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1983 Congregational Studies Conference Papers

Oliver Cromwell
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The Prayer Life of the Church
Neville Rees

PT Forsyth—Prophet of the 20th Century
Hefin Elias

**Congregational
Studies Conference
Papers
1983**

**Michael Boland,
Neville Rees
and
Hefion Evans**

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Oliver Cromwell

Michael Boland

In 1937 a study of Oliver Cromwell was published with the subtitle *The Conservative Dictator*. Twenty years later the same author, Maurice Ashley, produced another book on the same subject. This was entitled *The Greatness of Oliver Cromwell*. This change of title is indicative of a change not only of emphasis but also of attitude by the author. Such a change of attitude can be detected in other 20th century historians who have studied and written on Cromwell. Whatever their initial preconception and reservations, as they have lived day by day with his writings and speeches and considered his actions, discovered what his contemporaries thought about him, their subject has exerted a fascination if not a captivating effect upon them. Apart from Ashley, one might mention the writings of Sir Charles Firth or Robert S Paul, but the appeal of Cromwell well over 300 years after his death is well enough seen in the two most recent major studies by Christopher Hill and Lady Antonia Fraser. Neither author can be regarded as predisposed towards Cromwell's religious and political beliefs and attitudes. Lady Antonia, of Irish Catholic stock, daughter of the Earl of Longford and probably to be identified with the Liberal consensus; Dr Hill a committed Marxist, certainly in his earlier writings, his sympathies clearly lie with the Levellers who came to feel that Cromwell had betrayed the Revolution. Yet both authors write sympathetically, though by no means uncritically, and their admiration shines through not just for his achievements but for the man that he was.

So who was this remarkable man? 'Arguably,' says Antonia Fraser 'the greatest Englishman.' And wherein lay his greatness? We need first to look at Cromwell's life and work set in its historical context before considering a few of the controversial issues surrounding his name. And finally, to consider his greatness as a soldier, a statesman and a man.

There are two Cromwells in English history (that is excluding Oliver's son Richard who briefly and unhappily succeeded his father as Protector). Thomas Cromwell was the secular arm of Henry VIII's reformation (Cranmer was the religious arm); and is best known for his part in dissolving and plundering the monasteries. The fact that he and Oliver share the same surname is no coincidence. The family name of Oliver's ancestors was Williams. There are Welsh and Norman strains in the pedigree but his great grandfather, Richard Williams, was also the nephew of the Hammer of the Monks and changed his surname to Cromwell, presumably in honour of his powerful uncle and patron. Oliver Cromwell's father was the younger son and the family estates

were therefore in the possession of Oliver's uncle, Sir Oliver. These estates were none the better for Sir Oliver's attempts to gain Royal favour by lavish hospitality. He entertained King James I in connection with which event comes a probable apocryphal story of the future Charles I having his nose bloodied by a young Oliver Cromwell. The latter was thus a member of the gentry but by no means comfortably off, at least until the death of his uncle. In his own words to Parliament in 1654 'I was by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height nor yet in obscurity'.

Oliver was born in 1599 at the tail end of the Elizabethan era. His birthplace was Huntingdon and for most of his life his base was the Fen country. In 1631 he moved to St Ives and in 1636 to Ely. Only in the final period of his life as a national figure did he set up home in London. As an MP he represented first, Huntingdon, and later Cambridge. He was to be nicknamed the Lord of the Fens. Cromwell's education had the same East Anglian context: first at Huntingdon Free School, then at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. Its other distinguishing feature was a Puritan aspect. His schoolmaster Thomas Beard, was a noted author of the day. His book, *The Theatre of God's Judgement*, sets out how those who disobey God are punished in this life. The emphasis on providence was often to recur in Beard's most famous pupil. Beard, a conforming clergyman, certainly during Oliver's boyhood, belonged to the Puritan movement. So did Samuel Ward, Master of Sidney Sussex College where Oliver spent only a year before his father's death in 1617 necessitated a return home at the age of 18 to take charge of family affairs.

Although this Puritan upbringing may have had a decisive long term influence on Cromwell's thinking, its effect on his practice was not immediate. As a boy and young man he was less interested in studying theology than he was with sports and pleasure. He won a reputation at football, then the kind of rough house which, if it has anything in common with the modern game, equates more with the conflict on the terraces than that on the field.

Prior to his marriage in 1620 at least, the young Cromwell was reportedly something of a ruffian, the kind of youth that respectable middle aged people would cross over the street to avoid. It's difficult to put a precise date on Cromwell's conversion although evidently he began to behave more responsibly from around the time of his wedding in 1620. It may have been as late as 1630 that the Gospel Truth became a reality in his own experience. In his own words

Oh I have lived in and loved darkness and hated the light. I was a chief, the chief of sinners. This is true, I hated godliness, yet God had mercy on me. Oh

the riches of his mercy. Praise him for me, that he that hath begun a good work should perfect it to the day of Christ.

What is crystal clear from his later life is that this experience was no flash in the pan but the beginning of a lifetime walk with God in the light of his Word.

There is not much documentary evidence for Cromwell's life in the twenty or so years between his return from Cambridge and his emergence as a Puritan leader in the Long Parliament. Most of his energies were channelled into his responsibilities as head of a large family. His wife gave birth to eight children and though three predeceased their father, all reached adulthood by our standards and as a country squire clearly he took his responsibilities in both areas very seriously. He was a member of the 1628–29 Parliament that preceded Charles I's ill-fated attempt to rule without Parliament for eleven years.

Differences between the Crown and Parliament had been apparent even in the 'golden age' of Elizabeth I. She, however, was a master politician able to temper severity with appeals to patriotism and to exploit the fact that she was a woman. She was also in the eyes of Protestants a bulwark against Rome. Perhaps the Stuarts were unfortunate in inheriting problems that the Tudor queen had simply fudged and swept under the carpet.

There were many issues of contention between Charles I and his Parliament, social, economic, legal, constitutional, political, diplomatic. Two major issues however were probably the financial and the religious and as the drama was to unfold these two became inextricably linked. The Crown was not financially self-sufficient. Parliament was the appointed means of voting money. Parliament however disapproved increasingly of the religious policies of James I and his son. They would not vote supplies except on condition that these policies would change. The response of Charles I was to rule without Parliament for as long as he could. In 1640 however he was forced to call Parliament to pay for his war to impose episcopacy on Scotland. By then the opposition was so deeply felt and broadly based that it was to strip him of his authority and eventually to sweep him from power.

When Cromwell entered the Commons in 1640 he was by no means the leader or even one of the leaders of the Parliamentary Puritan opposition. He was however connected by birth or marriage with several of the leading group, notably John Hampden, a heroic figure in the early resistance to Charles I. The acknowledged leader of the Puritan Opposition was John Pym, known as King Pym, and his death in 1643 was a great blow to the Parliamentary Party.

In 1640, if Cromwell made an impression in Parliament it was not always favourable. He was not a great debater, was prone to lose his temper and his appearance was by no means elegant. John Hampden was asked by one of his

colleagues in the Commons who this untidy fellow was. 'For I see he is of our side by his speaking so warmly.' 'That slovenly fellow whom you see before us' replied Hampden with prophetic insight 'who hath no ornament in his speech. I say, that sloven, if we should come to have a breach with the King, which God forbid, in such case will become one of the greatest men in England.'

If not for his appearances, Cromwell soon distinguished himself for his conviction, ardour and energy in the Puritan cause. Within a year, the long Parliament made dramatic strides to reverse the Stuart policies, remove the King's advisers and limit his powers. Any of the Parliamentary grievances were encapsulated in the grand remonstrance which was passed by the Commons in November 1641.

Cromwell's own commitment to this measure was indicated by his reported statement that 'if the remonstrance had been rejected he would have sold all he had the next morning and never see England more'. In other words he would have sailed for New England.

When Charles I found himself powerless to resist the inroads of Parliament into his prerogative, he appealed to the country. Thus began the Civil War, although technically there were two civil wars: the first from 1642 to 1646 which ended with the King in the hands of Parliament, or rather its army; the second in 1648 after no compromised settlement could be agreed on. There was indeed a third Civil War which commenced after the execution of Charles I in 1649 and was led on the Royalist side, often at a distance, by the future Charles II. But if the Civil War was to lead to the fall and execution of Charles I, it was also to lead to the emergence of Oliver Cromwell as the most powerful man in the British Isles.

Remarkably, as far as we know, he had no military experience before the Civil War. He began the War humbly enough as a Captain of Troop, raising his own Troop within his own manor so to speak. In 1643 he was promoted to the rank of Colonel and later the same year was appointed Governor of the Isle of Ely, when he played a vital role in securing the east of England against the Royalists. In January 1644 he was appointed Lieutenant-General.

The first Civil War was effectively settled by two battles, at Marsden Moor and Naseby. Cromwell's part in both was decisive. Indeed he became to be seen as indispensable to the Parliamentary cause, so that when Parliament passed a self-denying ordinance excluding its members from holding commissions in the Army, the rule was almost at once waived in his case.

