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THE THEOLOGY OF P. T. FORSYTH

by SAMUEL J. MIKOLASKI

THE third and last theologian whom Dr. Mikolaski studies in his present series is P. T. Forsyth (1848-1921). As with Dale and Denney, he surveys Forsyth's general theological position before proceeding to the more detailed consideration of his soteriology.

As a girl Elspet MacPherson¹, Forsyth's mother, became maid and friend in the house of Peter Taylor, respected citizen of Aberdeen. Though she had been betrothed to Isaac Forsyth since her girlhood on Speyside, their marriage waited for nine years because she had promised to care for Mr. Taylor. He willed his house to her and into it Isaac and his bride moved after their marriage. Here their first son, appropriately named Peter Taylor Forsyth, was born on May 12, 1848, the son of a postman and a maid, and raised in the Blackfriars St. Congregational Church which his namesake had helped to found. The parents were poor and frugal but godly folk who skimped from their child's birth to give him a university education. After attending the Parish and Grammar schools, with the savings of his parents to which were added scholarships and bursaries that he had won, Peter Taylor came to the University where he read classics and achieved an enviable reputation as a student.

In the early years of Forsyth's adult life F. D. Maurice and Albrecht Ritschl influenced him, especially the latter, under whom he sat for a term at Göttingen. On returning from Germany he entered New College, London, for what proved to be an abortive career of theological study due to his frail health and his failure to fit into the academic life of the college. He went directly into the public ministry but not before marrying Mina Magness of London, a cultured and intellectual young lady and an Anglican by upbringing. There followed in succession five busy and successful ministries, first at Shipley, a suburb of Bradford, where he was ordained in 1876. From the beginning he gained a reputation for unconventionality not only because of his liberal theological views, but also because of his "loud" dress and unpredictable pulpit utterances. In fact, some called his church the "Cave of Adullum" because of the unlikely people (to those making the judgment) who flocked to hear Forsyth. Ironically this church and its minister

¹ All readers of Forsyth are indebted to his daughter, Jessie Forsyth Andrews, for the Memoir of her father published in the second edition of *The Work of Christ*, pp. vii-xxviii.

were rejected by the Yorkshire Congregational Union, and the London Congregational Union took the same attitude when he moved to St. Thomas's, Hackney. But his reputation grew not only for the power of his preaching but also because he developed wide interest in art, literature, and politics. During his next pastorate at Cheetham Hill in North Manchester, when the Manchester Exhibition of Art was held in 1876 he gave and published the series of lectures entitled *Religion in Recent Art*. Following Manchester he spent six years at Leicester, but probably his most outstanding pastorate was in Emmanuel Church, Cambridge. He came to the attention of R. W. Dale in 1893 after contributing to *Faith and Criticism*, and until Dale's death two years later there developed a warm friendship between the two.

By this time his delicate health had given way and he was constantly ill, requiring long periods of convalescence and rest. The death of his wife added to his burden of grief, but after three years he married Bertha Ison, a person of charm and unflagging energy, who devoted herself to him. It was she who sustained and inspired him so that the remaining twenty-four years of his life were eminently productive of theological literature. Twenty of these years he spent in the principalship of Hackney College, London, from 1901. As the college had recently been recognized by the University of London as a divinity school, the opportunity was unusual and Forsyth approached it with vigour. These were the prime years and wide recognition came to him as a gifted preacher and articulate theologian including, in 1895, the conferment upon him of the coveted degree of Doctor of Divinity by his own University of Aberdeen. In 1899 he addressed the second decennial International Congregational Council in Boston and the response to his address, "The Evangelical Principle of Authority", was wildly enthusiastic. In 1907 what was later published as *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* was delivered by Forsyth as the Lyman Beecher Lectures on preaching at Yale.

