

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

*DR. FORSYTH ON THE ATONEMENT.*¹

A REALLY adequate and constructive work on the Atonement has long been overdue. The situation in Theology has for the last twenty years been both anomalous and painful. Our leading thinkers have been obliged to abandon for the time the doctrinal aspects of the Faith, owing to the pressure of the attack on its philosophic postulates and its historic origins. The Higher Criticism has apparently worked havoc in the latter region ; and in the former the breakdown of every current school of philosophy has made confusion worse confounded. It has thus been impossible for any competent thinker to attempt a calm survey, much less a confident reconstruction of Christian doctrine in view of the new conditions. Many a tentative effort has been made to rehabilitate the doctrine of the Incarnation, with partial success in a few cases, but with complete success in none ; and the many studies of the Atonement that have issued from the press have either been insufficiently freed from the tyranny of outworn views of the Universe, or they have been too obsessed by the newer views to give adequate expression to the essential and abiding elements of truth in the historic theories of the Cross. Meanwhile on every Christian preacher and writer has weighed the urgent sense that to expound the Christian Faith without a clear, confident and whole-hearted presentation of its central doctrine, is to be doomed to ineffectiveness, and often to be suspected of insincerity. The result has been a deep sense of inadequacy in the work of the pulpit, and a disquieting, nay a disastrous feeling of unsatisfied spiritual hunger in the pew. The note of conviction and confidence that rang so clearly in the preaching

¹*The Person and Place of Jesus Christ.* The Congregational Union Lecture for 1909. By P. T. Forsyth, M.A., D.D.

of the Evangelical pulpit two generations ago, and which exercised such profound influence on the life of the country, has almost disappeared ; the emphasis in preaching has moved from the centre to the circumference of the circle of Christian doctrine ; and theology has fallen for the time into temporary disrepute. The recent developments in religious thought, with its bickerings and recriminations ; and still more, the lamentable waning of the power of the pulpit to hold the worshipping public, have been but outward symptoms of a trouble that has penetrated into the heart of the Church, and which has sapped its vitality to an alarming extent. That trouble is this—we have not known how to integrate the truth of the Cross into our deeper thought, and so have lost the sense of its power and joy. Therefore is it high time that we should have an exposition of this all-important subject, which, while conserving its undying message, shall expound it so that it may once more take its radiant and immovable place at the core of a happy and consentient faith.

I.

Dr. Forsyth has many qualifications for the handling of this supreme subject. He has proved himself to be a writer of broad and varied culture. He has studied in many schools of thought. He has passed through many eventful phases of thought on his own account. His religious development has been an interesting and even tragic pilgrimage after the truth ; and he was long ere he “ found ” himself. Even since his rediscovery of the Faith in which (like all good Scotchmen) he was brought up, he has been slow to assimilate his material or to clarify his vision. As he himself expresses it in the first of these remarkable books, he was not freeborn in this faith : “ with a great

¹ *The Cruciality of the Cross.* By P. T. Forsyth, M.A., D.D., Principal of Hackney College, Hampstead.

price have I procured this freedom.”¹ There are marks of this travail of spirit, and of the keen joy in which it has issued, on every page of his books ; and this will account for a certain vivid impatience which marks his attitude towards the contented and self-complacent sciolism of the *dilettanti* of theology. He knows the barrenness of the way and the sorrow of the quest too well to feel kindly to those who accept easy solutions to the Great Enigma, and who blandly dismiss as “ out of date ” the historic witness of the travailing Church of the Redeemer. Were not his pen dipped into his own heart’s blood, some of the phrases with which he stigmatises the shallow utterances of these easy writers might be suspected of uncharity. As it is, it would be impossible for him to speak otherwise. The man who has once faced lions in the arena cannot suffer fools gladly when they speak glibly of that which has been a matter of life and death to his soul.

