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THE MISSIONARY MESSAGE OF P. T. FORSYTH

It is just over a hundred years ago since Dr. P. T. Forsyth was born. The celebration of this event has been marked by a renewed interest in his message and a reissuing of some of his greatest works. Not much, however, has been said concerning his contribution to missionary thought. It is of that we would speak here.

Forsyth was more than a theologian, he was a prophet. No mere scholarly pedant, he was a flaming herald of the Cross. His message came out of his own heart. Speaking to young preachers in his famous Yale lectures (*Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*) he says:

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 the 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. I was in a relation of life duty and responsibility for others. I could not contemplate conclusions without asking how they would affect these people, and my word to them, in doubt, death, grief or repentance.

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 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 that word. . . . Meantime my own course seemed prescribed. It was, in the space of life, strength and work which was yet mine to labour as one who waited for that messianic hope, and try to persuade those who would hear to join me in preparation for so great a gift of God. 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.

This extract so frank and personal gives us the key to the message of P. T. Forsyth. Whatever theme he touches, behind his thought lies the burning conviction of the vital need for the Gospel of the Cross.

We are not surprised, therefore, to find this emphasis in his treatment of the missionary problem. It stands forth most clearly in a remarkable sermon preached at the City Temple on behalf of the L.M.S. (printed along with other missionary utterance in the volume, *Missions in State and Church* [H. & S., 1908]):

The great and real charter of Missions, therefore, lies not in any express command of Christ. They would be just as binding on us if the command at the close of Matthew's Gospel had dropped off with the last page of the first manuscript. They would arise, as they did for Paul, not out of any injunction, but out of the nature of Christ's Person and especially from His Cross, His Resurrection, and His exalted life, judgement and reign . . . If they had not been commanded by Christ they would have been invented by His Holy Spirit . . . They are a dispensation of the Spirit. So entirely are missions supernatural in their nature that they must rise and fall with our faith in the supernatural, with the reality of the Cross to us, and of the resurrection, and of our relations with the living Christ. Our missions will escape from chronic difficulties when our Church recovers the ruling note of the redeeming Cross and the accent of the Holy Ghost.

These words uttered over forty years ago are as relevant to-day as then. Indeed they give the key to all effective missionary work down the ages. The mainspring has always been a realisation of the redeeming work of Christ.

It is not pity but faith, not so much pity for perishing heathen but faith and zeal for Christ's crown rights set up for ever in the deed decisive for all the world.

This comes home to us in a personal way. "You may always measure the value to yourself of Christ's Cross by your interest in missions. And it is a safe test of the Spirit's presence in a Church."

So also for the missionary: while these great fundamental truths may not be "the missionary's stock in trade", they are always his "capital and inspiration". It is the Cross as something even more than inspiration that supplies the missionary motive. It is essentially *the Cross as judgment*. As Forsyth points out, while missions a hundred years ago were based, so the critics say, on the passion to save the heathen from Hell, or in other words on eschatological rather than ethical motive, yet the principle was not essentially wrong. There is a great judgment in the Cross of Christ. Christ crucified judged the world, and so the world is adjudged to Christ. The judgment at the end of History is only the corollary of the judgment at the centre

of History. "The more completely we feel sin to be condemned in the Cross, the more power and commandment we have to carry the absolution to the ends of the earth."

Emphasising the truth that the great Reformers although they did not prosecute missions yet prepared the way for them, Forsyth points out that Protestant Missions were not the product of shallow liberalism nor humanitarian sympathy, but of "an evangelical faith largely on Calvinistic lines". The apparent contradiction here is explained in that the breadth of the Gospel really springs from its depth.

I would venture to say that missions have more to hope for from a narrow creed which remains great than from a wide humanism that runs thin. The Spirit of Unitarianism, whether open and acknowledged or hidden and denied sends forth no missionaries because it has no Gospel. We cannot rest missions on a religion of mere Fatherhood alone. One source of the decay in missionary interest is the decay in theological perception and conviction . . . Our missionary work reveals the difference between Unitarianism and ourselves to be very real. It lies in the very thing which made the Church, by making Christianity a mission. It lies in the Son's Cross and in its deep Divinity . . . The secret of Godhead is in the gospel of Atonement and of Fatherhood by Holy Death.

A second great truth that Forsyth emphasises in his missionary utterances, is that the Cross is not only *the key to the message* but *the secret of the method*. It is the very pattern on which the true missionary works, and by which alone the missionary cause can truly advance.

Is it a strange thing then, that missionaries should daily die as other men do not? . . . They are specially delivered unto death. You cannot separate the Mission and the Passion in a universal Christianity. There is no World crown without the Cross. The Church that missions really dies with Christ, and its missionaries but show forth its death . . . Neither can we save the heathen but by dying for them one way or another. Chalmers says it, and Stonehouse, and many a voice from beneath the altar and behind the veil. There is nothing finer or more pathetic to me than the way in which missionaries unlearn the love of the old home, die to their native land and wed their hearts to the people they have served and won; so that they cannot rest in England, but must return to lay their bones where they spent their hearts for Christ. How vulgar and common patriotisms seem beside this inverted home-sickness, this passion for a kingdom which has no frontiers and no favoured race, the passion of a homeless Christ.

In powerful and moving language, Dr. Forsyth calls up the pageant of missionary heroism and sacrifice down the ages. We cannot forbear to quote again:

There is no more heroic region of human valour. There is not in army or navy a focus of such bravery as each mission-house shows. There are no deeds that won our Empire so stirring to good blood as the exploits of Christ's kingdom

in new lands. There are no fortitudes so long, strong, and silent as those which underlie the early Christianity of a new race. Take Africa alone. In the eighteenth century the Moravians lost all their twelve missionaries on the West coast. The Wesleyans followed them and lost sixty-three men in fifty years. The Basle Society lost in the same time twenty-nine men out of one hundred and seven. The American Society has lost since 1874, fifty-four out of ninety. In Surinam, out of three hundred and ten missionaries one hundred and thirty-four succumbed in less than a century to the awful climate. And so on.