Much interest has been focused upon the dramatic transition in Forsyth's life and ministry from the purely academic and critical approach to Christianity to the warm evangelical piety and preaching that pervaded the remainder of his life, centring round the Cross and its related themes of the holiness, love, and grace of God, and the sin of man. What marks the transformation most clearly is the address "The Holy Father and the Living Christ" delivered in 1896 before the Congregational Union meeting in Leicester. It is this lecture which more than any other sounds the majesty of God in ways that compel some to speak of Forsyth as

the precursor of themes that made Barth and Brunner² famous later. In the following extracts Forsyth tells about his spiritual experience:

There was a time when I was interested in the first degree with purely scientific criticism. Bred among academic scholarship of the classics and philosophy, I carried these habits to the Bible, and I found in the subject a new fascination, in proportion as the stakes were so much higher. But fortunately for me, I was not condemned to the mere scholar's cloistered life. I could not treat the matter as an academic quest. I was kept close to practical conditions . . . It also pleased God by the revelation of His holiness and grace, which the great theologians taught me to find in the Bible, to bring home to me my sin in a way that submerged all the school questions in weight, urgency, and poignancy. I was turned from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace. And so, whereas I first thought that what the Churches needed was enlightened instruction and liberal theology, I came to be sure that what they needed was evangelization, in something more than the conventional sense of the word . . . I withdrew my prime attention from much of the scholar's work and gave it to those theological interests, imbibed first from Maurice, and then more mightily through Ritschl, which come nearer to life than science, sentiment, or ethic ever can do. I immersed myself in the Logic of Hegel, and corrected it by the theology of Paul, and its continuity in the Reformation, because I was all the time being corrected and humiliated by the Holy Spirit. To me John Newton's hymn which I spoke of is almost holy writ. My faith in critical methods is unchanged. My acceptance of many of the new results is as it was. This applies to the criticism of traditional dogma no less than of Scripture. But the need of the hour, among the only circles I can reach, is not that. The time for it will come, but not yet. It is a slow matter. For what is needed is not mere change of view, but a change and a deepening in the type of personal religion, amounting in some cases to a new conversion . . . I am sure no new theology can really be theology, whatever its novelty, unless it express and develop the old faith which made those theologies that are now old the mightiest things of the age when they were new³.

I. THE NATURAL WORLD AND THE MORAL ORDER

As regards the ways in which we are to understand the world, Forsyth held a prophetic view of the rôle of true science combined with a profound distrust of philosophical idealism—in the case of each the danger he saw was monism, where persons are sacrificed to systems and redemption to process. His early book *Religion in*

² The interest of Brunner in Forsyth ought to surprise no reader who is acquainted with the work of both. So recently as 1961 (*The Listener*, February 16) Dr. Brunner mentioned again his appreciation of Forsyth.

³ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909, pp. 281, 282, 283, 285, 287.

Recent Art shows how thoroughly he loved beauty for beauty's sake and nature as God's handiwork. The scientific developments of the era urged him to look for and demand a strong factual basis for both theology and science. Self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency harm the cause of faith as of science⁴. He felt that the development of evolutionary theories was a desirable release from rigidity where it is unessential:

They give us a new grasp of the long action of the Spirit and its way with the Church and the world. The more subtle and plastic the Spirit, the mightier and more irresistible is its action. And the less monumental our Christ is, in a stiff Byzantine figure, the more pervasive He is as a constant and subduing power. When evolution escapes from the bondage of the physical sciences, and its mesalliance with monistic dogma, it is a distinguished badge and blessing of a modern church. Only let it be taken as a supplement to creation, and not as a substitute for redemption, and it gives a wonderful flexibility and grace to much theological thought that once was formal and hard⁵.

A particularly penetrating essay (too little known now) where Forsyth engages Hegelian idealism as the backbone of nineteenth century immanentism is "Christ and the Christian Principle."⁶ He complains that it only seems to ethicize history, rather it turns the cosmic action into a succession of principles devouring persons. The norm of evolution and the process of history is God who transcends it. All process must serve personality, its mysterious freedom, and above all its freedom in grace, he said:

Any theory that places us in a spiritual *process*, or native movement between the finite and the infinite, depreciates the value of spiritual *act*, and makes us independent of the grace of God⁷.

