



# A Torrent of Error

## ***Closing the gulf between Calvin and Calvinism***

The word “covenant” occurs about 300 times in Scripture, but only in the 17<sup>th</sup> century did covenant theology (also known as federal theology) really come to the fore. Covenant theology teaches that God made a covenant of works with Adam, but he broke it. Since then, all humanity has entered the world under a covenant of works which we are unable to keep. In His grace, God the Father has through the covenant of redemption with His Son set apart a people for Himself in the covenant of grace. All of God’s redeemed elect from all ages are saved in the same way — by faith in God’s gracious promises fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

Today, it has become fashionable in many circles to see a great gulf between Calvin and Calvinism. That was the view of Karl Barth, and it has been perpetuated with regard to English Calvinism by R. T. Kendall, and with regard to Scottish Calvinism by the two scholarly brothers, J. B. and T. F. Torrance. The Torrances have seen 17<sup>th</sup> century covenant theology, as exemplified in the Westminster Confession of Faith, as being very different from the theology set forth by Calvin in his *Institutes*. Accordingly, they have accused covenant theology of many serious misdemeanors:

### **1. Stale and harsh dogmatism**

According to Thomas Torrance, *“The Confession of Faith does not manifest the spiritual freshness and freedom, or the evangelical joy, of the Scots Confession of 1560, and was not so much a ‘Confession’ as a rational explanation of Protestant theology composed in fulfilment of a constitutional establishment, reflecting the rigid dogmatism of the Synod of Dort, 1618.”*

He maintains that Calvin’s view of the covenant was *“radically altered”* through being systematized and schematized, in order to conform to *“a framework of law and grace governed by a severely contractual notion of covenant”*. The results were little short of being spiritually disastrous — the Christian life was moralized; faith was intellectualized; and theology was lexicalized. In place of God who is love, we find in Scottish theology *“a rather harsh view of God”*. The sweetness and light of the 16<sup>th</sup> century apparently all dissolved into misery and bondage in the 17<sup>th</sup>.

### **2. Teaching a covenant of works in Adam**

J. B. Torrance writes: *“This distinction between a Covenant of Works and a Covenant of Grace was unknown to Calvin and the Reformers — nor indeed would Calvin have ever taught it.”* He thought that this gave priority to law over grace since it would mean that the law was given to Adam before the promise was given to Abraham. It is difficult to follow the logic of this. The fact that the animals were created before human beings says nothing about their priority or importance.

This has implications for the use of the law in seeking to obtain a conviction of sin in order that the sinner might be led to Christ. On the Torrance view, that is neither desirable nor possible since there is no covenant of works. T. F. Torrance maintains that in the New Testament it is the Gospel, not the law, which reveals both the real depth of sin and the universal depravity of unregenerate human nature.

### 3. Basing assurance on subjective self-examination, and not on Christ's objective work

Thomas Torrance makes the quite extraordinary charge that The Sum of Saving Knowledge (Westminster Confession) gave rise to “a rather moralistic and indeed a semi-pelagian understanding of the Gospel”. The language of the market-place and of a legal compact is supposed to have replaced the language of the Bible. It is James B. Torrance's contention that a covenant is unconditional whereas a contract is not.

In the Torrance school, it is often contended that the Reformers equated faith with assurance, while their successors did not. The biblical teaching on assurance is not as straightforward as the Torrances maintain. Boston cites Rutherford to the effect that there are two types of assurance — one of which is part of saving faith and one which follows saving faith. The first kind is direct, the second is a reflex act of the soul.

Rutherford pointed to the need to add to faith in giving assurance by citing 2 Peter 1:10 — a verse which was often cited by federal theologians. The Torrances miss the biblical point that obedience, rightly understood, is meant to increase assurance (2 Pet.1:5-7, 10; 1 John 2:3, 5). Hence Colquhoun warned: “*Without the diligent performance of good works, no believer can attain assurance of his personal interest in eternal salvation, far less establishment in that assurance.*”

The Torrance criticisms come from trying to reduce the biblical message to a few simple slogans. The federal theologians sought to walk the narrow way between the twin evils of legalism and antinomianism. Samuel Rutherford maintained that “a believing faith must be a working faith”. Nevertheless, “faith” was not understood simply as mental assent to the doctrines of the gospel.

Because of such a view of saving faith, Thomas Torrance thinks that, so far as assurance is concerned, in *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, believers were “in the last analysis thrown back upon themselves”. He refers to what he calls the “new moralism” of the *Larger Catechism*. Justification by faith came, in effect, to mean justification by faith and obedience. At least, that is Torrance's accusation. But the federal theologians were only echoing what Calvin himself believed, that “believers are taught to examine themselves carefully and humbly, lest the confidence of the flesh creep in and replace assurance of faith”.