The missionary has learnt the Gospel in the school of experience. He daily *lives* the word of the Cross. He knows the language of suffering and speaks it in his daily manner of life. Emphasising this truth Forsyth brings in a personal note.

I cannot remember since boyhood passing a day without pain; but I think my life a piece of disheartening self-indulgence when I read missionary biography and track its quivering red line of apostolic succession from the beginning until now . . . In about ten years from 1876 the London Missionary Society lost in Central Africa ten men, and nine had to retire—all out of twenty-three. Yet the Directors solemnly resolved "to prosecute the mission with greater earnestness than ever". This was courage of the missionaries' own kind, and the bold strategy, the audacious prudence of the Holy Ghost, such as the true-born soldier loves. It is the large, exalted, anointed recklessness that took Christ to the Cross and won the world. And it is courage in the faith of fearful odds such as the British race should love. What is our pittance of money, our fits of sympathy, beside long, lonely devotions like these multiplied all over the earth? Their voices haunt us from graves baking in African suns or soaking in malarial swamps, or watched by the lion or the lizard that cannot break their sleep. They demand that we shall not let their work be wasted, or their blood be like water spilt upon the ground, or their quiet resolve choked in the dust that stops their mouths. This work has cost too much to fail now. And it is a sacred investment that we can only save by investing more.

Yet another insight relevant to the present situation is the *vital necessity for missionary work*. Missions are more than a hobby of some interested enthusiasts, they are but the fulfilment of a debt. This truth is brought out in a striking sermon on Rom. i. 14 (*Missions in State and Church*, pp. 249-74). Here Forsyth lets himself go with characteristic pungency, speaking of this apostolic word as "a hard saying for the Englishman whose frame of mind, ingrained for centuries, is 'I am Creditor to all the World'". Missions are *voluntary* and yet they imply *obligation* according to the highest standards.

Where the Spirit of the Cross is there is the pressure of Spiritual debt and Christian chivalry . . . Missions are compulsory in a Church by its own high law, if it is to remain a Church. By the law of spiritual life the mission-less Church betrays that it is a Cross-less Church: and it becomes a faithless Church, a mere religious society and finally perhaps a mere cultured clique.

It follows therefore that missions are not an *accident* of the Church's life, but belong to its *essence*. A Church may be neutral

in politics but it cannot be so in missionary activity. So with the individual believer, missionary interest is not optional. "You are bound by your Christianity . . . not to be interested would be to confess that you did not understand your own creed."

The whole point is that we are debtors. As Forsyth bluntly puts it "The man who repudiates his debts is bankrupt ; the Church that disavows missionary sympathy is bankrupt in evangelical grace and universal faith. The decay of evangelical faith is fatal to missions". Missions are also "a debt on the Church by way of amends, not only because of what Christ has done for it, but because of what it has done against Christ". This is aptly illustrated from the tragic story of South America; had South America received the same Christianity as North, Christ and the world would have been richer today. Even in Europe the persecuting spirit of the Church, its greed of plunder and lust of power in bygone centuries makes true missionary witness difficult to this day. Yet missionary work, evangelical, spiritual and sacrificial is the only answer. In Africa and elsewhere it is only by wholehearted missionary service that we can make some late amends for the exploitation and demoralisation of native people in the interest of Western trade and "Civilisation". Forsyth's words concerning India are almost prophetic:

No Christianising of our policy can dispense with missionary effort in the more direct and special sense. And in the case of India, perhaps our Christian policy is preparing difficulties for us and dangers, which can only be met by the subjection of the Hindoos as individuals to the control of the gospel. We have plied them with the literature of public liberty, without preparing them, as Puritanism prepared us by the influences of moral liberty. If we give a Christian emancipation without bestowing that inward Christian freedom which alone can safely manage enfranchisement, we may only be preparing for India revolution, anarchy, and new despotisms.

This like much else in Forsyth's writing has a truly prophetic note about it. He had such a grasp of the fundamental truths of the Eternal Gospel that every thing he wrote manifests a note of insight and discernment that passes by the incidental and lays hold of the fundamental. Living before the age of world-crisis in which we find ourselves, he knew that all life in the light of Calvary must be interpreted in terms of crisis. For the Christian Church every age brings it to the crossroads, and in no sphere is this more evident than in that of its missionary enterprise. Let our final quotation then be yet another word concerning the essential missionary nature of true Christianity.

The power that claims and saves us is beyond history, from before the foundation of the world. The first missionary was God the Father, who sent forth His Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. That is the seal and final ground of missions—the grace, the ultimate, unbought, overwhelming grace of God, the eternal heart and purpose of the Father who gave us not only a prophet but a propitiation. The second missionary was the Son, the apostle of our profession as the New Testament calls Him, the true primate of the apostles, of those that He sent forth from the bosom of the Father to declare Him; who exiled and emptied Himself in this foreign land of earth, and humbled Himself to death, even the death of the Cross. And the third missionary is the Holy Ghost, whom the Saviour sends forth into all the earth, who comes mightily and sweetly ordering all things, and subduing all lands to the obedience and kingdom of Christ. And the fourth missionary is the Church. And these four missionaries are all involved in the one Divine redemption to which we owe ourselves utterly, which is the ground of the divinest claims on us, and makes us debtors, and nothing but debtors, for ever and ever. These go forth into each other, into all the world, into the depths of the soul. And the soul is saved in going forth from itself into this one living fellowship and through it in love, sacrifice, and blessing to all the world.

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