This proclaims the primacy of the moral where, rather than claiming as men once did that the rational is the real, we declare that knowledge is for life, that only conscience plants us on the bedrock of reality. Morality, the movement of personal relations, will, and act, is the nature of things: "the great reality is thus a supreme will."⁸ God as Spirit is God *in actu*, but especially in that

⁴ *The Principle of Authority* (1913). Republished at London: Independent Press, 1952, p. 396; cf. *The Holy Christian Empire*. London: James Clarke, 1902, p. 16.

⁵ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 269.

⁶ *London Theological Studies* (1911).

⁷ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 214; cf. *The Justification of God* (1916), Republished in London: Independent Press, 1948, p. 156, 192; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (1909), Republished at London: Independent Press, 1955, p. 11.

⁸ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 49; cf. p. 62, *The Principle of Authority*, pp. 4, 178-180.

action of the moral nature that renews it in Christ⁹. The key to history is will as free, not as a puppet of ideas nor as a vortex of force, he said¹⁰. If moral action is ultimate reality then redemption and human response are not process but act. Salvation is not contemplation but submission:

Here is the goal of all that drift to Realism, for which, on the whole, we have to be so thankful today. The last reality, and that with which every man willy-nilly has to do, is not a reality of thought but of life and of conscience, and of judgment. We are in the world to act and take the consequences . . . The last reality is a moral reality—unless life's morality is by-play¹¹.

The image of God in man is the essential unity between what is spirit in man and what is spirit in God; only persons can commune, therefore, self-conscious personality is the highest form of being, created for freedom.¹² The soul is not a section of human nature but its unity; thus it is both a stage and a growth. Attention needs to be focused on the term "close" in Forsyth because it suggests both the unity and the development of (in this case of a spiritual) organism according to the will of the Creator:

Nature evolves to a close, which is none the less a real close because it has within itself an evolving history. Such closes are what every soul is—ends in themselves¹³.

Put in another way, Forsyth says that true perfection is the power of perfect growth (not of unbroken growth); of growth into perfection or of growing on the whole. Clearly freedom is the necessary condition of responsible growth, and freedom is something Forsyth defends with eloquence, trenchant argument, and vigour against the dominance of process philosophy over personality. If the key to history and human nature is morality and freedom then only confusion of thought can allow us to identify common sense and volitional cause-effect relationships under one mode. Forsyth aims to maintain the orderly world, freedom, and contingency. "The relation of a cause to a sensation," he says,

⁹ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 197; cf. *London Theological Studies*, p. 152.

¹⁰ *The Justification of God*, pp. 51-52; cf. *The Holy Father and the Living Christ*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1897, p. 138; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 335-336, 346.

¹¹ *The Cruciality of the Cross* (1909), Republished at London: Independent Press, 1948, p. 57.

¹² *Christ On Parnassus*, p. 227; *London Theological Studies*, pp. 149, 152; *The Principle of Authority*, p. 158.

¹³ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 146; cf. *Religion in Recent Art*, p. 55; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 139, 174-175. In *Christian Perfection* he said: "You only are because of your power to become what you are, to grow" (p. 119).

"is not analogous to the relation of a person to a person."¹⁴ We frankly resent the idea of the sovereign divine will and often attempt to reduce it to other terms; we yield much more readily to the idea of a process, or to abstract principles, than to another will. Man's freedom has its origin in God's creative act and its life in His sustaining providence. God's autonomy has its ground in itself but it underlies and guarantees all ours.¹⁵ A neat turn of phrase makes the point, "Secure that God be free. Seek first the freedom of God, and all other freedom shall be added to you."¹⁶ Our true freedom lies in electing God's choice, and by the redeeming help of God's grace in Christ to experience self-realization of the divine image. God invades us, but He does not assault us. "We are mastered but not concussed."¹⁷