This intense personal experience constitutes the highest possible qualification for a writer on the Atonement, and marks the utterances of all the great historic thinkers on the subject from Dr. Dale back to St. Paul himself. Its absence is a final bar to any fruitful thought. The Liberals stigmatised by Hermann as lacking this note of urgency, this “ sense that a personal life bears down on them out of every page of Scripture, and, full and warm, conquers them for his own ” . . . “ cannot do the work of theology,” and it is vain to look to them for help or guidance.² It would be well for the reading public to recognise this elementary fact, and turn for help to those who after passing through the deep

¹ *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 235.

² “ Only the saved have the real secret of the Saviour. That is the religion of the matter, which carries its theology. The Godhead that became incarnate in Jesus Christ did so, not to convince, but to save. . . . The work of Christ realised in the Church’s experience through faith becomes the avenue and the key to the person of Christ ” (*Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 220).

darkness have been saved as by fire, and know Him whom they have believed.

II.

These two books must be read and judged together ; it would, indeed, have been well, but for exigencies of bulk, if they had been published in one volume, for they are really one work, being together the organic development of one great central theme. It has always been a moot question in theology whether the Person or the Work of Christ should come first ; and writers have answered it differently according to the emphasis they would lay on the one or the other. The Greek fathers found the solution of their problem mainly in the Incarnation ; the Western and the Reformed mainly in the Atonement. Among modern thinkers, Dr. Dale and Dr. Denney give priority to the Cross ; Dr. Fairbairn and Bishop Westcott are mainly in sympathy with the Greek fathers. At root the antithesis is a false one ; the Person of Christ finds its solution as well as its consummation in His work, and His work has no meaning or efficacy except as the final expression of His Person. With Dr. Forsyth there is no hesitation as to which is the constitutive element in Christian theology : “ the reconciling and redeeming work of Christ is the grand avenue to his person in its fulness, though it does not exhaust it.”¹ The Person has supreme interest for him because it expressed, realised, and attained its final and saving value in the great redeeming act, without which it would lack its very *raison d'être*, and by means of which it put forth its saving power, and attained to final victory over sin and death. “ The doctrine of the Incarnation,” he writes, “ did not create the Church ; it grew up (very quickly) in the Church out of the Doctrine of the Cross, which did create it. . . . The doctrine of the Incarnation grew

¹ *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 280.

upon the Church out of the experience of the Atonement. The Church was forced on the deity of Christ to account for its redeemed existence in Christ. We can experience the redemption as we cannot the incarnation. The soterology sprang from the soteriology, the creed of the Person grew up in the Church which had been created by the experience of his salvation.”¹ This, indeed, is scarcely accurate in point of history, for the earliest preaching as summarised in the early chapters of the Acts was Christological rather than soteriological, and there is no mention made of atonement in the later sense of the word. True, however, is it that the deity of our Lord did not fully dawn on believers till the Church had had deep and valid experience of His redemption, and it is as true to-day as it was then that it is as Saviour that the ultimate significance of His Person is borne in experimentally on redeemed souls; what He does *for* us and *in* us determines our concept of what He is *to* us. And Dr. Forsyth boldly gives it as his conviction that it was the Cross that solved for Jesus Himself the mystery of His own nature and mission. “He Himself learned (if I may say so under shelter of the Hebrews) to construe all His life from the death whose divine necessity grew upon Him, and for whose accomplishment He was straitened in all else. In His death He found Himself fully. And His expiring groan was also the relieved sigh of self-realisation.”² Holding such views, it is natural for the writer to place almost exclusive emphasis on the atoning work of Jesus, and to subordinate not merely His earthly life, but almost every aspect of His super-historic Person to the supreme act in which in time He revealed the timeless and eternal God in His redeeming grace. One hesitates to justify this tremendous obsession

¹ *Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 98, 99 (footnote).

² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

exercised by the Cross on the writer's view. There are other aspects of the rich revelation of the Son of God than this ; and some noble believers, whose experience of the Christian salvation is full and true, would find it hard to assent to such an exclusive doctrine. None the less is Dr. Forsyth right in saying that the central fact of the Christian Faith is the atoning act of the Redeemer ; the Cross is the keystone of the arch of His perfect Life, the burning focus of all the light that radiates from His Divine Person.