Apart from his own success as a commander, Cromwell made two other important contributions to the success of the Parliamentary cause. First he was probably the main influence in remodelling the character of the Parliamentary Army, hence the name New Model Army. That he identified the importance of

this factor at the outset of the War is illustrated by a conversation he had with Hampden after an early setback. ‘Your troops,’ said Cromwell ‘are most of them old, decayed, serving men and tapsters and such kind of fellows. Their troops are gentlemen’s sons, younger sons and persons of quality. Do you think that the spirits of such base and mean fellows would ever be able to encounter gentlemen that have honour and courage and resolution in them?’ ‘Truly, I did tell him,’ says Cromwell ‘you must get men of a spirit, and take it not ill what I say, of a spirit that is likely to go on as far as gentlemen will go or else you will be beaten still.’

Hampden, Cromwell tells us, thought this a good notion but an impractical one. His cousin however proceeded to put it into practice. The Parliamentary newspaper was soon bearing testimony to the success of the experiment. ‘He had 172,000 brave men, well disciplined, no man swears but he pays his 12 pence, if he be drunk he is set in the stocks, insomuch that the countries where they come leap for joy of them.” ‘How happy it were,’ observed the editor ‘if all the forces were thus disciplined.’

Despite his references to gentlemen and mean persons, the kind of character and ability Cromwell looked for was moral and religious rather than social. ‘Truly, I think,’ he wrote in 1651 ‘he that prays and preaches best will fight best.’ It was his policy, disapproved of by some of his fellow officers, to select common people and promote on the basis of merit not birth. In the early days he also got into hot water for promoting members of the sects, Independents, Baptists and further into the fringe. These were of course often the same men of humbler origins just mentioned and under Cromwell some of them were to rise to the rank of General. What he looked for was not theological or ecclesiastical orthodoxy but a commitment to the cause and honest and upright behaviour. When the Scot, Major General Crawford, complained of an officer that he was an Anabaptist, Cromwell wrote ‘Aye but the man is an Ana-Baptist, admit he be, shall that render him incapable to serve the public?’ He went on to develop a startling (for the times) position ‘Sir, the State, in choosing men to serve them, takes no notice of their opinions, if they be willing faithfully to serve them, that satisfies.’ So what might have seemed an exclusive attitude to recruitment worked out in practice to be more catholic.

Cromwell’s second great contribution to the success of the Army was in promoting and exemplifying a ‘Win the War’ policy. It might seem axiomatic that if you fight a war the object is to win but it soon became apparent that some of the Parliamentary Commanders were reluctant to press the conflict to an issue. On the one hand they knew that if they lost they would be hanged or at least disgraced and stripped of their land. They even feared the consequences

of a decisive victory by their side. What would they do with the King? Would drastic social changes follow? So they tended to fence and shadow box hoping the King would come to terms.

In the process, however, men were killed, opportunities were missed, and the Royalists were able to regroup. In Cromwell's view, if the object was not to defeat the enemy as quickly and completely as possible there was no point in fighting. He showed total commitment to the cause, raising men and supplies and risking his life. If his fellow officers, including his own commanders, lacked this commitment he did not hesitate publicly to criticise their conduct and press for their dismissal. He might have been accused of being ungentlemanly and disloyal but, to be realistic, if control of the Parliamentary Army had not passed into the hands of the 'Win the War' party the outcome could well have been quite different.

In the aftermath of military success, John Milton wrote 'Peace hath her victories no less renowned than war'. The victories of peace, however, proved much more elusive than those of war to the Parliament and its Army. Those who had agreed in opposition could not agree what to do with the power they had won. First came the tortuous negotiations, not to say intrigues, in which the King tried to play off Parliament against the Army: not too difficult, now that these two elements were polarising—Parliament standing for Presbyterianism and the 'haves' socially: the Army for Independency in the sects and the 'have-nots'. When it came to the crunch the Army, of course, must win and Cromwell, who emerged as its acknowledged leader and spokesman, although not yet Commander in Chief, played a decisive role in the events leading up to the execution of Charles in January 1649. Never a republican, he believed initially that the King must be an essential part of any settlement, but eventually disillusioned by Charles' duplicity he came to see him as a man of blood who must be brought to justice. A few months after the execution of the King, which took place in January 1649, Cromwell reverted from the role of politician to the more comfortable one, to him, of soldier, when he was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. The Royalist cause had not died with the King and a motley collection of Cavaliers, English settlers, native Irish, and Roman Catholic clergy represented a threat to the new government.

So much has been written and said about Cromwell in Ireland that it should be emphasised that the war was really about who should rule in England and not about whether Ireland was to be ruled by the English, since both sides agreed on that. In sending Cromwell, the Council may have been hedging their bets: if he was successful, the opposition to the new regime would be crushed; if he failed, his personal standing and influence would be diminished. In the event, however, he succeeded where others had failed before

him and where others would fail after him with monotonous regularity in Ireland. With an aura of invincibility now about him, Cromwell's return from Ireland was urgently required from Parliament to meet a new threat from north of the border. The Scots were the wild card in the situation. Having initially triggered off the revolution and Civil War in England, and fought alongside the Parliamentary Army against the King, they were now supporting the Royalist cause against the Commonwealth. Alarmed by the prevalence of independence and the sects in the Army, they were too ready to believe in the commitment of Charles I and his son to Presbyterianism and the Solemn League and Covenant. Cromwell's attitude to the Scots in spite of their, as it seemed to him, betrayal of the Protestant cause, was quite different to his view of the Irish rebels – 'murderous wretches' he called the latter—the Scots were brothers, albeit misguided, against whom he had no wish to fight. He engaged in a war of words pleading with their lay and clerical leaders. 'I beseech you,' he wrote 'in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.' Persuasion worked with a few, but the issue was again settled by arms and yet again in Cromwell's favour. The crucial victory against the odds at Dunbar in 1641 was one of his most glorious triumphs, although, as ever, he took none of the credit for the victory and ascribed it all to the gracious hand of God.

Recovering from lengthy illnesses in Scotland, Cromwell now raced south with his army to fight the last battle with the Royalists. The climactic Battle of Worcester was uncharacteristically delayed by him, as it is now believed, so that its date would coincide with that of the Battle of Dunbar a year earlier. The outcome was the same on both occasions and Charles II fled from Worcester to remain in exile until the death of Cromwell on 3 September 1658, which, as it happened, was also the anniversary of the Battle of Dunbar. The Battle of Worcester had settled two things: the Commonwealth was secure for Cromwell's lifetime at least, and Cromwell himself was indisputably the greatest man in England. Yet an agreed form of government was no nearer. The broad-based consensus of the Long Parliament had long gone. Some of its members had fought on the Royalist side in the Civil Wars; some of the parliamentary and army leaders were alienated by the execution of Charles I. Others, however, were looking for far more radical and social change than Cromwell was prepared to support.

As we have seen in countless revolutions, the man who rules the army rules the country, and in England in the 1650s that man was Oliver Cromwell. With the dissolution of the remnants of the Long Parliament, the 'Rump' as it is known, in 1653, the only alternative centre of authority disappeared. Cromwell was the only man, the sole safeguard against either a return to Stuart rule or the onset of anarchy, and he knew it. He was often to protest that he

never wanted supreme power. 'I sought not this place. I would have been glad to have lived under my woodside to have kept a flock of sheep,' he told Parliament shortly before his death. It is true there is no real evidence that he was driven by the lust for power, yet he came to the firm conviction that, though not of his wishing or doing, he was called to it by God through a remarkable series of providences and by the people. He saw this as a trust that he could not and would not betray. He was determined that the things that had been fought for, at the cost of so many lives, should not be thrown away.

In December 1653, he was appointed Protector, an office formerly held by the future Richard III in the fifteenth century, and the Dukes of Northumberland and Somerset in the sixteenth century, all of whom met untimely ends. But while making repeated attempts to reintroduce parliamentary government, Cromwell always took steps to ensure security of the realm and his regime, including a short period of direct military rule through his trusted major-generals.

During 1657 approaches were made by the second Protectorate parliament that he should accept the title of King. This move was not prompted by a desire to increase Cromwell's powers, just the opposite. Nor were those who made the proposal necessarily his most devoted supporters. It was the same people who were later prime movers in restoring Charles II. Their object was to legitimise the regime and protect those who served it from future prosecution. Cromwell himself seemed to adopt a fairly pragmatic attitude to the matter, considering whether or not it would contribute to the settlement of the nation. In the end he was probably swayed by a petition of his Army officers, many of whom were republicans, and he decided not to go against their wishes. Interestingly enough, this petition is supposed to have been drafted by none other than John Owen, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, and one of the Protector's closest religious advisers.

The Protectorate is sometimes depicted as a period of tyranny, gloom and intolerance. This version is linked with the grotesque romanticising of life under the Stuarts. Cromwell was no tyrant: he believed in, and sought to implement, parliamentary government. He became progressively disillusioned, however, as his Parliament pursued, as he saw it, sectional rather than national interest. Nor was he a kill-joy. Where sports and recreations were progressively outlawed this was done on political rather than moral grounds. Horse racing, for example, was banned for a time because that was the place where the Cavaliers would meet. The accusation of intolerance can be stood on its head. The Protector repeatedly criticised and opposed the intolerant and persecuting tendencies of his Parliaments. He stands out in the seventeenth century as a shining example of Christian enlightenment in the treatment of religious

dissenters and minorities. 'I would rather that Mohammedans were permitted amongst us,' he said 'than that one of God's children should be persecuted.' Although the reference to Mohammedans would appear to be poetic licence, in a parallel case, where the question of toleration actually arose, that of the Jews, the Protector used his authority and influence, against the wishes of his Council, in favour of their readmission to England.

