

Introduction

THOMAS F. TORRANCE
AND THE *CONSENSUS PATRUM*

[T. F. Torrance is] a theologian who is at the same time Orthodox, Catholic and Reformed because he seeks to build up his theology on the one, historical common ground of all three traditions and because he is prepared at the same time to confess in full modesty and sincerity their historical particularities and fortify himself only with their positive forces. Is this not what ought to be commended today across the boundaries of the Christian traditions when Patriarch and Pope and Reformed theologian have been united in reminding the world about the Gift of God's boundless Love, Grace and Truth in and through Christ and His Church?

George Dion. Dragas, "The Significance for the Church of Professor Torrance's Election As Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland," 226.

INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century has seen a movement *ad fontes* of the church fathers¹ unprecedented other than, perhaps, the time of the Reformation itself. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians have always used The Fathers, the Reformers used The Fathers, however there was a large gap during a time of the diverging traditions of liberalism and fundamentalism

1. Throughout this book the term "Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures in general, "Greek Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures writing in Greek and "Latin Fathers" is used to denote patristic figures writing in Latin.

when Protestants did not allow the consensual patristic tradition, or the *Consensus Patrum* ("Consensus of The Fathers"),² to inform their theology.³

The Reformation included a "return to the sources" in regards to both the Bible and the church fathers as the Reformers sought to prove that they were in line not only with New Testament Christianity but also the theology of the early church, albeit with an emphasis on the Western Augustinian tradition. The early twentieth century found evangelical⁴ Protestants largely

2. See Torrance, *The Christian Frame of Mind*, 5. "Consensus Patrum" is a Latin phrase used by Catholic and Orthodox theologians to denote the consensual patristic tradition. It is not a phrase that Torrance himself uses very often, more regularly using phrases such as "the classical tradition" and "consensus." See Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, 2ff. Torrance also refers to "the Athanasius-Cyril axis of classical theology." See Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation*, 14. The concept of the "Consensus Patrum" is usually traced back to Vincent of Lérins' famous call to hold to "that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all." See Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 2.6. In this book phrases such as "patristic tradition," "patristic consensus," "consensus of The Fathers," and the Latin phrase "Consensus Patrum" will all be used to denote the concept of a consensual patristic tradition.

3. See the following chapter of this book for elaboration upon this claim.

4. The term "evangelical" is used in in a two ways in this book to mean: (1) evangelical in the wide sense of "committed to the Gospel of grace" and (2) conservative evangelical, sometimes in the fundamentalist/legalist sense. In doing so, the usage of the term in this book follows Torrance's own use of it. See e.g. Torrance, "Karl Barth and the Latin Heresy," for both uses in one article. See p. 464, 478 for use #1 and p. 472, 477, 479, 480, 481, 482 for use #2. Torrance's employment of the term in the former sense appears to derive from the traditional use of the term within Protestant circles as denoting the churches arising out of the Protestant Reformation in general (and also, more specifically, delineating them from the liberal churches) but Torrance constructively applies this sense of the term much wider in seeing a greater evangelical tradition extending back through to the patristic era and forward into the contemporary era through Barth (see further chapter 4 of this book). Torrance employs the term positively in this sense. The latter sense of the term is typically coupled with words such as "fundamentalist" or "legalist" and, as such, Torrance appears to be thinking of conservative evangelicals. Typically, Torrance's employment of the term in this sense refers particularly to conservative evangelicals in the Westminster tradition of Calvinism following in the tradition of Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly whom Torrance had mind in his own time, but generally, this negative use of the term denotes those who use Protestant confessions in a literal and static sense ("fundamentally" and "legalistically") filtering the Gospel through the confessions whereas the positive use of the term refers to those who remain committed to the Gospel of God's gracious self-giving in Christ and read everything else (the Bible, creeds, confessions, etc.) in light of Christ. Torrance never puts it as such, but it is probably fair to say the positive use of the term refers to conservative evangelicals appreciative of Karl Barth and the negative use of the term refers to those in the evangelical tradition of Torrance's time who were suspicious of Barthian theology during its entrance into the English-speaking world. Cf. Noble, *Tyndale House and Fellowship*, 71–78 and Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 254f. See also Noble's excellent summary of Torrance's relationship to these two traditions within British evangelicalism in Noble, "T. F. Torrance on the Centenary of

