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The Authentic Word.

A Study in P. T. Forsyth's attitude to the Bible.

BY THE REV. R. E. HIGGINSON, M.A.

THE significance of the writings of Dr. Peter Taylor Forsyth has at last dawned upon our generation, although it was largely unrealised by his own contemporaries. Dr. J. D. Jones, writing of him as his dearest friend in "Three Score Years and Ten", describes Forsyth as "a great gift of God to our churches." He says he *was*. The realist of this present hour would change the tense and declare he *is*. He began his ministerial life as an extreme Left Winger, and ended it as a pillar of orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy was his own ! This "prophet of the Cross" had an authentic word to deliver about the Cross. His chief contribution to theology lies there. But indirectly he made a valuable contribution to the question of Biblical criticism and the Evangelical reaction toward it. In his own denomination he is best remembered as an uncompromising critic of the "New Theology." To him Christianity was at the crossroads and he brought the churches back to the central fact of the Historic Faith—Christ crucified as the demonstration of redeeming, recreating activity by God. He magnified the Grace of God, as a powerful, perennial personality dealing with the awful calamity of a fallen humanity through the Cross of Jesus Christ. And yet, strange as the union may seem, he was an exponent of critical views with regard to the authorship and documents of the books of the Bible. In him the critic and the fundamentalist were united. On the one hand, he preached a positive Gospel which aimed to recreate men and women through unreserved faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Sovereign Lord. With what passion of soul he declared by lip and pen the crucial evangel ! On the other hand, he accepted the views of the scholarship of his day. In principle he was with the critics. This paper is an attempt to reconcile these apparently divergent views.

"Fundamentalism is next door to Atheism," so he affirmed in his epigrammatic way. This might well be the key to his position.

A true understanding of the Forsyth dialectic will only come as the magnetic north of his theology is grasped. In many respects he applied the principle of Martin Luther to the doctrine of the Word of God. As the Reformer writes in *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*, " You ask, ' What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God ? ' I answer, ' The Apostle explains it in Romans, chapter i. The Word of God is the Gospel of God concerning His Son. . . .' " In a Gospel sermon he writes again, " How can we know what is God's word ? . . . You must determine this matter for yourself, for your very life depends upon it. Therefore God must speak to your heart : This is God's Word. . . ." Just as the Scriptures had vindicated their Divine character in Luther's experience and recreated him as a new creature in Christ Jesus so with Peter Taylor Forsyth. He too advocated that the Written Word must be interpreted by the Gospel which it discloses. All the Written

Word bears witness to the Gospel. The bare written word of Scripture was not sufficient for the human soul, the Spirit of God had to take that word and apply it to the heart. This Spirit-applied Word was the Gospel, the recreative power of Divine Grace operative in the heart of the believer. This word achieved the new creation. Therefore, it was this Evangel of Grace, active, redemptive, and recreative which gave the Scriptures their peculiar value. Apart from it they had no real worth, other than as historical documents. This Gospel became the criterion for the testing of the various parts of the Bible.

Forsyth followed the Reformers in setting the Bible over the Church and over the individual. But he stressed the fact that it is for the sake of the *Gospel* that the Bible and the believing preacher exist. The Gospel was prior to the New Testament. The Gospel created the church as a community of believing, worshipping, and faith propagating men and women. The Gospel created the New Testament. Christ did not come to bring a Bible. He himself never wrote a word, except in sand, and that He erased to prevent the curious from reading it! Christ came with a Gospel. He is the Gospel of God's Redemptive, Revealing, Recreative action through the Cross and Resurrection. The New Testament arose afterwards *from* the Gospel *to serve* the Gospel. "The Bible, the preacher, and the Church are all made by the same instrument—the Gospel. For the sake and service of the Gospel, preacher, Bible and church exist" (p.15, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind*).