Whatever dissatisfactions existed under the Protectorate, in years to come, when Charles II was back on the throne, Englishmen would look back with nostalgia to the days of Oliver. 'Everybody do nowadays reflect upon Oliver and commend him', observed Samuel Pepys in 1667. 'What brave things he did and made all the neighbour Princes fear him.' Certainly in the case of foreign policy, the Protector made Britain great in a way it was not under any of the Stuarts. Charles II was to complain to the Dutch Ambassador in 1672 that he was shown less respect than the Protector had been. 'Of course they treated him differently,' came back the reply, 'for Cromwell was a great man who made himself feared by land and sea.' This must have been a bitter pill indeed for the King to swallow.

Life under Oliver was better in other respects. He was a pioneer of legal reforms, complaining of 'wicked and abominable laws'. 'To hang a man for 6/8d and acquit murder, this is a thing God will reckon for.' In 1817 Jeremy Bentham, Founder of University College, London, judged that Cromwell's interest in law reform 'ranked that wonderful man higher than anything else I ever read of him'. He was also distinguished (i.e. Cromwell) as a patron of education and science.

The Protectorate did not long survive the death of Cromwell in 1658. His son Richard, 'Tumbledown Dick', soon stepped down from the succession and one of Oliver's trusted generals, Monk, was instrumental in restoring the Stuarts, who were to survive another 28 years before being sent on their travels again.

It is possible to regard the Commonwealth period as a brief interlude in English history, yet, with more justice, it can be argued that the Restoration was the interlude. Not all the achievements of 1640–60 were reversed by Charles II, and the effect of the Bloodless Revolution was to secure the main gains of the Commonwealth, particularly religious and political liberty. So while the men of the Long Parliament, and Cromwell in particular, were disappointed in many of the things they hoped to achieve, what they did cannot, in the light of history, be regarded as a failure.

Of the many debates about Cromwell there are four issues that we should now consider. *First*, his role as a regicide. *Second*, his conduct in Ireland. *Third*,

his attitude to Providence, and *fourth* what we might call the question of his religious affiliation.

First, the regicide question. We can begin with three facts. 1. Cromwell played a leading part in bringing about the execution of Charles I. 2. At the time, and afterwards, he was convinced that this was the right and the only course of action. 3. Of his fellow Puritans, some agreed and some disagreed. The action of the regicide can be condemned on two broad grounds: first, in the light of David's refusal to lift up his hand against Saul, the Lord's anointed, it could be said that it can never be right to kill the King. This position, logically, however, would also have ruled out taking up arms against him and would lead to a stance of passive resistance, or even passive obedience. Secondly, one may object, not to the thing, but the way in which it is done, smacking perhaps of illegality in judicial murder. All I can say is that this is an open question and that there are probably as many different opinions in this room as there would have been at the time.

Second, Ireland. According to some schools of thought, Cromwell is known as the 'Butcher of Ireland'. There are two extremes to avoid in approaching this issue—first, believing all the stories told by hostile witnesses, and second, attempting a whitewash job. 'My hero, right or wrong.' Again, we can begin with a few facts about Cromwell in Ireland. 1. He mounted a military operation, not a crusade. 2. His object was to win the war as speedily and bloodlessly as possible. 3. At the outset he forbade his men to plunder and pillage the land (which was the common practice of invading armies) and those who disobeyed were executed. 4. He followed the then rules of war. 5. Before all sieges, notably the two most bloody at Drogheda and Wexford, advantageous terms were offered in the event of surrender. The garrisons knew that if they rejected they would be put to the sword in the event of defeat. Unless one objects to war as such, no serious case then can be made against the Lord Lieutenant's treatment of enemy soldiers. Controversy lies in the allegations of atrocities against innocent civilians. To be honest, we do not today know what actually happened. Probably non-combatants were killed at Drogheda or Wexford, although this was against Cromwell's stated policy. The Commander can't be everywhere! We must also bear in mind what must be well appreciated by English troops in Ireland today, when you are under fire it is not always easy to identify who is and who is not a combatant. The greatest severity was shown to the Roman Catholic clergy, towards whom Cromwell evidently felt a bitter hatred and whom he regarded and treated as full combatants. He saw the outcome at Drogheda as 'A righteous judgement' for the atrocities committed on the English a decade earlier by the Irish. He also

believed that it would prevent the effusion of blood for the future and this analysis was vindicated by events.

Third, Cromwell's view of Providence is worthy of note because it was such an overriding element in his thought and life. It is a thread that runs through all his letters and speeches. Some have found his constant recognition of, and references to, God's Providence embarrassing or even distasteful. Surely, however, he stands four-square on Scripture in his conviction that God controls and determines the outcome of all events. The question is, to what extent, if any, can one read Divine approval of a person or group into the success or otherwise of their actions? Cromwell clearly believed that one could. Indeed, should do so. He believed that the cause for which he fought was owned of God by a remarkable chain of providences. He also believed that this constituted a rule for future action: a mandate for him to hold power and to use it in certain ways. The Scottish Kirk would not accept this position with its implication that God had judged against their cause in battle, replying 'They had not so learned Christ as to hang the equity of their cause upon events'. Certainly there are problems in Cromwell's view. What of the many occasions when right and truth do not prevail? Was the Restoration in 1660 a sign that God's approval had moved to the Stuarts and Anglicans? Is it right to be guided by one's interpretation of events and inward impressions rather than by the written word? I ask the question.

Fourth and finally, the last issue we have to consider is Cromwell's religious affiliation. First, was he a Puritan? To which I would answer unhesitatingly, yea. He held to the faith of the Puritans as scriptural evangelical reformed Protestantism. He lived as a Puritan. His friends and confidants were Puritans, and he fought for Puritanism in war and peace. To be more precise, then, what label can we put on Oliver? Was he a Presbyterian, an Independent, a Baptist, perhaps a Crypto-Anglican, or even a Free Thinker? His thinking was clearly with mainstream Puritanism, which during the Protectorate had three main branches—Presbyterian, Independent and Baptist. We can safely state that he was not a Baptist, although had the phrase been in vogue at the time he might justly have claimed 'Some of my best friends are Baptists'. The Presbyterians often felt the rough edge of his tongue, not so much on ecclesiological grounds as because, to him, they represented a persecuting spirit, though he recognised that they were by no means unique in this. 'Every sect,' he complained, 'said "Oh give me liberty", but give it to him and to his power he will not yield it to anybody else.'

Without flattering you Congregationalists, then, one can fairly conclude that Cromwell's preference was for the Independents. He was called (and it was not meant as a compliment) 'The Great Independent'. Yet a number of

qualifications must be made. First he believed in and upheld the State Church, although permitting independent congregations outside it. So he was committed to the sacralist rather than the voluntary principle. Secondly there is no evidence that he ever belonged to a gathered church. Thirdly, he saw himself as belonging to the whole people of God, not part of it.

The halcyon days of religious unity for Cromwell were in the army. 'Presbyterians, Independents, all have here the spirit of faith in prayer, the same presence and answer', he wrote in 1645. 'They agree, here we have no names of difference. Pity it is it should be otherwise anywhere. All that believe have the real unity which is most glorious, because inward and spiritual, in the Body and to the Head.' As was later said of John Bunyan, Cromwell truly belonged, and belongs to, no sect or party but to the whole of Christ's Church.

I have always been suspicious of authors who pontificate on what makes a great man: rather I tend to agree with the wit who said that there are two classes of people—those who believe there are two classes of people and those who don't. Having said that, I must risk placing myself in the scorned first category by concluding with a few words on the greatness of Oliver Cromwell. He was a great soldier and a great statesman by common consent for the reasons I have already mentioned. Above all, he was a great man—a manly man, with courage, dignity and courtesy; a human man, a devoted husband and father, an adored general, a man of wide human interests, with a sense of fun overlooked in the popular image, and a big man with large thoughts and large sympathies, towering over his contemporaries as an enlightened, civilised and tolerant man. And remember, this was a man with a naturally passionate and combative nature; not an armchair intellectual but a man of action. It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet. Oliver Cromwell, lionised by so many then and now, is an exception to this rule. And with the words of John Maceton, Oliver Cromwell's steward, this study can appropriately be concluded: 'A larger soul has seldom dwelt in a house of clay', he wrote. To which I would add Amen, and to God be the Glory.

The Prayer Life of the Church

Neville Rees

I feel like the preacher who on a very lovely afternoon after a good lunch found his congregation drifting off to sleep, and complained bitterly to one of his deacons to wake them up. And he replied very curtly, 'You sent them to sleep—you wake them up!' Well, I hope the subject that we have for this afternoon will be a stimulus to keep us awake after an excellent lunch, and that we will be able to be questioned regarding the present prayer life of the church. The corporate prayer life of the church is one of the most important subjects or tasks that anyone could face. 'The Church is as she is in her prayer life', and this would immediately suggest to us that we need to look carefully at the way in which the Church conducts herself in prayer.