III.

Turning to Dr. Forsyth's treatment of the Christological problem, what comes first to the mind of the reader of this brilliant and suggestive book is the completeness and thoroughness of its survey of its inexhaustible subject. The work contains searching criticism, but its main note is constructive throughout. There is much repetition and reiteration of central thoughts at various stages in the argument, which is like a river returning on itself as though loth to leave the scenery through which it passes ; but there is always something fresh and stimulating to see and to hear. Any attempt like a summary of the work in such an article as this would, of course, be futile as well as out of place. A few hints are all that is possible as to the line of thought.

Briefly then, in his Congregational Lecture, Dr. Forsyth seeks to expound for the men of to-day the significance for us of the great Personality who is at once the source and the embodiment of our Faith. In substance Dr. Forsyth's view of Christ is that of the historic Church, as expressed by the great thinkers ; and his purpose is mainly to show the utter inadequacy of the views of the Liberal theologians and amateur thinkers who, for the time, bulk so largely in the public eye. In a passage of great incisiveness, he

points out that our present Protestantism is historically composed of the union of two streams, which take their rise in different sources, and which, like the waters of the Arve and the Rhone below Geneva, have not yet coalesced; these are the Reformation and the Illumination. They may be called the Old Protestantism and the New—a distinction far more radical than the old antithesis of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy; they do not so much issue in two theologies as in two religions. The focal centre of the one is in a Divine intervention, and it rests on the objectivity of a given revelation; the other builds on the subjectivity of human nature or thought; the one is predominantly transcendent in its philosophic and theological emphasis, the other almost exclusively immanent; for the one Redemption is an interference, for the other it is an evolution. Each movement has its relative justification, and a full synthesis of thought must give due place to both. The crucial point comes here—which is to be regulative for faith, and which ancillary? The “modern mind” has chosen the immanent view of religion (as of the world and of man), and has made theology secondary to philosophy, and as a consequence is fast wandering into mere spiritual subjectivity. Dr. Forsyth, with ever-deepening emphasis, insists throughout his treatment of the Christological problem on the validity of the historic attitude of the Christian Church, in its instinctive clinging to the transcendent view of religion, and pre-eminently of the Faith once delivered to the saints. Christ for him is no mere perfect flower of the immanent order; He is the *incarnate* holiness of the transcendent God; He is not God as immanent, realising and “fulfilling” Himself “through all the spires of form” till He comes to a perfect self-expression, but the inrush into our nature of the fulness of the Godhead bodily for the purpose of a great ethical redemption for

the race.¹ The Incarnation was the solution in fact of the great antinomy of religious thought—how God can be infinite and finite, relative and absolute, immeasurably removed from us, and yet unspeakably near to us. According to our author Jesus was as divine as the Father, and as human as ourselves. This is the quintessence of the creeds, the sum of Christian orthodoxy—“all that Athanasius ever meant, and all that Faith ever realised.”

It is thus clear why Dr. Forsyth throws out a perpetual challenge to both wings of the “advanced” school of modern theological thought—the “Liberal” Protestant wing, which for the moment draws such attention in this country, and the “Modernist” Catholic wing, which is so threatening a feature of present-day Romanism. He discards the former as being confessedly anti-dogmatic, the latter as being tacitly anti-historical in the sense that it makes dogma practically independent of its foundation in the historic personality of Jesus—the one being subjective in its exclusions, the other in its inclusions. In the interests of the evangelic Gospel, he affirms the super-historic content of the historic person of Christ, and, in the interests of a true theology, the validity of the Church’s exposition of the significance of that content for faith. “Jesus is not only faith’s object, but faith’s world.”² “We know Him by faith to be much more than He is to our experience. . . . My contact with Him by faith is continually deepening my experience of Him. And as my experience deepens it brings home a Christ objective in history, and creative in experience, and the life and the deeds of a whole vast Church, meant, and moving, to subdue mankind not to itself but to the faith of the Gospel.”³

¹ “Jesus was for the Apostles and their Churches not the consummation of a God-consciousness, labouring up through creation, but the invasive source of forgiveness, new creation and eternal life” (*Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 58).