II. THE HOLY GOD AND THE MORAL ORDER

No theme is more dominant in Forsyth's writings than the holiness of God and the reality of the moral order in which both God and the world share their lives. The biblical idea of the righteousness of God is what we mean by the moral order.¹⁸ In the face of the trends in philosophy and theology Forsyth's proclamation of the Holy God came like a trumpet call:

Are we not planted before the ineffable presence of one who is forever fed from within with all the moral strength he needs, and is therefore the centre and foundation of the universe—the changeless self-sustained, absolute and *Holy One*? Is not the Holy God the heart of things and the head of things—the eternal good . . . ?¹⁹

Attention is drawn to one salient feature of this that must await more extensive development in a subsequent essay, namely, that as the purpose of a world created by God must be holiness, God secures it in a moral way. To this Christ and His Cross are the answer or they have, he said, no meaning at all.²⁰

Holiness can be conceived of in two ways and in each case we have to do with both its nature and its issue. First, it is public and universal; second, it is God's nature and exhibited in the acts of God. We must maintain the sharp line between the creature and

¹⁴ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.

¹⁶ *The Principle of Authority*, p. 254.

¹⁷ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 64; cf. *The Power of Prayer* (Dora Greenwell, co-author), London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910, p. 59.

¹⁸ *The Work of Christ* (1910), London: Independent Press, 1952, p. 188.

¹⁹ *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 70.

²⁰ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 228.

the Creator, he said. God is God and man is man ; we view reality not monistically but in terms of holiness, and holiness has to do with personal identity, with communion not sublimation, so far as both Creator and creature are concerned. The all-fatherhood of God is not the general, kind, benign sort of thing that in fact empties God's holiness of real meaning (readers of contemporary theology will have noted recent attempts again to reduce the divine wrath to terms of a peculiar definition of the divine love). Nor may we view the divine righteousness rectorally after the manner of Grotius where God is purely Power, Judge or King.²¹ Nevertheless we do see it as the public righteousness of God to which the Cross is addressed.²² In its intrinsic nature the divine righteousness is infrangible, that is, any affront to it must be satisfied according to its own inner law.²³ Extension of this concept of infrangibility to the moral order yields the idea of the universality of the divine holiness. The holy, the good, and the being of God stand together in the following:

Absolute being must be identical with the absolute moral norm. God wills good because He is good, He is good because He wills good . . . The Holy is the ideal good, fair, and true, translated in our religious consciousness to a transcendent personal reality, not proved but known, experienced immediately and honoured at sight as the one thing in the world valuable in itself and making a world²⁴.

As we move forward in understanding the death of Christ we leave behind the crasser elements of such theories as the ransom to the devil, the wounded honour of God, atonement conceived purely as administration of justice, to theology founded upon righteousness as universal and holiness as eternal. The divine love is holy love and no soft paternity will match either the love described in Scripture nor the demands of conscience.²⁵

The complement of the preceding is that holiness is neither abstract nor static, but personal and divine act. There can be, in other words, no abstraction of the righteousness of God from the being of God nor can there be a conflict of his attributes. The prime condition of a free world is the free, personal God fashioning the world according to His own ideal of holiness. Law is not

²¹ *The Holy Father and the Living Christ*, p. 15.

²² *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 28.

²³ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 149.

²⁴ *The Principle of Authority*, p. 6.

²⁵ *The Christian Ethic of War*. London: Longmans Green & Co., 1916, p. 38 ; cf. *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, pp. 74-75, and *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 293-294.

an alien law laid upon Him but the expression of His own life ; if God ceased to be personal He would be parting with power ; "God's holy law is His own holy nature."²⁶ But, such power cannot reveal itself only as dispersed through history, nor in history as some sort of involution ; rather, it acts according to its own nature, that is moral personality, by means of a climactic act that gathers up within itself and commands cosmic history. This act is Christ's Cross into which a whole divine life was put and which, when answered by the act of our faith, issues into the divine life of freedom intended for man in communion with God.²⁷

The ideas of holiness and moral and personal relations say something strategic about individual men and racial interdependence. The sense of corporeity that pervaded both church and state in the mediaeval era intrigued Forsyth and he felt that the rise of psychological and sociological science at the end of the nineteenth century would compel philosophical and theological re-discovery of the solidarity of the race. This solidarity he viewed in three ways: organic, social and ethical.