Yet we will look at this subject as one of the highest devotional exercises that sinners redeemed by the Grace of God and the Blood of Christ can ever engage in, and yet at the same time the most delicate and difficult of spiritual activities. We would all agree that, as individuals, private and personal prayer in our lives often meets with difficulties, high and low spots, but how much more so the collective praying of Christians. So, as I stand this afternoon, sandwiched between the great man of God, Oliver Cromwell, and hopefully looking forward to hearing about PT Forsyth, we are going to concern ourselves about the collective body of Christians met together in prayer.

It is an important subject as well in the light of contemporary situations. First of all, the prayer meeting in the local church is by and large the most reluctantly attended meeting and the one that causes most concern to pastors and officers. Often lifeless, dead, dry, formal, or, the 'in' word with young people, boring (especially to young people, and to counter this kind of spirit the door often opens to praise and worship meetings where praying is reduced to child-like phrases, for example, 'Make me more loving, Lord. I love you Jesus')

And then, secondly, this is an important subject in the light of the contemporary situation, in the light of schools of prayer which are arranged deliberately, not in church buildings, but in hotels throughout Britain. You pay to learn to pray. A recent pamphlet on a school of prayer suggests that your registration could be paid at the door. Quote from such a pamphlet,

You learn to pray by praying, right? Praying when you are in trouble or sick or hurting or maybe even desperate. Praying fervently when someone you love is hurting or sick or in trouble. Prayer is so basic—we talk to God and he talks to you. Some of the time he says 'yes' and some of the time he says 'no'. We all

need to pray more. If we pray more, God will do more, and we would all be in better shape. We need to pray more than God needs us to pray. There is no big mystery, it is as simple as all of that.

We comment 'I wish it were so simple'. We obviously need to properly assess the prayer meeting and the prayer times of the church and to face our problems in the light of Scriptural teaching and maybe with the help of history.

I want to proceed in this paper to look at the prayer life of the Church in the context of the prayer meeting and the prayer times of the Church, first of all in the Biblical scene, and then secondly from the historical data, which I am afraid is very limited, and then thirdly perhaps to raise contemporary problems.

Keeping to the guidelines of the New Testament we can glean that corporate prayer was an integral part of Church life. Ephesians 5:19–20 tells us, 'Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. Giving thanks always for all things under God and the Father in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' This gives us a general pattern of the devotional exercise of Christians with prayer and thanksgiving highlighted.

Examining many other references, not all, we are able to point out first of all that in the Scriptures prayer is seen as basic and functional in the life of the Church. In Acts chapter 2:47, we read of the converts on the Day of Pentecost, as they gathered themselves to the Church, that they

continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

They followed obviously the pattern of how the disciples were instructed and gathered under our Lord's instruction and practice and the way that the Church had been empowered through prayer and supplication. Matthew 18:19–20, the Lord's own words,

Again I say unto you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

Our Lord here gives corporate prayer as the basic means by which his disciples were to prove his presence and have the ear of Heaven.

And then secondly, in the Biblical record, prayer is seen as resorted to in specific circumstances. Acts 4:23ff.,

And when they heard that [the account of Peter and John being pressed by the authorities] they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said ...

And then we have the great prayer uttered and then the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon them and shaking the whole of the place where they were meeting. Then in Acts 12:5,

Peter therefore was kept in prison but prayer ...,
and we need to enlarge there with the Amplified Version,
... instant and earnest was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him

and in verse 12:

Where many were gathered together praying.

Peter was imprisoned awaiting execution. James had been executed. So persecution and opposition pressed them to pray.

Then thirdly in the Biblical record, prayer is taught and exhorted. From the letters of the New Testament there are countless references. Ephesians 6:18, after piecing together the armour of God, there is 'Praying always', which is often missed out when dealing with the armour of God.

Praying always, with all prayer, and supplication in the Spirit, watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Philippians 4:6,

Be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be known unto God.

1 Thessalonians 5:17, one of the short exhortations in the list, 'Pray without ceasing', bringing the ring of our Lord's own words when he said that men ought always to pray and not to faint. 1 John 5:14-15,

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us, and if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

1 Timothy 2: 1, 8, exhorting young Timothy as he is sent down as a pastor of a church,

I exhort therefore that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men. ... I will therefore that men will pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting.

James, in chapter 5 of his letter, in the passage verses 13-18, teaches that prayer is to be encouraged, is to be exhorted by the leaders when people are in given situations, in affliction, in need; then taking the example of Elijah, points out that prayer has to be engaged in with all fervency.

From these records we can surely conclude that the gathered company of the Lord's redeemed in the days of the early church were to be found watching

and praying, exercising this bought privilege to besiege the Throne of Grace regularly.

Regarding the very nature of the prayer meeting as such, we have no content in this direction. All that we are told in that passage from Acts 2:42 is that it would give rise to the possibility of regular meetings for prayer, and that during those times maybe the apostles or all who were together would pray with one accord for the particular thing that pressed them to pray. But we could surely underline, especially when we come to look at the contemporary problems, that they gave themselves fully and wholeheartedly to praying as a devotional exercise with all fervency. In the words that we find in the Book of Psalms,

They poured out their heart unto the Lord in prayer.

But can history help us to trace from the early days of the Apostles up to the present time the whole place and structure and nature of the prayer meeting of the Church.

As I suggested, there is very little written in history for us. There is plenty of detail on forms of worship—ceremonialism, ritualism and organisation and so on. The record books of local churches rarely have a comment on the strength or weakness of the prayer life of the church. Something that we could take to heart in our present time: do we see in our church meetings the need to record the spiritual life of the Church, and to discuss together the prayer life in our church? One source that I contacted stated that there is hardly any evidence to prove that the prayer meeting as we know it today existed in the chapel or church sense before the nineteenth century, but only found itself in the domestic scene; in other words, that homes were used for people to gather for prayer. However, I feel that we can glean from a quick survey of history some help in this direction to see the development of the prayer meeting and its place within the life of the church. In the early centuries, Tertullian, wrote in the second century,

We come by troops to the place of assembly, that being banded, as it were, together we may be supplicants enough to besiege God with our prayers. These forces are unto him acceptable.

He seems to suggest that right at the beginning, at least of the third century, this concept of groups of Christians coming together in prayerful and in a corporate manner was to besiege the Throne of Grace. Obviously into the third and fourth centuries, life became more ceremonial and formal and everything seemed to be directed into the hands of the clergy. And we know that the Church and State became completely merged and eventually the Church entered into its Dark Ages.

If we jump to the Reformation period, the Reformation inevitably brought the Bible back to us, and to the reforming task of the Church. There are hints, for example in Calvin, that the Church at Geneva knew what it was to engage once more in praying together. In his Institutes Book III, chapter 20 and section 29, he speaks of 'assiduity in prayer' or 'diligence and fervency'. And says:

though it specially refers to the peculiar private prayers of individuals, it must extend also in some measure to the public prayers of the Church.

And then he states:

the manner [of public prayers] for the sake of order, has to be established by public consent. ... But there is nothing to prevent each church [he goes on to say] from being now and then stirred up to more frequent use of prayer.

And he speaks of fixed hours.

It seems that the way back to the Scriptural practice (if our analysis of the Biblical record is right) of corporate prayer was a long haul, and the Puritan movement was frowned upon in some measure for the disregard of the Common Prayer Book, and the recourse that the Puritans had to extempore enthusiastic praying, which often took thirty minutes in a said public service. At such a time it would appear that corporate prayer, rightfully as my source states, was confined in this period to family devotions. Richard Baxter, you remember, at Kidderminster, states that on his arrival he saw scarcely one home in eight hundred engaging in family prayer. And by God's grace at the conclusion of his ministry there this had changed to scarcely one home in eight hundred not engaging in family prayer.

From the beginnings of Nonconformity, likely converts were encouraged to allow a prayer meeting in their home, which led eventually to the preaching of a sermon to their neighbours and became an evangelistic means in the hands of God.

When we move into the eighteenth century, it is good to remind ourselves that the Moravians who had a great influence, as we know, on Wesley and Whitefield, in their Herrnhut arrangement were exhorted by Count Zinzendorf, to gather regularly in groups of six or more to meditate and to pray for the Spirit. Could this well be then seen as having filtered through when we look at Wesley and Whitefield. Although we admit that in their case preaching becomes the great emphasis, and their society meetings were times when experiences were shared and prayer was engaged in, nevertheless, they as a group of leaders, found it necessary to meet in gatherings at regular intervals at Fetter Lane which were highly valued and particular. Just to cite one

example, on New Year's Day 1739, it is classically reported as the occasion when they met (as Whitefield reports)

Spent the whole night in close prayer, psalms and thanksgiving.

Wesley is said to have recorded this incident by stating that it went on well into the early hours of the morning, until 3 a.m. when it was obvious that the power of the Spirit came upon all present, and with one voice they all stood up and said 'Praise be to God'.