² *Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 56.

³ *Ibid.* p. 203.

We must, however, give due place to the critical movement in correcting the *naïve* attitude of former ages to the sources of our knowledge of Jesus, and to the historic conditions of the Incarnation. Dr. Forsyth makes large allowances for the service done here by criticism. Some who have drunk pretty deeply of this cleansing fountain will possibly think that in his presentation of the case, faith concedes both to culture and to dogma more than may ultimately be found justified. His picture of the human life of our Lord and its significance for faith is also, in our judgment, relegated too much into the background of the picture, and lacks something of the pulse and glow of the reality. It is viewed so exclusively in relation to its consummation in the great act of sacrifice on the Cross, that it almost appears as though it had no other value or meaning. *Christus Consummator* overshadows *Christus Revelator et Exemplar*; the Incarnation and its earthly expression in the sinless life are almost lost in the blaze of the Atonement in which its inner meaning was finally expressed. We would repeat that to many this will seriously impair the value of this book, for it almost ignores the evangelic record of that life, thus tacitly depreciating the imperishable and inexhaustible value of the teaching, the deeds, and the personal atmosphere and outgoing influence of that gracious and holy Person who lived our life as well as died more than our death; and whose life, and words, and teaching are more than a mere background for its final self-expression in the Cross. Say what we will of the profound truth of the Pauline presentation of the significance of the *work of Christ*, we should have been little helped by the Epistles were we not in possession of the Gospels, whose substance always lay behind the apostolic teaching, and for the adequate understanding of which teaching they are as necessary as are the Epistles for the final explication of the Gospels.

It may also be legitimately urged whether, considering the rich content of the religious sense, both in the spiritual psychology of man and in his manifold religious history, it is permissible to reduce the creative aspect of any religion to one single principle. This is the criticism which Loisy rightly passes on Harnack's reduction of the essence of the Gospel to the one doctrine of the Fatherhood of God. Religion is as many-sided as is man's capacity for receiving the impress of the Divine Spirit, and of responding to His appeal. Atonement and the sense of forgiveness represent one side (objective and subjective) of the Christian Faith, and they are central. None the less are there other, equally vital, aspects of the same manifold reality ; and it would seem that we are to some extent robbing these of their fruitfulness for the life of the soul if we make them depend entirely on a more or less complete realisation of the atoning work of Christ, vital as that is to a full and joyful spiritual life.

IV.

These, however, are blemishes due to over-emphasis rather than vital defects in the presentation of our author's subject, and we pass gladly to the positive and distinctive contribution of these books to the great problem of the Incarnation and the Atonement. Dr. Forsyth's message is, in a word, the transmutation of the ontological aspects of both into the ethical. The Person and the Cross of Christ are reinstated as the final court of moral appeal for the human conscience. This is precisely where recent theology, equally with modern culture, has gone astray. The loss of power in the doctrine of Atonement has been due to a loss of the sense of its ethical finality. By a false anti-thesis between the concepts of God and man, by a thoroughly unethical theory of substitution as the means whereby our

redemption was effected, by a doctrine of kenosis which had no bearing on practical thought and life, the subject had become largely lost in a fog of unreality ; indeed the whole idea of atonement has frequently been boldly denounced as an immoral doctrine. It is the inestimable value of this fresh presentation of the case that, for those at least who will take the trouble to penetrate into the heart of these volumes, the lost ground has been largely recovered.¹ According to Dr. Forsyth, the "moralising of dogma" in all its bearing, Divine and human, on the objective side, and the re-sensitising of the Christian conscience as the subjective response, is the supreme need of the day, both in religion and theology. In this is to be found the key to the problem of authority in religion, which is to be found not in the Church, which is too human, nor in the Scriptures, which are the fruit rather than the seat of that authority, but in the Gospel itself, which is the creative source and final norm of the religious life. This Gospel is expressed in the supreme fact and act of holy love on the Cross in history. That fact was the temporal manifestation of an eternal act in the Godhead, realised through the Incarnation, consummated in the Cross, ratified in the Resurrection and exaltation of the Redeemer, discovered by faith in the experience of salvation in the Church, and explicated in the Epistles as their authoritative expression and reflex in human thought. This passionately ethical keynote is shown to run through the whole gamut of Christian doctrine in all directions. The omnipotence of God, the absoluteness (finality) of Christ, His pre-existence, kenosis, and plerosis (or exalta-