The race is an organic unity, or organically interdependent, and upon this fact rests the possibility of God in Christ doing one thing that has racial benefits.²⁸ Forsyth's careful discussion of this idea²⁹ shows both how dependent he is at certain points upon nineteenth-century Idealism, and how he remoulds certain ideas of it in the theology of his own fashioning. His point of departure is the individual soul, then proceeding by analogy he constructs the philosophy of the inter-relation of souls within a given society. Each soul is more than the mere product of a process, or a dynamic convergence ; it is itself a producer in turn as a law-

²⁶ *The Work of Christ*, pp. 112-113 ; cf. *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 304 ; *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace*, London : James Clarke, 1911, p. 100 ; *Mission in State and Church*, London : Hodder & Stoughton, 1908, p. 66.

²⁷ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 335-336 : *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 23.

²⁸ *The Principle of Authority*, p. 289 ; *The Work of Christ*, p. 8 ; *The Charter of the Church*, London : Alexander and Sheppard, 1896, p. 11. Individual personality, he said, is the product of both organic and social evolution. The race "is not a mere mass of atoms joined together by various arbitrary relations, sympathies or affinities. Hence, as the race before God is one, a personal God is able to do for the race some one thing which at the same time is good for every person in it" (*The Work of Christ*, p. 121).

²⁹ "Corporate Personality-Rights Intrinsic or Conferred", Chapter VI in *Theology in Church and State*. London : Hodder and Stoughton, 1915.

giving, valuing, selecting, creating power. The living soul is also a life-giving Spirit. With Bergson, Forsyth finds a place for the creation of new values not involved in the old. Analogically, this applies to the social soul, to the solidary mind. Each age is more than the redistribution of past forces: "no true society can be formed by simple addition", he says.³⁰ This passage in context, as the following, ties the idea to our understanding of the Trinity. We look for unity not catholic in the old sense but confederate. In my opinion Forsyth is here adumbrating the full-orbed demand for trinitarian theology made by Leonard Hodgson, namely, that we think more precisely upon what we mean by unity as an organic, complex notion, rather than mathematically simple. The Christian idea of interdependence, Forsyth says, is

not provided by organization but by an organizing life, by the only kind of life that organizes persons as such, by the distinctively Christian principle of the interpenetration of persons and their cohesion in a supreme personality—the principle of the Christian Triune God³¹.

Probably the best clarification of the idea in his writings is drawn from family relations, though it is not easy to grasp Forsyth's thought. He says that a man and wife are not only one flesh but one spiritual personality. It is a fact that their lives interpenetrate. Together they comprise a joint personality "by the harmony of an indelible psychic difference," and this unity as reflected in the total complex of family relations is the base for the corporate unity of society.³²

Second, personality is not static ; it is growing and creative and these changes take place only in the social context, "personality is created by social influences, and finds itself only in these."³³ On the one side, no society can achieve its true end of the unity of spiritual life on the mere freedom of individuals ; on the other, recognition must be given to the historical mediation of our personal response to and assurance of Christ. There is the public, national fact and history with its own claim and truth. This is, so far as the ethics, outlook, mind or spirit of an age is concerned, of immense significance when we probe the meaning of interdependent life. The New Testament assigns it an important place in its contrast between kingdoms, between the spirit of the world and the mind of Christ, and we can agree with Forsyth on the import-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³² *Marriage, Its Ethic and Religion*. London: Hodder & Stoughton (n.d.), p. 34.