From sketchy information in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries we are able to learn that the prayer meeting in the life of the church seemed to be directed upon certain lines. The first category that we would find information about would be that there would be obviously special times of prayer that the Church was called to engage in. On many different occasions Christians in localities were encouraged to gather together for corporate prayer. Harvest Thanksgiving time was a noted period when the church would gather in prayer to thank God in his Providence for the fulfilment of his promise in creation and the goodness of his hand in caring for them. Linked with the Harvest Thanksgiving time, there were also prayer meetings gathered for the weather needs, especially in rural areas, and one prayer that has been handed down to us that was commonly voiced,

Almighty God, may it please thee, to stay the rain and to cause the sun to shine on the fields.

Then, thirdly, in the home of bereavement prior to a funeral, Christians would gather with the bereaved family to engage in prayer. This in particular in Wales was to discourage the Gwynnos, which for non-Welsh speaking people you may find understanding of it in the Irish 'wake'. In other words, a licentious drinking party.

Then, fourthly, inevitably there were seasons of prayer for revival. Again, records speak of Wales in particular, but in the period prior to 1859, that great awakening, Christians were called upon to call upon God 'because God is not among us'. This was to them of course in contrast to the halcyon days of 1760 through to 1830, when in the Principality of Wales in particular, it would seem that wave after wave of God's working was known here and there in different localities.

And then there are records to prove that prayer meetings for young people became a feature, either on Saturday evenings or between services on Sundays. A person would be appointed to encourage the young to practise speaking and to begin to conduct themselves in prayer in public. In my own church, for example, in the period 1862 to 1865, a David Dafydd and Daniel Evans are

cited as men who were particularly gifted in stirring and prompting and teaching young people to pray in public.

And then, from about 1860 the first days of the New Year were underlined as an opportunity to call upon God for his blessing on a New Year in the land. This of course became essentially taken over by the Evangelical Alliance in their first week of the New Year's prayer meetings.

So much for the special prayer meetings and the evidence. What about their nature and character as we look into non-conformity in this period? Well, as a result of a Report of the Royal Commission on the Church of England and other religious bodies in Wales, published in 1910, we have some information on the latter half of the 19th century. Prayer meetings, the report tells us, were held once a week in every hamlet with hymns, extempore prayer with four or five taking part as a pattern. Congregationalists met in houses with about three homes used in rotation. The Baptists held regular prayer meetings in the Chapel with the minister or deacon leading, and members named to take part in prayer, and sometimes they would be open as meetings to everybody or they would even go around one by one. The general pattern and content of these meetings, the report tells us, was as follows—they would generally commence with praise and singing, one reads a chapter and leads in prayer, two would then be called upon to pray; the minister or deacon would give extempore exposition on the chapter just read, two or three more would be called upon to pray and then it may be left open to all. The duration of the meetings would be something from an hour and a quarter to an hour and a half. In Wales in particular, the Society meeting which Wesley and Whitefield had brought into being, and of course their counterparts in Wales, Howell Harris and William Williams, would often follow this meeting when six or so would recount experiences of the Lord's dealing with them in the past week. The report specifies as well that the benefits from such gatherings were cited as leading to the formation of Christian character and the training of the moral and spiritual faculties in the redeemed of the Lord.

In the light, then, of our scriptural analysis and of the small amount of material that we can find historically, let me now turn to a contemporary scene and to the problems as we see them.

From experience, many of us know the value of such gatherings when spirits are uplifted, souls refreshed, when God's presence is felt, and the preaching of the Word is made effective to the converting of sinners. We also know of dead meetings, with no life, some people even monopolising the prayer time by praying for 20 minutes or so, small attendance, some take part saying more or less the same things week by week, some even revert to preaching in their prayers at you, others tell you through the Lord where they

have been and what they have done, and the problems seem to increase. But if we are convinced from the scriptural record and as we trace the development through history, that the prayer meeting is the God-given means to the Church for our spiritual well being, then we must face these problems head on and try to help in the best way we can.

I want to examine, therefore, some areas, and to prod you and to perhaps help one another in making these meetings more profitable.

Let's take first of all it would seem the twentieth century pattern of what is called a Bible Study-cum-Prayer Meeting. This combined meeting would appear to be a twentieth century phenomenon, although early dissenters met for the study of the Scriptures and prayer. (Reverting again to the church where I am a pastor, and the only reason I do this is that it is 200 years old and I have been able to write up an account of its history. Prior to its founding in 1782, they met on a farm and they met regularly for the studying of the Scriptures and praying, and that obviously took place on a regular basis in mid-week). Now there are advantages and disadvantages of this kind of meeting. The disadvantages are—firstly people find it difficult to move from one half to the other, and in certain cases over half the company of the people rise up to leave after the Bible Study. The second disadvantage is that people dry up when the change takes place from Bible study to closing one's eyes to pray. And thirdly, there can often be a lack of stimulus to pray.

The advantages are that it can deal with the 'sameness' problem, in other words, the Word studied should promote prayer in the direction that it has been teaching. For example, if the passage has been bringing out the great need of repentance then the prayer meeting should be directed along those lines. Or, if the passage has brought out the great promises of God, which God's people should be claiming, then the prayer meeting could be led in that direction. The promises of God should be pulled upon, as our fathers used to say. And secondly, the advantage of such a meeting is that it brings the Word and prayer together in the same way that the individual in his own personal life exercises his own soul. Then thirdly, the economic use of time. It is doing in one evening two things. Perhaps I can leave that for you to pursue and discuss.

The second area of the contemporary scene is obviously (from what I have said in the beginning) participation. If this meeting is given by Christ and is commended, as it was by the disciples, to be the means by which they could know his presence and have the ear of heaven, how can we encourage people to pray and how can we shut up others, who seem to take all the time? Essentially the meeting is designed to pray for the local church and the Body of Christ generally. Perhaps missionary work could best be accommodated for by a monthly missionary meeting or separate house missionary groups. We would

all agree that stimulus is essential in this meeting. And perhaps some practical helps are offered to us. By the way, I don't say I agree with all these, I am just bringing all the contemporary issues to you.

One, that topics be put on a blackboard, and people be exhorted to pray for one subject only. *Secondly*, why not divide into smaller units, taking the Herrnhut arrangement of Zinzendorf into seven or ten in number; after opening the meeting each deacon or elder could lead each group with topics for half an hour. *Thirdly*, encourage prayers of one sentence, because if we are a family then it is all one prayer and we all add one sentence to it. For example, all praise God for atoning for us in Christ upon the cross. All can say that in a personal and different way. Or, pray for that which really burdens you. Surely everyone should have something quite different there. Then *fourthly*, calling people to lead in prayer on the particulars which have been itemised before prayer, taking the historical evidence of the nineteenth century when named people were called upon when a church gathered in prayer. Then *fifthly*, what about instruction in praying? Calvin emphasises the need for public prayer to use the vulgar tongue. What he means by that is not coarse language but he says that when you are amongst English people you don't pray in French, or perhaps appropriately for some this afternoon, we ought not to pray in Welsh! And then he said that we should take always in public the prayer given to us as a pattern to instruct ourselves how to pray, The Lord's Prayer, and from it he gathers that there are six petitions that we should always have before us when we pray. And they are? we should always have the Glory of God in view: 'Our Father which art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name'. We should consider God's word foremost, 'Thy Kingdom come'. We should take no account of ourselves, only to lead into fourthly: confession—'forgive us our sins'; need—'give us this day our daily bread'; and submission—'Thine be the kingdom, the power and the glory'.

What about the place of singing in prayer times? What about prayer for special circumstances, as we have had from our historical information? Are there occasions that ought to be pressing us to pray more together? What is praying in the Spirit? These are phrases and areas which we need perhaps to have some help and guidance over.

Regarding the place of singing in prayer times, Calvin points out that singing is not only very ancient but was used by the apostles; 1 Corinthians 14:15—'I will sing with the Spirit and I will sing with the understanding also'. Then he adds that

Neither words nor singing if used in prayer are of the least consequence or avail one iota with God, unless they proceed with deep feeling in the heart.

Finally, having raised some issues for us, I want to end by saying to the contemporary scene that if the prayer meeting has been given by the Lord to his people in the church, maybe the problems that we are encountering, like poor attendance, little participation, dry and lifeless meetings, are because we have not grasped that this meeting is to receive the primary place. Why are such meetings generally neglected? Why do Christians go out of their way to go to other meetings and places? Why is it that we call a church meeting maybe on the prayer meeting night, and more than what would normally turn out, turn out? Why? Why?

I suggest that: could it not be because we do not emphasise the significance of this meeting, its potentials and its powers and its possibilities? Let us remember that the early Christians were bathed in the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit. Have we lost the sense of, 'It is not our prayer which moves the Lord Jesus' (I quote!).

It is Jesus who moves us to pray. He knocks and thereby makes known his desire to come into us. Our prayers are always the result of Jesus knocking at our hearts' doors (Hallesby on Prayer).

He continues,

Prayer has been ordained only for the helpless. If it is the last resort of the helpless, indeed the very last way out, it seems we try everything before we finally resort to prayer.