¹ "A redemptive work is moral or nothing. A metaphysical Incarnation cannot lead to a moral atonement. If it was the mere possession of a divine nature and rank worthy to atone gave Jesus Christ this saving power, if it was not the moral quality of His action in the doing of it (either on earth or in Heaven before coming to earth), then His work as a moral atonement is bound to reduce the value of its practical effect if it do not turn it into an unreality" (*Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 235).

tion) are all viewed in the light of this illuminating principle. The self-consciousness of Christ, the apostolic witness, the testimony of the distinctive experience of believers both in the soul and the Church are all examined with a view to the illustration of the same principle, with a subtlety of insight and a breadth of treatment that are amazing in their thoroughness. In the second volume, the problem is handled with reference to the attitude of the "modern mind," both in its negative and sympathetic aspects, towards the Cross of Christ. The closing chapter gathers up the discussion into a more personal form, and is a fine expression of the writer's own faith. Holiness, judgment, and redemption are shown to be the keywords of the Christian Atonement; a holiness expressing itself in wrath against sin, in love for the sinner, in a sacrifice that at once brands sin in judgment and rescues the sinner in the grasp of a love that "will not let him go."

This thorough and synthetic treatment of the central doctrine of the Christian faith has its defects, partly arising from temperamental sources, and partly from a tantalising literary style, which, while brilliant in its occasional aptness of phrase, at times becomes obscure through the condensation of its thought, and is generally lacking in steady consecutive movement. These volumes are thus hard to read, and it is at times irritatingly difficult to follow a clear line of thought from page to page. The reader who perseveres will, however, be amply rewarded for his pains. For he comes here into intimate contact with a thinker who has his own way of expressing himself because he is not so much explicating an abstract subject as expressing a faith which has been enriched from many sources, but chiefly by its own intense experience of the truth he would communicate. There are books which are the outcome of a wide erudition and little more; there are others which are the

issue of long meditation and of independent thought ; there are others that are the literary expression of a man's own passion and agony and spiritual deliverance. In these volumes we have the fruit of all these three impulses ; and their best quality is that they are the work of a mind which, while sensitive to all the delicate currents of modern life, has found its final resting-place where " beyond these voices there is peace." They are therefore books not only to read, but to master and to assimilate. If to these two books is added a careful study of Dr. Denney's great work on *Jesus and the Gospels*, the exegetical and dogmatic aspects of the Person and work of Christ will be mastered in such a way that will leave little to be desired in the equipment of the young preacher for his work.

E. GRIFFITH-JONES.

*HISTORICAL COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST
EPISTLE TO TIMOTHY.*

XXIII. ADVICE TO TIMOTHY ON THE CONDUCT AND SPIRIT
OF HIS WORK.

THIS letter contains not merely much advice to Timothy as to what he should do and what sort of teaching he should give, but also counsel as to the manner and spirit in which he should perform his duties in the Church of Ephesus. The second kind of advice is quite as important as the first, and it is never far away from Paul's mind as he writes. It lurks in, or is at points quite plain in, almost every paragraph ; but in iv. 6-16 it is specially clear. To do his work is for Timothy not merely the way of usefulness, but also the way of salvation. He must have the knowledge of what is right to teach ; education, insight, some philosophic aptitude, are good, and in a certain degree indispensable for one in such a position, who had to meet those