The Bible was not produced like "St Paul's Library." There was no human editor; no committee of reference who framed "the fixed magnitude" of the canon (unless it be the experience of the believing Church down to A.D. 200); no "Canterbury Press" to arrange for the publication and circulation among the scattered Christian communities. The various books were occasional productions. In the case of the New Testament (and indeed in principle with the Prophets of the Old Testament) "applying fundamental Christianity to particular situations in the believing church" (*vide, The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, lectures V. and VI.). "The occasion of writing was some *providential* juncture in the affairs of the Church; and the Apostles managed and directed that juncture as men writing of final truths in which they habitually lived, truths given them to see by an Indwelling Lord" (p.140 and p.164, as above).

How then would Forsyth answer the question which arises so frequently, Where is the permanent element, and what relates only to the local situation?

The core is the Gospel. Just as the Gospel created the Bible and the Church, and just as the Bible and the Church exist for the sake of the Gospel, so every part is measured and assessed by the Gospel. The Gospel is the Authentic Word of God in the Bible. This principle is the *Highest criticism* of all: it judges both men and methods in their approach to Holy Scripture.

I.

Revelation is "the manward movement of God", whereas religion is "the Godward projection of men," which feels and hopes that

eventually it is "bound to get to God." Forsyth, while accepting the conclusions of the Higher critics and the evolutionary theory of the formation of the Old Testament, yet asserts most definitely and incisively that there is such a thing as Revelation. It is nothing less than the historic, actual, invasive, recreative action of the Hidden God breaking into the ordered Universe. God took the initiative in order to redeem and restore man to the pattern of the Divine Image. Even in the evolutionary process the invasion of God in revelation had a teleological purpose. He ordered the progression of the stages of religious development. He also culminated the movement by invasion through lawgiver, or prophet, or Messiah.

Forsyth thus held a belief in "General Revelation." The Hidden God, (to use a phrase of Karl Barth, who seems to have been anticipated by P.T.F. and at many points saved from the Barthian extremes), has given partial gleams of light within nature ; within the religions of men ; and even within man himself. But the whole weight is laid upon "Special Revelation." The Hidden God has revealed His character unmistakably through the living voice and the creative utterance of the prophets. Selecting a single nation as a unit, and selecting men within that nation, He has progressively in stages and in different ways unveiled His character and Purpose of Redemption. This movement culminated in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Divine-Human Saviour.

II.

This Divine Revelation is intended for all ages. The fact and the act needed an authoritative interpretation which would be a full and *final record*. The factual Revelation could not be left to tradition, nor even to a static narrative of the events. Something more was required. There was the double danger of the Revelation being misunderstood, and the message mutilated.

In what relation does the Record stand to the Revelation ? In approaching the vexed question of Apostolic Inspiration there is the peril of trying to define the indefinable ! The New Testament is the mouthpiece of Christ. The Apostles spoke as men in whose experience Christ dwelt. On matters of Faith, their voice was His voice. It is no more possible to describe the inner psychology of inspiration in the Apostles than it is in the Prophets. And yet, anyone in close contact with the New Testament records feels that the ascended Christ was really *acting upon* and *within* these specially chosen instruments from the Divine Glory. "The Apostles were the posthumous pen of Christ. The Apostolic inspiration is the posthumous exposition by Christ of His own work." These specially selected men did not echo the Cross and the Christ, they were anointed by the Spirit of the reigning Lord to decipher and declare. Christ is His own interpreter through the men in Whom He dwelt. The Church is Christ's Body, and the Bible is Christ's Word, His own interpretation of Himself.

This position was an attack indirectly upon the Higher Critical assertions of his day that the men were inspired, but their words were not. He denied that the Record of Revelation was man construing : that it was merely a commentary by fallible men upon the action

of God in history : and in the transfer to writing much of the reality or authenticity had vanished. Such an assertion was unwarranted in Forsyth's opinion, especially in regard to the New Testament. It was an unwarranted separation of Record from Revelation. The New Testament is not a product of Revelation, but an integral part of it. Christ not only unveiled God's character in His crucial action but He also interpreted it from the Unseen World through special men. In His earthly life it was not possible to interpret the whole of His Mission, because it was not yet fully achieved, the Cross had not been endured. But from the Throne He reigned in men's hearts and by the Spirit unveiled to them the meaning of His person and work. There was not just the bare fact of redemptive revelation, but in addition and essential to it the word which interpreted the fact. The Revelation could not possess recreative power unless the record of it was also an integral part of it. "The fact without the word is dumb ; and the word without the fact is empty." "The Apostles translated Christ, the text, who without the translation would have been a *dead letter* so far as history is concerned."