We have made little reference to the Psalms. Perhaps we could just end on the note of the Psalms. We do well to keep before us in our personal prayer life and especially the corporate life of the church, the striking note of the Psalms—they are full of the needy subjects of the Christian Church—repentance, contrition, helplessness, which Hallesby has pointed out is our best prayer. In one phrase, our prayer meeting ought to be occasions when we come together as the Lord's people not to express opinions about the Lord's work, not to tell others what we have been doing, but to pour our hearts as a people out before him. For his work, for his name, for his glory, for the coming of his Spirit in every generation to make known the Gospel of Christ in power to our own day and age.

PT Forsyth— Prophet of the 20th Century

Hefin Elias

Christ died for our sins. His blood was shed for their remission. His death set up a new relation of covenant between God and man.

And, for those who worshipped him first, all he was to them centred on the cross and radiated from there. It was the Christ who was made sin for them on the cross that became for them God reconciling the world to himself. He was all to them in the cross where he died for their sin, and took away the guilt of the world, according to their Scriptures ... The question of a Saviour is the question of a salvation. It turns on an experience, and not only of an experience, and the experience of an historic person, but upon what is for us a *revolutionary* experience, and not a mere impression, however deep. It turns on a new creation. The *soterology* turns into a *soteriology*. The centre of Christ is where the centre of our salvation is. He is Christ, he is God, to us in that he saves us ... He is Christ and Lord by his Cross ...

Christian faith is our life-experience of complete forgiveness and final redemption in Christ. It does not *include* forgiveness, it *is* forgiveness. Its centre is the centre of forgiveness ... And we have it where the evangelical experience has always found its forgiveness—in the cross.

Powerful words; they are taken from a book by PT Forsyth entitled *The Cruciality of the Cross*. They furnish us with an immediate insight into the character and stature of the one to whom we direct our attention. The quotation shows that we are not looking at the product of a literary genius seeking to display the delicate artistry of his talent. Nor do they reflect the effort of a scholar to explain his intellectual response to the apprehension of a truth or scheme, no matter how exciting. Our quotation shows quite clearly that we are concerned with a person who appreciated, above everything else, that he was a sinner saved by grace. There is no need to hazard a guess as to whether this man has been to the cross, washed in the blood, found peace with God and received everlasting life. We do not have to scan his works in search of some hint that these glorious truths are hidden somewhere between the lines. They are clearly stated and in bold relief. He knows what it is to be translated from being a spectator of the activities of the household of God into a member of the family. And he expresses in thrilling terms the awesome wonder and joy that every believer knows when we are transformed from a child of wrath into a child of God.

As with others who have passed this way, the gracious ministry of God the Holy Spirit and the atoning sacrifice of Christ are ever central in Forsyth's work. Having met God in Jesus Christ at the cross he is wise enough thereafter to want to stay in close proximity to that sacred spot. The cross is central and crucial. It cannot be bypassed. It is at our peril that we wander from it.

Having such a firm hold on the heart of the Gospel and able to express it in forthright terms, Forsyth found himself inevitably in the van of those who in his day furthered the cause of the kingdom. Assuming the cross is his vantage point, he secured a range of vision of the eternal and temporal: he could not fail to make pronouncements which were prophetic. The consistency of his assertions with that which is visible at the cross, provides us with the best possible gauge of the effectiveness of his work.

Peter Taylor Forsyth was a native of Aberdeen. His mother, Elspet, was a very honest, kind and patient woman. Elspet's father was a crofter, but as with so many from a similar background she had to migrate to the nearest city in search of employment. She found work as a maid. When her employer's wife lay on her death-bed Elspet promised to care for the ailing husband. True to her word she delayed her marriage for nine years to fulfil the promise. Peter Taylor, a prosperous shoemaker, rewarded his faithful servant by bequeathing his house to her. Elspet then married her fiancé, Isaac Taylor. This was in 1847. They had five children. Their eldest child was born on 12 May 1848, and named after the benefactor who had presented them with their home—Peter Taylor. Isaac Forsyth tried his hand at numerous occupations until in 1853 he became a postman. His earnings amounted to some 11 shillings, or 55 pence, a week. To supplement her husband's income and help pay for their children's education, Elspet took in lodgers. Her innate generosity coupled with the fact that the lodgers were usually the poorer students at the university meant that there was little extra income from this source. The poverty experienced in his own home and witnessed in the old city of Aberdeen during his childhood, explains Forsyth's lifelong interest in social issues and his passionate political involvement when a young minister.

After leaving grammar school, Forsyth proceeded to the local university to read classical literature. Whilst at college he began preaching and determined to enter the ministry. Having completed his studies, he went on the prompting of the Rev. W Robertson Smith to the continent to study under Ritschl at Göttingen. This was in 1872. When he returned he entered New College here in London. As a result of his unorthodoxy, or possibly as a result of ill-health, he failed to finish his course at New College. He left in 1874.

Whilst in London he met his first wife, Minna Magness, whom he married in 1877. She died in 1894. In 1897 he remarried, his second wife being Bertha

Ison. Both marriages appear to have been happy and blessed unions. After leaving New College, Forsyth had to wait two years for a call to minister a church. It required an unorthodox church to call an extremely unorthodox student as its pastor. In those days such churches were not so plentiful as they are now, so it was not until 1876 that he received an invitation to Shipley, near Bradford in Yorkshire. The church at Shipley was sufficiently unorthodox to be refused membership of the Yorkshire Congregational Union. The new minister was equally unacceptable to Yorkshire fraternity. During his time at Shipley the church became known as the 'Cave of Adullam'. Two years were enough for Forsyth at Shipley. In 1879 he moved to Hackney, here in London, to St Thomas's Square, but remained out of communion with the London Union. During his ministry at St Thomas's Square, Forsyth underwent the experience which revolutionised his person and ministry. Subsequent to his experience he was admitted into the London Union. In 1885 he moved to Cheetam Hill, Manchester, and then proceeded to Clarendon Park, Leicester in 1888 and to Emmanuel Church, Cambridge in 1894 until in 1901 he was appointed Principal of Hackney College in London. He returned to the capital city and remained at this post until his death on 11 November 1921.

It is evident from what we have said already that the life and ministry of Peter Taylor Forsyth falls into two clearly defined eras. One before his experience of the redeeming grace of God and the other thereafter. To help us understand the radical nature of the change he underwent we need some knowledge of the religious context in which he placed himself before his conversion. This information will also help us appreciate the tension which appears in his thought between the old outlook and the new, and may offer some light on our discussions already this day.

When he first entered the ministry, Forsyth was a militant liberal following the fashion of the age, evidencing itself increasingly among the younger men. He made his way to the inner core of 19th century liberalism. Whilst at Göttingen, and after returning, he familiarised himself with the leading exponents of German liberal theology. Later under the direction of the Rev. J Baldwin Brown, a Congregational minister at Brixton, near here, he immersed himself in the work of FD Maurice. In their day Kant, Hegel, Ritschl and Maurice were amongst the most influential and advanced exponents of theological liberalism. At one stage in his career Maurice was Professor of Theology at King's College in London. He was removed from his Chair for his unorthodox views. Quite some feat in the Anglican church. The essence of the thought of liberalism which Forsyth professed at this stage was directly opposed to that propagated by Protestants at the Reformation. Liberals of the sort to which we now refer, and will be referring in this paper, preferred the

actions of the enlightenment to those of the Reformation. Furthermore, they accepted as infallible the expression of the principals of the enlightenment in the maxims of Kantian philosophy.

Working within this framework they devastated the evangelical Gospel. With the stroke of a pen they believed they succeeded in demolishing like an idol the God who dwells in eternity, the Creator of heaven and earth. Heaven, it was thought, evaporated with the mists in the mind. We are ignorant of matters external to ourselves and uncertain as to what lies within. But we are sufficiently bold to assert that if the term God has any meaning at all, it must refer to something within us. I often think that the reference to 'fightings and fears within, without', in Charlotte Elliot's great hymn 'Just as I am' is as good a summary of this philosophy as one can find. If there is an entity which we can rightly label 'Divine' then, *ex hypothesi*, it can only refer to something, to some streak or spark within us. Intrinsic merit in Christianity is that it was the first religion to have hit upon this idea. The divine and the human are one. For discovering this idea, Christianity deserves a liberal, if I dare say it, measure of praise. As with the discoverer of any great invention, usually of course by accident, the author of the idea is ultimately irrelevant. We never stop to think who invented the wheel before driving away in our car. Similarly with the idea embedded in Christianity. You see now how it is—you can hear a sermon preached without the name of Jesus being mentioned. And how it is that we have lost our God-consciousness.

One thing, however, we should note in passing concerning the authorship of ideas in contrast to the discovery of inventions, is that ideas are often considered the prerogative and playthings of the educated and knowledgeable by those who consider themselves educated and knowledgeable.

Let me explain the assertions I make concerning liberalism by referring you to their own statement of the central tenets in their thought. True religion, they maintain, is not the preserve of any one faith. Religion is a formula which may be expressed as a good idea. So differing faiths may be evaluated according to their proximity to its discovery. As we find a kernel within most nuts so we find the central religious concept in most things. Hence, Emmanuel Kant tells us, 'There is only one true religion, but there can be faiths of several kinds.'. Typically, I suppose, of a philosopher, Kant thought this such a phenomenally difficult concept he believed few mortals had the capacity to understand it.