³³ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 262.

ance of spiritual communities for the action of the Holy Spirit upon human history.³⁴

Third, as the nerve centre of the previous discussions there is the ethical interdependence of the race—its moral solidarity. This is something we all see clearly but can say only obscurely. Racial moral solidarity answers to the universality of the divine holiness; man's unity is a moral unity witnessed to by conscience.³⁵ The guilt of sin therefore is solidaric or racial: "The more we realize the solidarity of man the more his moral condition becomes a collectivism of guilt."³⁶

Unsatisfactory as the old juridical theories of the Atonement are, Forsyth says, they are admirable for the sense of the moral order of things that they exhibit. Only with the upsurge of a growing awareness that as history progresses man's responsibility increases and the sins of the race become blacker will we comprehend the vastness and appropriateness of the climactic work of Christ on the Cross:

As man grows the sin grows. The kingdom of evil grows with the kingdom of good. Sin, self, exploits every stage in the process of society . . . The social organism has a common sin. And a collective sin must have a central treatment³⁷.

III. THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Caught up in the controversies that raged over Scripture and the science of criticism Forsyth said not a little about the authority of Scripture though he did not write as a biblical theologian. Not the idolizing of the Bible, nor its antiquity (the Gospel laid hold on Europe by its novelty³⁸), nor the collocation of texts yields the value of Scripture to us. Christ's person and His deeds with their theological interpretation given in the New Testament continually carry with themselves a freshness and newness that impinges upon the conscience.³⁹ The church gave us the canon but not the books, he said, therefore the true successor to the Apostles is the New

³⁴ *Marriage, Its Ethic and Religion*, p. 14; *The Principle of Authority*, p. 60; *The Charter of the Church*, p. 61.

³⁵ *The Work of Christ*, pp. 122, 123.

³⁶ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 58.

³⁷ *The Cruciality of the Cross*, p. 22.

³⁸ *Religion in Recent Art*, p. 60.

³⁹ *The Holy Father and the Living Christ*, p. 54; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 144; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, pp. 262-276.

Testament as the product of the apostolic ministry through the Holy Spirit.⁴⁰

Forsyth urged that we need a sense of the infallible Word of God given by God and of the free Spirit who not only fills the Word but mediates it to the soul.⁴¹ He said that we ought to view the Bible not as the history of an idea but of a long divine act of redeeming grace in Christ. The house of Scripture does not stand as a closed system of ideas, but as the dynamic statement of the redemptive theme of Christianity which is commensurate with the scale of grace, the race, and the church that confronts the race, and in this Forsyth is in agreement with Principal Denney.⁴² If we take a rational attitude to criticism, then, its rôle is reduction of bulk (especially so far as church traditions are concerned) but not surgery, he said. The essentials of faith can in no sense be either settled or unsettled by criticism but rather by the requirements of grace.⁴³ It is one thing to claim the liberty of sound scholarly pursuit, but another to repudiate the New Testament version of Christ for the critical; so then, unfaith is unfair and uncritical and faith is essential to sound criticism.

The soundness and vitality of Forsyth's evangelical convictions pose his views of inspiration as a conundrum. No reader of his books can escape his rejection of verbal inspiration, though the term "plenary" might be more appropriate to his views seeing that in fact he holds Scripture in high regard. This doctrine is something that the heart holds though the mind cannot vindicate it technically, he felt, in a manner not unlike the sinlessness of Jesus which is cardinal to faith but about which our Lord says little. The following, I think, epitomizes his faith:

I do not believe in verbal inspiration. I am with the critics, in principle. But the true minister ought to find the words and phrases of the Bible so full of spiritual food and felicity that he has some difficulty in not believing in verbal inspiration⁴⁴.

Inspiration, he said, has to do with the human instrument, revelation with the divine message, and both are involved in the divine disclosure. There seems to be a division to Forsyth between the

⁴⁰ *Rome, Reform and Reaction*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1899, p. 224.

⁴¹ *Faith, Freedom and the Future*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912, p. 1. *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 8-10.

⁴² *The Principle of Authority*, p. 397; *Theology in Church and State*, pp. 229 ff.