ignorant of their patristic heritage on account of, on the one hand, The Fathers being given equal importance to Scripture in medieval Catholicism and, on the other hand, the bypassing of The Fathers in liberal Protestantism. The resulting paucity of knowledge in this regard has meant that many Protestants who later “discover” The Fathers conclude that there is a necessity to convert to Roman Catholicism⁵ or Eastern Orthodoxy.⁶ Moreover, many of those who have returned to The Fathers but remained Protestant have failed to offer any clearly defined Reformed and evangelical hermeneutic to guide patristic interpretation that allows for a truly evangelical reading that is also historically faithful to The Fathers.⁷

Fr. George Dragas, Professor of Patrology at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, has been known to tell his students the story of his first interaction with his beloved professor, Thomas F. Torrance.⁸ When young Fr. George first sat down with “Professor Tom” in his office at New College, Edinburgh, the budding student’s eyes were drawn to two items in the scholar’s study: An icon of St. Athanasius and a painting of John Calvin. Upon Fr. George’s inquiry about the items, Professor Torrance told Fr. George, “*Always follow the example of St. Athanasius.*”⁹ When Fr. George asked about the other figure, Torrance responded, “Well, you should read him.” This colorful anecdote illustrates Torrance’s unique approach to Reformed and patristic theology and, in many ways, encapsulates the essence of this book.

Torrance constructs (or to use his own recurring term, “reconstructs”)¹⁰ his patristic consensus around catholic (or ecumenical) themes and figures.¹¹ Torrance is unique for his time in that as a Protestant, evangelical, and Reformed theologian he uses the church fathers as an authoritative voice speaking within the theological tradition into his own theological system. However, Torrance’s uniqueness goes even deeper inasmuch as, being a western Protestant theologian, his patristic reconstruction consists primarily of the Greek Fathers of the Christian East. He provides a fresh

His Birth” 11–17. In this book, as in Torrance, the term is used in both ways and context clarifies which sense is in use.

5. Howard, *Evangelical Is Not Enough*.

6. Gillquist, *Becoming Orthodox*.

7. Perhaps the two most famous: Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy*; Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*.

8. See Dragas, “Interview Regarding T. F. Torrance,” 32 for written account of this story.

9. According to Dragas, Torrance called Athanasius “*the theologian*.” See *ibid*.

10. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*.

11. See Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* for the full flowering of Torrance’s reconstruction. However, it exists throughout all of his published and unpublished material.

voice into the theological conversation of his time by means of his approach to dogmatic and historical theology as a Reformed theologian with strong catholic leanings, intentionally situating himself and his reading within the universal church. Torrance's reading of The Fathers is unique amongst other interpreters because as both evangelical and Reformed, he combines them with theological themes and figures from his own tradition. Torrance has a unique conception of the consensual patristic tradition, which is centered upon Christology and informed by grace, consisting of primarily Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria, along with figures such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Didymus the Blind, Epiphanius of Salamis, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and H. R. Mackintosh. For Torrance this *Consensus Patrum* is contained within the core message of The Fathers, namely, the Nicene *ὁμοούσιον* ("one essence") with the Father and the epistemological and soteriological implications therein, which he understands to be best encapsulated by Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria.

Torrance's patristic consensus is a creative attempt to produce a Reformed and evangelical version of the *Consensus Patrum* which involves significant changes to both the standard interpretations of The Fathers and Torrance's own Reformed and evangelical tradition. The Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* has many constructive achievements that have been overlooked by his contemporaries and later commentators on account of his being evaluated simply as an historian of Christian thought or a Reformed dogmatic theologian. When Torrance is viewed rather as a Reformed and evangelical theologian constructing a uniquely Reformed and evangelical version of the *Consensus Patrum*, as he is in this book, Torrance's many contributions emerge more clearly.

SCOPE OF THE BOOK

This book explores Torrance's version of the *Consensus Patrum*. It traces the patristic scholarship of Torrance and his appropriation of it into his own evangelical and Reformed tradition by means of his construction of the Torrancian patristic consensus. Moreover, this book offers an exploration of where Torrance's project fits within the map of theological and patrological scholarship. The questions this book seeks to answer are: (1) What is the nature of Torrance's patristic scholarship, (2) is his project a successful constructive-theological endeavor, and (3) in what ways should contemporary theological scholarship carry Torrance's project forward?