Such startling things [he said] should only be talked about amongst the learned. They should only be written about in learned journals. In our pulpits we treat our audiences to myths and fables, and preach as though we believed them.

This is how he puts it:

It is more fitting to say that this man is of this or that faith, Jewish, Mohammedan, Christian, Catholic, Lutheran, than he is of this or that religion. The second expression, ought, in justice, never to be used in addressing the general public in catechisms and sermons. For it is too learned and unintelligible for them.

Whether you think this directive to refrain from expressing the true nature of this type of liberal theology to the general public was the result of scholarly reticence or plain duplicity I leave you to decide. To the exponent of such views, the heart of biblical Christianity is meaningless, often ridiculous and even objectionable. Kant, for example, displays no reticence in making known the fact that he cannot stomach the thought of an atonement, and that belief in miracles, mysteries and the meanings of grace are illusory. Hegel is prepared to admit that Christianity is the absolute religion. It deserves this title because it has absolute truth as its content. Lest we should get over-excited about this seemingly generous compliment, we should hasten to add that one Hegelian scholar, WT Stace, says:

It only receives this nod of approval because its content is identical with Hegelian philosophy. Hegelian philosophy represents truth in a higher form than Christianity. It expresses the absolute content in absolute form. Christianity has never attained to that level of distinction. It can only portray truth in a sensuous and pictorial manner.

If these views are correct then the entire Bible must be rewritten, or interpreted in such a way that it cannot possibly mean what it says. The place to discover Christ is within us. Those who seek salvation should never be counselled to look upward and see him there who made an end of all my sin. We must advise people to do the very opposite. We must look within. The panacea for all our ills is found not in the objective work of God in Christ; it is found in some hidden cellar within our own person. God help those who follow this advice, but as the apostle Paul admits, every Christian has to confess 'I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh'.

When FD Maurice's mother was enquiring for the way of salvation, he went out of his way to advise her to reject the objective Christ and his atoning death upon the cross. That was the cornerstone of his sister's evangelical faith. He would have none of it. The mother is urged to look within. He writes:

Is there a difference between the believer and the unbeliever? Yes, the greatest difference. But the difference is not about the fact but precisely in belief about the fact. Christ is the head of every man—some believe it, some men disbelieve it. The truth is that every man is in Christ. The condemnation of every man is that he will not own the truth. He will not act as if these were true. Now my dearest mother, you wish and long to believe yourself in Christ,

but you are afraid to do so because you think there is some experience that you are in him, necessary to warrant that belief. Now if any man or an angel from heaven preached this to you, I say let this doctrine be accursed.

In the wake of statements like this we will not be surprised to hear Schleiermacher, father of modern liberal theology maintain,

Knowledge of religion or God is a portrayal of human states of mind. In other words, Christian faith is a statement of our feelings in words.

In the hands of these people the Gospel becomes unrecognisable. A system called Christianity is evolved without a God in his heaven, no divine incarnate Son, no atonement, no justification by faith, no regeneration, no sanctification, no heaven, no hell. To pray is to talk to yourself. It goes without saying that this is a completely different entity from biblical Christianity. To be converted from this is like being converted from Confucianism or Mohammedanism. Forsyth underwent such a conversion. Apprehended of God and brought to the cross, Forsyth's faith in the innate goodness of man, natural evolution towards the good, and the virtue of religious morality was shattered. The awesomeness of God's holiness, the radical evil of man's sinfulness, and the glory of the cross as the power of God unto salvation, exposed the full error and futility of liberalism. The cross is the Armageddon of liberalism.

On occasions, Forsyth gives us a glimpse into the radical change which took place in his views, when he came to experience saving grace. Thus, for example, he writes:

There was a time when I was interested in the first degree with purely scientific criticism, but it 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 see that what they needed was evangelisation, and something more than the conventional sense of that word.

Forsyth did not have to return to theological college to discover that his new found faith constituted a completely different religion from that which he previously confessed. The Christianity he now knew as true made mockery of the liberalism to which he had pinned his faith. In his own words, 'modern theology is one thing, theological liberalism is another'. Ritschl represents one Gospel, Pfleiderer another, and they are disparate and incompatible. Paul and Luther cannot dwell with Hegel—the one is a function of faith and the other a

school of thought. It took the gracious power of God the Holy Spirit to tear him away from the tenets which had so long deluded him.

I was all the time [he says] being corrected and humiliated by the Holy Spirit. What is needed is no mere change of view but a change and a deepening in the type of personal religion amounting in cases, to a new conversion.

After his conversion, as with every new convert, the grace of God becomes the focal point of all his thought. This means that having met God at the cross, Calvary assumes a strategic importance in the life of the believer. The cross is an experiential action, crucial to our knowledge of God, of ourselves, and our understanding of the Gospel. It is this principle which the apostle Paul expresses so effectively when he writes to the Christians at Corinth how it was, on his visit to them, he determined to know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and him crucified.

Forsyth had to rebuild his theology. His experience left him with no alternative other than to acknowledge many of the great evangelical Biblical truths. At the same time, he struggled to hold on to some facets of his old liberalism. As he sought to reconcile the opposing standpoints, he gradually evolved a position which was in many ways a novel one. He tried to wed a positive evangelical heart with several elements of a liberal corpus, which would long since have become a corpse if he had not done so. Since it is impossible to establish a satisfactory equilibrium between evangelicalism and liberalism, his thought displays the presence of two clearly demarcated contrasting principles. We will look at each of them in turn.

Firstly, the evangelical. The most striking truth imprinted on Forsyth's mind after traversing the Damascus road, was the awesome character of the holiness of God. Holiness is the crown of the divine attributes: it is God's self-sufficient perfection; it is the attribute of attributes, the perfection of perfections. The love of God is a holy love. It is, he says, something else than human perfection raised to infinity. Flirting with sentimental liberalism as a basis for one's standing before God, is like playing a garden hose on a volcano. God is holy and Christianity is concerned with God's holiness above all else. In view of the irreconcilable contradiction between holiness and sin, judgement must be enacted. It is impossible to drive a wedge between holiness and judgement. He says,

Holiness and judgement are forever inseparable. The wrath of God is no passive entity, it is active against sin. God must either punish sin or expiate it for the sake of his intrinsically holy nature. If mankind is to have any hope of escape from the torrent of God's wrath an intermediary of divine stature is essential; man cannot save himself; no angelic being is capable of rescuing us. God's holiness is so intransigent that our only hope of escape rests on his

adoption of our cause. In his holy mercy and grace he does this. The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is a glorious declaration to immortal souls sold unto sin that God himself has undertaken the task of our salvation. That God should feel constrained to do this shows the immensity of his love and the value of an immortal soul.

Well does Forsyth conclude:

There is nothing so precious in the world as souls.

Rejecting contemptuously the personification of God's attributes (a favourite pastime amongst Welsh evangelical preachers) and the thought that they could be at war with each other, Forsyth clearly demonstrates that holiness is not a sulky streak in the divine character which must be placated before men can be redeemed. It is equally wrong to speak of holiness in quantitative terms as if it were equal to goodness *ad infinitum*. Our salvation, he maintains, originated in the holiness of God. It is planned by a holy God. It is accomplished by a holy God. It satisfies the just demands of a holy God and creates a holy people. Every jot and tittle of Christian salvation is the result of the activity of God—and our God is a consuming fire.

It is only when we have understood the true nature of God's holiness that we can talk meaningfully of the love of God. He says:

Holiness is love morally perfect. Love is holiness brimming and overflowing. The perfection speaks in the overflow. It is in redemption love is perfect, not in amount but in kind; not as intense but as holy; and holiness is perfect, not as being revoked nor as being morally pure, but as it asserts itself in redeeming grace. Love as holy must react against sin in atonement. Holiness as grace must establish itself by redemption in Satan's seat. It is not the obstacle of redemption but its source and impulse. Salvation is in its entirety the gift of God's mercy. In the atoning sacrifice of Christ God declares himself just and the justifier of sinners. Christ is our substitute. The prime doer in Christ's cross was God. Christ was God, reconciling. If judgement had fallen upon man alone it would have destroyed him, but God was in Christ. The key which unlocks the door to understanding of the Christian faith is the atoning work of Christ. Theology must find its locus at Calvary. The atonement is the key to the incarnation not vice versa. In the cross of Christ and there alone the final and public righteousness of God is revealed to our growing faith. Christ suffered the penalty and curse for our sin, voluntarily entering into the pain and horror which is sin's penalty from God. Christ entered unreservedly into the blight and judgement of our sin. He offered a complete surrender of his total self on the cross.

Little wonder the saving work of God drew blood from Christ as it drew Christ from God. And not only from God's side, but from his heart. Christ's work touched the quick of God's heart.

The cross of Christ is both central and crucial. It is the first and final refuge of the redeemed. The alpha and the omega of theology. A *terminus ad quo* for human history and destiny. The cruciality of the cross is summarised by Forsyth in four-fold form.

First, that in the atonement we have primarily the act of God and the act of God's holiness. Secondly, that it alone makes any repentance or expiation of ours satisfactory to God. Thirdly, that, as regards man, it is a revolutionary act and not merely a stage in his evolution. Fourthly, it is further meant that our view of what Christ was and did must be the view that does most justice to the holiness of God and takes most profoundly and seriously the hallowing of his name.

