Torrance take:

'I believe that the real problems which the Church has to face today are not those created by science and the changes in cosmological theory, but in the recrudescence of the old pagan disjunction between God and the world, in which redemption is divorced from creation and the mighty acts of God are removed from actual history; in which a radical dichotomy is posited between the non-objectifiable and the objectifiable, and the conceptuality and imagery mediated to us in the traditional Christ are regarded as detached from God and changeable' (p. 263).



The book is difficult, and I found that I had to re-read most of it several times. A reviewer could not possibly compress its arguments into a few paragraphs; all that I can do is to pick out a few points that struck me.

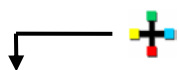
Dr. Torrance takes account of the work both of the scientists and of the linguistic analysts. He finds them his allies in dealing with what he regards as false theologies. True theology, like science, must allow itself to be controlled by the reality with which it is dealing. Neither in science nor in theology can we make a statement about how our statements are related to reality. In the language of Wittgenstein, we cannot make a picture to show the relation between a picture and the thing pictured, but the thing pictured 'shows through'. Our statements, like those of the scientists, are therefore 'disclosure statements'. Scientists are wrestling with these difficulties: theologians like Bultmann are running away from them:

'When a theologian like Bultmann understands intra-mundane connections as a closed continuum of cause and effect, which makes him posit a radical dichotomy between this-worldly and other-worldly relations, and so eliminate the objective framework of Biblical and theological statements, he thereby renounces the possibility of scientific thinking either as an interpreter or as a theologian. Instead of facing the difficulties in a scientific way, he is playing a game behind the back of science' (p. 60).

What Dr. Torrance has to say in his early section on the nature of the theological statement is further illuminated when he comes to deal with the doctrine of the Spirit. 'The Spirit' is not another name for 'the mind of the Church' (the typically Catholic error) nor for 'religious experience' (Protestant). The Spirit means (to quote a typically Torrential phrase) 'the transcendentally personal yet implacable objectivity of God's presence and activity in the Church'. It follows that much modern Protestant theology shows a sign of deep-rooted mental disease:

'Failure to distinguish between objective realities and subjective conditions, or a confusion between them, is the primary mark of irrational behaviour or mental disorder. But this is precisely the kind of madness that has infected so much modern theology. That is why the obsession with self-understanding and the reduction of the great Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement to the self-understanding for their explanation, indicates that religious man is in desperate need of some kind of spiritual psychiatry' (p. 231).

The therapy which we need can only come from an obedient return to the gracious action of God in Jesus Christ who is the Word, of one substance with the Father.



In the central part of the book, where he deals with grace and justification, Dr. Torrance is in dialogue with the Roman Catholics. It is not a defence of Protestantism, but, as such dialogue ought to be, a realistic and serious confrontation of both Romanism and Protestantism with the Word of God. There is no room, when Dr. Torrance is done, for either side to say 'We were right'. Every justification is excluded save that which is God's act. This is a much-needed model for us in India of what serious dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church must mean.

Dr. Torrance takes his stand uncompromisingly upon the ground of the Incarnation. His argument is in the context of faith, obedience and worship. 'Theological language', he says, 'is not descriptive, compelling assent, but persuasive, challenging conversion.' This book answers to that description. It is hard work but worth it.

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