This raises an important point in any appreciation of Forsyth's doctrine of the Word of God : did he regard the Record as infallible and inerrant ? Forsyth is careful to state that on the cross and related events these inspired men were *infallible*. This central fact of the Faith is unassailable. The region of infallibility and finality lies in the Gospel. On the circumference of the Faith the Apostles *may* have been mistaken.

The details may have been open to the possibility of error, but the central features are above criticism. There is a criticism higher than the Higher Criticism ! Any attack upon the Holy of Holies of the Faith is invalidated if it cannot stand the test of the Gospel. For instance, the Resurrection can be verified in experience and therefore the documents which relate the event are not the only data available. The *experience* of the Resurrection authenticates the *fact* of the Resurrection. A mere literary criticism cannot nullify the experiential testimony. "It is only the accidents of the sacred records which will respond to methods of ordinary secular research." The corrosive acid of an excessive literary criticism cannot reach the core of the Word. There is a peculiarly inherent quality beyond the analysis of the critic, which speaks only to the believer.

This claim to finality is not a claim to *inerrancy*. Full scope is allowed to Lower (Textual) Criticism. No textual variation has affected the Gospel one iota. It cannot. The weakness of Forsyth's position lies here. Too much is granted to the subjective experience of the one who reads. In many respects Forsyth limited the application of this principle overmuch. For instance, he questions the connection between sin and physical death, (*cf. p.155, Person and Place*). These matters he considered as lying further from the centre and, therefore, from the region of inspired certainty. "Inspired men have been wrong on points and modes of argument, just as, even with Christ in them, they sinned. They have not always been right by the event. But they were right in the interpretation of the Gospel, in Christ as a final work of a holy God for the race" (*ut supra*, p.179).

III.

Despite the seeming weakness of his position on inerrancy, Forsyth nevertheless affirms with all the power at his command that the Bible has a living authority. "The authority of the Bible speaks not to the critical faculty that handles evidence but to the soul that makes response." "The true region of Bible authority is therefore saving certainty in man's central and final part—his conscience before God" (*ut supra*, pp. 178-179).

This authority is personal, living, internal and decisive. Any critical proposition which undermines any part of the Bible which forms an essential element of the Gospel must be rejected. The highest criticism of all is the Gospel which can be verified in the region of believing experience. This is the fundamental principle for the assessment of all critical theories. They deal with the human parentage of the Word, but fail to analyse the Divine Inspiration. Faith responding to the Holy Spirit alone can do that. The great sacrament is the Gospel. This sacrament gives value to all the other sacraments. It is the sacrament of the Living Word. This word must overmaster the preacher. The Bible makes men into preachers in proportion as it lays hold of them. Preaching can only flourish where there is more than a formal respect for the Bible. The Bible is the living source of preaching. The preacher's greatest need is an ever fresh immersion in this Word, an immersion both scholarly and experimental. "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 inspiration", (p.38, *Positive Preaching and Modern Mind*). "If Christ died to make a Church that Church should continue to be made by some permanent thing from Himself, either by a continuous Apostolate secured in the *charisma veritatis* as Rome claims, or by a book which should be the real successor of the Apostles, with a real authority on the vital matters of truth and faith. But, we discard the supernatural pope for the supernatural book. And so we come back, enriched by all we have learned from repudiating a verbal inspiration and accepting an inspiration of men and souls; to a better way of understanding the authority that there is in the inspiration of a book, a canon. We move from institutional authority to a biblical; and from Biblicalism we advance to Evangelism. But it is an Evangelism bound up with a book because bound up with history" (p.171, *Person and Place*).

Forsyth has taken up the mantle of Martin Luther and with the same fearlessness and creative genius. His contribution toward the understanding of the Bible is not without weight and value. It was born in faith amid crisis. It is a tentative answer.