⁴³ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 19-21, 133; *Holy Christian Empire*, pp. 14-16.

⁴⁴ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 38; cf. pp. 125-6.

Scriptures and the Gospel if we press the role of the apostolic record. The authority of Scripture is the Gospel; Christ, not the book, is the revelation. Such ideas⁴⁵, not uncommon to Forsyth, appear to exclude the possibility of the revelatory use of language—a debate that contemporary theology knows only too well. It is possible, however, to ease the apparent sharpness of this. What he means, substantially, is the evangelical principle of the interpretation of the Bible by the Gospel. He unhesitatingly claims that the Christian Gospel rests in the witness of the Apostles to Christ—the Scriptures are “Christ Himself interpreting His finished work, through men in whom not they lived but he lived in them.”⁴⁶ Act and interpretation go together. This is the finality and authority of the apostolic witness.

The philosophical statement of the point follows: Christ is materially the finality of revelation, but not formally. He is the prime juncture in the divine disclosure and redemption; but He is incomplete unless the formal element, the interpretation, is complete. The New Testament is therefore not the first stage of an evolution but the last phase of a revelational fact and deed. Apostolic inspiration means that the unique and final interpretation of the unique and final revelation is given; fact and word join in their experience and witness. Despite the ways in which it would appear that Forsyth rejects the objectivity of revelation (the revelation given in the language of Scripture) when he suggests, for example, that so far as revelation is concerned a lesson is not taught until it is learned, I think that in his theology a case can be made for the authoritative Word of God being historically mediated through Scripture. This is the theological significance of the apostolic life and witness and the meaning of inspiration for us:

The inspiration of the Apostles was not in discovering the idea; it was in seeing its real truth and consummation to be in fact and act of Christ . . . Christ by His work made them saints, and by the inspiration of His Spirit He made them theologians⁴⁷.

The word of God is, therefore, the Gospel, the message of God, the theological sense of what is given by God. Putting himself at the side of Luther, Forsyth says:

The Word of God has been conceived at various times to be the letter of the Bible, or the Bible as a whole, or the doctrines running

⁴⁵ *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 224; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, Ch. V and Ch. VI; *Christ on Parnassus*, pp. 243 ff; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 15-16; *Faith and Criticism*, p. 106

⁴⁶ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 60.

⁴⁷ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, pp. 160-161.

through it, or the promises scattered in it. For Luther, it was the vital principle of the Bible, the long act of revelation and redemption which the Bible records—the Bible's heart and power; in a word, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The Testimony of Christ is the Spirit of Scripture⁴⁸.

It remains now to probe the epistemological ideal in Forsyth's theology. If there is first the incarnate fact, then the word or interpretation of it by the apostles, then the fact enshrined in the soul of the believing church,⁴⁹ how can we state the rationale of our knowledge of it? In a word, what is the meaning of divine revelation?

IV. REVELATION

Well aware that no longer could one develop an epistemology out of a faculty psychology Forsyth aimed to encompass the whole of the man in his theory of knowledge. Briefly put, this meant two things: on the one side it is impossible, he said, to establish certainty on purely rational or intellectual grounds because the rational and the moral cannot be bifurcated; on the other, he strove to ethicize life and thought because what a man knows depends upon what he is, that is, upon his response to the truth. I do not think that when Forsyth says that truth does not exist for the soul unless there is commitment to it, he is thereby denying the objectivity of revelation. Note the following on the objective revelation:

And what makes religion different from science is not a difference in our subjective function, in our attitude to the same object, in our manner of approach, but a difference in objects we face and in their behaviour . . . The difference is objective⁵⁰.

Nevertheless the inscripturation of the meaning of the mighty acts of God in history will give some readers trouble where he seems to undercut the propositional character of truth or the revelatory function of language. Somewhere we must rest upon what God has *given* as the meaning of what He has done in Christ. Revelation, for him, clearly is not a number of things: it is not system,

⁴⁸ *Rome, Reform, and Reaction*, pp. 134-135. Note also many other passages that bear on this general theme including: *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 30-274; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, pp. 171, 179; *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 98-99; *The Church and the Sacraments* (1917), republished at London: Independent Press, 1953, p. xv.