The message of the cross is the redemptive Gospel. We must always preach it even although we do not always preach about it. Away with those anaemic do-gooders whose sentimentality is offended by reference to the blood of the cross. Fairytale liberalism has never understood the radical nature of human sin, or the frightening intensity of God's holiness. To come to Christ is not to take a stroll around the lake in St James's Park: to come to Christ is to come to the cross; to come to the cross is to come to crisis. 'It is,' says Forsyth, 'crisis, judgement, atonement, suffering, moral revolution, and re-creation from a new centre.' At the cross we know the torment of genuine evangelical repentance, as well as the healing balm of Gilead poured into those scars which are the cause of our sorrow. 'Christ,' says Forsyth, 'certainly used force and gave it his moral sanction. He wracked the victim of the unclean spirit in exorcising them. He cowed his disciples: he did not impress them. He preached hell as, in the service of his kingdom, he hewed the Pharisees.'

The value of the atonement is the value of the person who suffers in our place. There is enough value in him for the whole world. Salvation is not individual in the sense that Christ died for me—salvation is personal. The efficacy and power of the blood of Christ is immeasurable. It is more than enough for me and you. Let us hasten to avail ourselves of so great a salvation. By the gracious ministry of God the Holy Spirit, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us. When this is done, we appreciate, he says, our righteousness is as little ours individually as the sin on Christ was his. The source of salvation is also in turn the standard of judgement. Christ crucified is the great divide in time and in eternity. We are judged, he says, now, by the cross, and by the cross we stand or fall. The great sin is not something we do, but it is refusing to make ourselves right with God in Christ's cross.

Secondly, then, the liberal element. Despite his insistence upon the radical revolutionary effect of true conversion, Forsyth continued to hold several strategic liberal views after his discovery of the gospel of grace. Like everyone

else who enters heaven, he did so because of the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not because he was intellectually, theologically or morally perfect.

Let us look briefly at three areas of considerable importance where his liberalism continued to get the better of him.

First, the authority of scripture. Although he came to prove the efficacy of the gospel of redeeming grace by returning to the pages of the Bible, sceptical liberalism had so scarred his mind that he was never able to accept the scriptures as the inspired infallible word of God. He states quite bluntly—'I do not believe in verbal inspiration'. In the same context, however, he proceeds to maintain 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. The Bible is still the one manual of eternal life, the one page that glows when all life grows dark, and the one book whose wealth rebukes us more, the older we grow, because we knew and loved it so late.

This is typical of the enigmatic element in Forsyth. It is difficult to understand, because he saw quite clearly that the battle concerning the authority of scripture was a matter of first principles and not about the trivia of differing techniques. Forsyth's theology is in the main a biblical theology. He tries to found it on the basis of his experience of Christ. Its content is all too obviously a statement of scriptural doctrine. To maintain that the certainty of your experience constitutes the true norm or supreme authority in a theology is only permissible when the biblical doctrine forms the content of one's faith. In his treatment of scripture Forsyth is one of those theologians who wants the penny and the bun. He wants to hand the Bible over into the hands of critics and at the same time retain his biblical theology. For a person who has an evangelical experience of grace, this inconsistency is tolerable. Problems arise when others construct a contrary theology on the basis of a differing experience which they have undergone. At that point, something other than a subjective experience is required as the final court of appeal. A reliable objective referent is indispensable. Forsyth's position is like that of an ambassador representing his country in a foreign capital. Normally there is no need for him to carry or display his credentials. If, however, an impostor appears who also claims to be the ambassador, then recourse must be had to some objective referent. On the evidence of an objective referent the impostor is unmasked. God has given us the Bible to secure us from the false prophet, Forsyth should really have seen the error of his ways, particularly since he recognises that theology covers a far wider field than the limitations imposed by our experience. The errors which accompany his view of scripture show themselves in the next matter I wish to mention, namely his doctrine on the person of Christ.

Although adamant that a divine mediator is essential if man is to be rescued from sin, Forsyth held to the kenotic theory of the person of Christ. This meant for him that our Saviour not only shared the limitations of his people's knowledge, he was also limited in power. If you stop and think about that, then it means, of course, that the apostle Paul knew more about Christ than our Saviour knew about himself. This is what happens when we build our doctrine upon experience. If we only speak of the Messiah according to our experience of him, we devastate the greatness and glory of his person. We believe and trust biblical truths concerning Christ even though as yet we have no personal experience of him. We accept, for example, and establish and exercise our faith in such great truths as the apostle Paul's statement concerning Christ in Colossians 1:16–17.

By him, says the apostle, were all things created that are in heaven and that are in the earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones or dominions, or principalities, or powers, all things were created by him, and for him, and he is before all things, and by him all things consist.

Whilst it is true that the subjective efficacy of Christ for me personally at any given time is commensurate with my faith, this is a very different matter from constructing a doctrine of the person of Christ upon the fleeting moments of my appreciation of my Saviour. We are thrilled with everything we know of Christ in our experience, but our hearts go into raptures when we meditate on the power and glory of our Saviour of which as yet we cannot say we had experiential appreciation. We read it in scripture and the Holy Spirit confirms it to our hearts, as true.

And thirdly, and lastly, the sufferings of Christ. There are times when Forsyth failed to appreciate or acknowledge, and even speaks disparagingly of, the sufferings of Christ. For one who stressed the centrality of the cross, this is a sad error of judgement of major proportions. In treating of the value of the redeemer's work, he will even assert 'It does not lie in the suffering at all, but in the obedience and the holiness'. That the obedience of Christ is a primary element in the Saviour's ministry and sacrifice goes without question. But to claim it is the only element is to err. In his greatest work on the atoning sacrifice of Christ, Forsyth is strangely silent on the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. This is sad, for it not only fails to establish the full biblical picture of our Saviour's redeeming death, but it also undermines the scriptural analogy and link between the suffering of our Lord and that of the redeemer. We have a Saviour who apart from sin, identifies himself completely with us and understands through experience the sufferings of his people. It is also surely our hearts desire that we know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering, being made conformable unto his death.

Was Forsyth prophetic of 20th century theological trends? I am sure that you can see he was. In an exemplary, and in an unfortunate sense.

Let me finish with some vintage Forsyth. In his book *The Work of Christ*, Forsyth begins with a story reported in a Belgian newspaper some years previously. He uses this story as a basis to explain the atoning work of Christ, and the stumbling blocks which have to be overcome in us before its efficacy is effectual in our lives. The story reads like this. Two passenger trains were coming in opposite directions at full-speed. As they approached the station it was found the levers would not work, owing to the frost, and the points could not be set to clear the trains of each other. A catastrophe seemed to be inevitable, but a signalman threw himself flat between the rails and with his hands held the tie-rod in such a way that the points were properly set and kept, and he remained thus, while the train thundered over him, in great danger of having his head carried away by the low hung gear of the Westinghouse brake. When the train had passed he quietly rose and returned to his work.

Forsyth proceeds to offer some reflections on this incident. It is, he said, the kind of incident that may be multiplied indefinitely.

I offer you certain reflections. First, on some of its analogies with Christ's work and, secondly, some of its differences. First, this man in a true sense died and rose again. His soul went through what he would have gone through if he had never risen from the track. He gave himself—that is all a man can give at last. Like Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, it was complete and acceptable even though not accepted. The man's rising from the ground was, if not really, a resurrection from the dead. It was not simply a return to his post; he went back another man. There is a death and rising again possible to us all. If the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ did not end in producing that kind of thing amongst us then it is not the power of God unto salvation.

Secondly, not one of the passengers in either of those trains knew, until they read it, what had been done for them, nor to whom they owed their lives. It is so with the whole world. Today it owes its existence in a way it but poorly understands to the death and resurrection of Christ. Perhaps some of the passengers were at the moment grumbling about the staff of the railway for some small grievance or other. These people were ploughing along in safety over one of the railway staff lying in a living grave. I say it is so with the whole civilised world. Its progress is like that of the train—it seldom stops to think that its safety is owing to a divine death and resurrection much more than heroic.

Thirdly, another point, and I am now coming to the difference. This man died for people who would thrill with the sense of what they owed him as soon as they read about it. His act appealed to the instant which is ready to spring to

life in almost every breast. You felt the response at once when I told you the story. Some of you may even have felt it keenly. Do you ever feel so keenly about the devoted death of Christ? No, there is a difference between Christ's death and every case of heroism. Christ's was a death on behalf of people in whom the power of responding had to be created. Christ had to make the soul which should respond to him and understand him. He had to create the very capacity for response, and that is where we are compelled to recognise the doctrine of the Holy Spirit as well as the doctrine of the Saviour. What the work of Christ requires is the tribute, not of our admiration or even gratitude, not of our impressions or our thrills, but of ourselves and of our shame.

Now we are coming to the crux of the matter—the tribute of our shame. That death had to make new men of us. It had to deal with our active hostility, not simply with the passive dullness of our hearts.

May God in his grace have ensured it has done that already in all our hearts. Our prayer is that he would do it for many more immortal souls.