This book argues that Torrance constructs his *Consensus Patrum* around key theological themes and figures. The primary theme is the Nicene doctrine

of *ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ* (“of one essence with the Father”) and the primary figure is Athanasius of Alexandria. Additionally, other patristic themes and figures, inasmuch as they are situated in relation to Athanasius’ basic theological *ὁμοούσιον*-centered commitments, fit within the patristic consensus.

Torrance’s reconstruction of the patristic tradition contains much from which theologians, particular evangelical, can learn. A full study and assessment of it, in addition to a proposed “next step,” therefore, has much to offer the church and the academy. From an historical viewpoint the results will show how a systematic theologian used patristic sources. From an ecclesiastical viewpoint it will supply the Reformed evangelical community with, at the very least, an example of a theologian who effectively appropriates The Fathers in such a way that preserves faithfulness to The Fathers and commitment to the Reformed evangelical tradition. It will also contribute to the growing discussion amongst Protestants, especially evangelical, who are returning to The Fathers and hopefully provide further impetus for ecumenical discussion on the basis of a shared theological tradition. Thus, it is important both to look at Torrance, a major Protestant theologian who uses The Fathers, and work from Torrance towards an evangelical hermeneutic of interpreting The Fathers; indeed, an “evangelical patristic theology.”

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

After (1) exploring the pre-Torrancian history of the *Consensus Patrum* and (2) situating Torrance in his more immediate context, this book is organized by (3) major catholic (ecumenical) themes and (4) major catholic (ecumenical) figures in the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* as organized primarily by Torrance in his magisterial text, *The Trinitarian Faith* (but also elsewhere) and (5) by exploring Torrance’s ecumenical relevance, especially as seen in the Reformed-Orthodox Dialogue within which he played a major role. In the conclusion, a proposed way forward, an “evangelical patristic theology,” is offered.

The chapters of the book are organized accordingly. Chapter 1 is an historical introduction to the concept of the *Consensus Patrum*. This chapter examines the manner in which all traditions approaching the patristic tradition have a lens through which they view The Fathers. This chapter offers an historical narrative of the prevailing approaches to The Fathers by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants. Chapter 2 places Torrance in his immediate context, namely, evangelical “discoveries” and “recoveries” of The Fathers, and begins to highlight Torrance’s uniqueness. Chapters 3 and 4 offer an exploration of the catholic themes and figures of Torrance’s

version of the patristic tradition. These chapters examine the way in which Torrance's approach to The Fathers is both faithful to the patristic tradition and to his own Reformed evangelical commitments and also involves significant changes to both standard readings of The Fathers and his own tradition. Chapter 5 explores Torrance's ecumenical relevance. This chapter argues that Torrance's appropriation of The Fathers into his Reformed and evangelical tradition is an achievement of his broad catholic (ecumenical) ecclesiology, which allows him to remain faithfully within his own tradition while appropriating truly Greek patristic themes and figures, allowing the two to dynamically inform and reform one another. The concluding chapter explores a critical appropriation of the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* and offers the next steps towards an "evangelical patristic theology."

The argument throughout the book is that Torrance offers a viable Reformed evangelical reconstruction of The Fathers which has yet to be fully appreciated by patristics scholars and theologians. This is argued by means of exploration of the Torrancian *consensus* consisting of catholic themes and figures (primarily the *ὁμολούσιον* and Athanasius). The argument is that Torrance's project has much merit and relevance and an "evangelical patristic theology" should critically adopt the Torrancian *Consensus Patrum* and move forward on the path paved by Torrance, assuming many elements of Torrance's reading while revisiting portions thereof.

CONCLUSION

Torrance's reconstruction of the *Consensus Patrum* is a bounteous well from which much can be drawn. Prior to exploring its nature and merit, it is necessary to first explore the history of the *consensus* in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant theology in order to begin to view Torrance's project in its historical and theological context. Therefore, it is with an historical overview of the *Consensus Patrum* with which this book begins.