The Torrances try to separate justification from sanctification in a way that federal theology — and the Bible for that matter — does not. To cite Thomas Boston: “*Justification and sanctification are indeed inseparable. In vain do they pretend to be justified who are not sanctified; and in vain do they fear they are not justified, who are sanctified by the Spirit of Christ, 1 Cor. 6:11. But yet they are distinct benefits, not to be confounded, nor taken for one and the same.*”

The federal theologians were aware of the dangers of using fruit as the evidence of saving faith. Horatius Bonar declared: “*We need sensitive but not morbid consciences to keep us steadfast in the faith.*” For true assurance, Hugh Binning advised two things: studying the promises of Christ, and taking heed to walk suitably. John Colquhoun also pointed to both objective and subjective grounds for the believer's assurance — do you cordially believe the doctrines of the glorious gospel, love this gospel, and in some measure delight in the law of God after the inward man?

### 4. Teaching limited atonement

The *Larger Catechism* maintains that “*Redemption is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those for whom Christ has purchased it*” (Q. 59). This is the teaching too of David Dickson, and indeed virtually all of the federal theologians. To John McLeod Campbell, this was an arbitrary act, which could not reveal the character of God, which is love.

All of the criticisms of federal theology by the Torrances are intertwined. Hence the charge that lack of assurance came from the doctrine of limited atonement. In the Torrance view — whether T. F. or J. B. — Calvin taught that Christ died for all men, and this was also taught by the Scots theologians of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century this was replaced by the notion of definite or limited atonement, which, in T. F. Torrance's view, has done *"immense damage in Scottish theology"*.

In fact, the Torrance view that Christ dies for all but does not save all hardly makes for assurance. If Christ's death is not sufficient for the salvation of the sinner, the objective ground for assurance is undermined — contrary to Torrance's intention. In any case, the federal theologians did not ground their assurance immediately on their grasp of election but worked back from their coming to Christ. Hence George Hutcheson wrote, with regard to John 6:37:

*"Such as really come to Christ and embrace Him have not only the present comfort of communion with him, but are warranted from this to gather their eternal election, and that they have been given over to Christ, and committed to His charge and care; therefore is their coming put as an effect and evidence of their being given."*

In J. B. Torrance's caricature of covenant theology, *"the Father has to be conditioned into being gracious by the obedience and the satisfaction of the Son"*. That is grossly misleading. Samuel Rutherford asserted the primacy of the love of God, declaring that if God's love has a beginning, Christ has a beginning. He went on: *"Christ loves you better than His life, for He gave His life to get your love."* Nowhere do we find orthodox federal theologians teaching that Christ's satisfaction won the love of the Father. On the contrary, to cite Rutherford: *"the shed blood of Christ is an effect, not a cause of infinite love."*

The federal theologians believed in a universal and gracious offer of the gospel, but a special love of God for the elect. As Samuel Rutherford put it: *"Christ offers in the Gospel life to all, so that they believe, but God mindeth to bestow life on a few only."* God's love is infinite in its act, but not in its object or extent. This is Calvinism, not as Torrance thinks, extreme hyper-Calvinism.

In T. F. Torrance's view: *"A God who restricts His love to a fixed number of the elect is not a God who is Love and therefore is not as infinitely loving as His infinite Being."* McLeod Campbell veered towards universalism in his closing years, although Thomas Torrance disavows that sin. Yet there are obvious dangers in the kind of theology which wants to reduce God's attributes to one, that is love. As *"Rabbi"* Duncan put it: *"All errors are abused truths."*

## **5. Placing election before grace**

J. B. Torrance also charges federal theology with placing election before grace, so that the person and work of Christ is subordinated to the doctrine of the decrees. Torrance's point hardly survives an encounter with the evidence. To cite Robert Traill: *"And we know no grace, we call nothing grace, we care for no grace, but what comes from this head, the Saviour of the body."* Thomas Boston was so centred on Christ that he could write: *"I contemned all things in comparison of Him, yea even heaven itself."*

In the Torrance school of Barthianism, grace is objective and unconditional for all. All the teeth of predestination are extracted, as *"the hard conception of double predestination"* is especially repudiated as *"biblically and evangelically unfortunate"*. Against this, David Dickson was content to point to Matthew 11:25-26, and write: *"The cause of election of some and reprobation of others, of this or that man, rather than of others, is to be found only in God's good pleasure."*

In Samuel Rutherford's view, grace is not separated from justice but fulfills it. This is because God *"cannot be God and essentially just, except He vindicate his glory of justice"*. Justice is infinite because God is infinite. As Robert Traill put it: *"Herein justice and mercy kiss one another in saving the sinner."*

The Torrance school has contributed much to the advancement of covenant theology. It has been responsible, for example, for the new translations of Calvin's New Testament commentaries. There remains the next step, which is to understand them more accurately.

Peter Barnes

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