⁴⁹ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 159. He speaks of this three-fold division as the thesis planting itself out in an antithesis and then reclaiming, recovering itself in a synthesis.

⁵⁰ *The Principle of Authority*, p. 148; cf. pp. 100-101 and *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 266.

theology, church, or truth. Revelation is divine act ; it is a thing of persons and personal acts, he says.⁵¹ How is this to be understood? Primarily, I think, in two ways: both as historical and personal act. The Christian revelation is what Christ has done in history, not only what He taught: "The Cross *effects* the reconciliation of man and God ; it does not simply announce it, or simply prepare it. . . . Revelation must be act, reality is action."⁵² The point is simply whether God has intruded into history redemptively ; here Christians answer Yes !

If we put a direct question to Forsyth on whether the criterion of the truth or of the revelation of God is simply experienced, I believe his answer would be No. He would say that the ruling idea to which the Spirit leads us so far as revelation is concerned is the Cross as the divine redemptive act divinely interpreted to be this to the world and to us. Historically, he said, the three key elements of Independency are: the Calvinistic emphasis upon the Word of God ; the Anabaptist freedom of the Spirit ; and the English love of democratic, constitutional procedure. But, in the church Word and Spirit belong together always.⁵³ The revelation is not primarily in the soul but in an historically oriented fact ;⁵⁴ so then, experience is the method but not the measure of faith.⁵⁵ The truth of what God has done is in the first place objective ; the measure of faith can be therefore only its objective content.⁵⁶ The following summarizes the foregoing discussion:

A real authority, we have seen, is indeed *within* experience but it is not the authority *of* experience, it is an authority *for* experience, it is an authority *experienced*. All certainty is necessarily subjective so far as it concerns the area where it emerges and the terms in which it comes home. The court is subjective but the bench is not⁵⁷.

The epistemological ideal occurs at the point where the Word of the historical saving event as the authoritative apostolic interpretation of its meaning is made a saving reality in the life of man.

⁵¹ *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 98-99 ; cf. pp. 105-106 ; *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 125 ; *The Church and the Sacraments*, pp. 101, 102 ; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 214.

⁵² *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 346-347, 349 ; note p. 279 ; *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, pp. 73-74 ; *The Holy Father and the Living Christ*, p. 8.

⁵³ *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, pp. 1-15, 296-304 ; *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, p. 73.

⁵⁴ *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 211.

⁵⁵ *The Justification of God*, p. 93.

⁵⁶ *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ *The Principle of Authority*, p. 75 ; cf. p. 259.

The only Cross we know, he says, is a theological one.⁵⁸ The relation of Word to Spirit is elucidated in the following:

The Holy Spirit which inspired the universal word is not only immanent in it always as the Creator Spirit is in universal nature, but also present to the soul every time the Word comes home. The ministry of the Word is the chief agency of the Holy Ghost, and the chief function of the Church; whose business is not simply publication of a truth but confession of an experience—the experience of the indwelling Spirit as its life. It is the Holy Spirit that makes the Word to be revelation; it is the Word that makes revelation historic and concrete⁵⁹.

Numerous passages could be cited that state the same truth. The sort of paradox that Forsyth tried to illuminate is that the Spirit acts *directly* through the *medium* of the Word.⁶⁰ Nothing can challenge the certainty and validity of the believer's experience of Christ because it is the eternal saving act of the living God who recreates us. At the bottom this is a miracle—the miracle not of a spontaneous event but of an act evoked by the sovereign God where we acquire our souls for life and freedom.

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⁵⁸ *The Work of Christ*, pp. 46-48.

⁵⁹ *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34; *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 150; *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 346; *Faith and Criticism*, pp. 116, 121; *The Principle of Authority*, p. 116.