



## P.T. Forsyth, ‘the Positive Gospel’, and the Church

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### Abstract

The Congregationalist theologian P.T. Forsyth urgently implored the Church to attend to what he termed ‘the Positive Gospel’. The positive gospel was a gospel of finality, looked to the cross as God’s holy judgement on the wreck of sin, and viewed the work of Jesus as an incursion into human life rather than a placid evolution from within. A robust understanding of the Church and its ministry flourished or withered in proportion to its *concentration* on this gospel. A church which skipped past the positive gospel would find that it was exercising a ministry of impression rather than regeneration. On the other hand, a church sustained by the positive gospel would carry out its vocation with a healthy combination of decisiveness and liveness. There is much of value in Forsyth’s porous understanding of the relationship between the positive gospel and the Church, but lurking in Forsyth’s language is the lure to neglect the embodied reality of the Church and its ministry.

### Keywords

church unity, cross, preaching, salvation, P.T. Forsyth

### Introduction

‘The Church’, P.T. Forsyth boldly said, ‘is the greatest and finest product of human history; because it is not really a product of human history, but the product of the Holy Spirit within history’.<sup>1</sup> If the Congregationalist

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<sup>1</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1946 [1910]), p. 5. When Forsyth speaks of ‘the Church’ he nearly always means the Church catholic, and not the Congregational Church.

theologian, P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921) advanced a high theology of the Church this was a product of his attention to the gospel. Forsyth's theology is a robust ecclesial theology, both in the sense that what he wrote was directed to the Church and in the sense that he was anxious that the Church should better understand its status, location, and role in the divine economy. If we are to understand the inter-relationship between Forsyth's grasp of what he termed 'the Positive Gospel' and his thinking on the Church, it will first be necessary to say something about this gospel. Armed with some awareness of Forsyth's permanent preoccupation, I will then investigate Forsyth's contribution to ecclesiological thinking and his location of preaching as an instrument of salvation. This article will conclude by advancing that Forsyth's ecclesiology has within it a temptation we should resist.

### **P.T. Forsyth and the Positive Gospel**

Forsyth's re-direction from being a 'lover of love' to an 'object of grace' was an orientation towards the aforementioned positive gospel.<sup>2</sup> Where orthodoxy believes that assent to certain truths is necessary for salvation and liberalism 'grounds faith on general...sympathies native to man but roused by Christ',<sup>3</sup> a positive gospel looks to the commerce between the objective cross and the redeemed conscience. The positive gospel was 'not merely a gospel of definite truth but of decisive reality, not of clear belief but of crucial action at an historic point'.<sup>4</sup> Such a gospel stood alongside the apostles in their gazing on Christ not as the incarnation of the best of humanity, but the worst,<sup>5</sup> emphasising not the repose of the Word made flesh, but the holy love triumphant over sin in the life – and especially the cross – of Christ. A gospel of incarnation was in danger of neglecting the invasive aspect of Christ, viewing him as a mere 'node' in an optimistic evolution of humanity.<sup>6</sup> Forsyth thus

<sup>2</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998 [1907]), p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ. V: Moral Finality and Certainty in the Holiness of the Cross', *Expositor* 8th Series, 10 (1915), pp. 340-64 (p. 342).

<sup>4</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'The Need for a Positive Gospel', *London Quarterly Review* 101 (1904), pp. 64-99 (pp. 70-71).

<sup>5</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'A Holy Church the Moral Guide of Society', in *The Church, the Gospel and Society* (London: Independent Press, 1962), pp. 5-64 (p. 24).

<sup>6</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross* (London: Independent Press, 1948 [1909]), p. 33.

directed attention away from sentimental or anthropomorphised notions of fatherly love and towards the holy love of God, evident in Jesus Christ's commitment to the holiness of God. Christ's work – the act of God in Christ – is not the sanctification of spiritual resources brewing within humanity, but rather a lively moral conquest over all that despoiled humanity's relationship with God.

How does Christian agency fit in with this positive gospel? Christians, Forsyth asserts, are to look not to 'the sacrifice we make, but the sacrifice we trust; not the victory we win, but the victory we inherit'.<sup>7</sup> In the bid to concern themselves with social affairs it is too easy for the Church to skip past that which the gospel announces as decisively achieved by God in Christ. Polemically ranged against those who would see the cross as an imitable sacrifice and those who would see Christ as their co-worker, a positive gospel prioritised the cross as regenerative, emphasising that 'while Christianity was indeed given us to realize the development of our powers, it was quite as much to combat them and build goodness on their failure. Its first and deepest connexion is with our broken and ruined nature'.<sup>8</sup>

## The Positive Gospel and the Church

The positive gospel pointing, above all, to the action of God for humanity, it is not surprising that Forsyth strongly emphasises that the Church is a creature of the preached gospel. God's decisive action - the gospel - is what 'launched' the Church and keeps it buoyant.<sup>9</sup> Warning against the 'fatal transfer of the centre of gravity from an objective gospel to a subjective piety',<sup>10</sup> Forsyth looks to the gospel as something that descends on the Church, rather than something that swells up from within its atmosphere. The Church is holy because it has been called into being by God. 'A mere fraternal atmosphere, a religion of brotherhood ... can only make a club or a fraternity',<sup>11</sup> Forsyth insists.

<sup>7</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God: Lectures for Wartime on a Christian Theodicy* (London: Latimer House, 1948 [1916]), p. 220.

<sup>8</sup> Forsyth, 'Positive Gospel', p. 68.

<sup>9</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'Church, Ministry and Sacraments', in *The Validity of the Congregational Ministry*, with J.V. Bartlet and J.D. Jones (London: Congregational Union of England and Wales, 1916), pp. 33-52 (p. 34).

<sup>10</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Forsyth, 'Church, Ministry and Sacraments', p. 42.

A religious glow and a swelling of human sympathies cannot found a lasting and authoritative Church. The Church is founded by a certainty, not the maturing of pious sentiments.<sup>12</sup> Equally, what Forsyth identifies as Roman Catholic notions of the Church as the prolongation of the incarnation eclipse notions of the Church as the ‘product’ of the incarnation.<sup>13</sup> If salvation is not the maturing of pious sentiments, then neither too is the Church to be understood along the lines of some stately process of salvation. Doctrines of the Church which extrapolate from the incarnation – rather than the cross – end up in ‘ecclesiastical pantheism’.<sup>14</sup> Salvation, Forsyth insists, isn’t processional but erupts from a decisive action and definite crisis. Equally the Church isn’t a new stage on humanity’s career of ‘spiritual development’,<sup>15</sup> but a creature and response to the atoning action of Christ. In the background here is Forsyth’s oft-stated preference for the active work of Christ, rather than a quiescent incarnation allied to grace as infused. The Church is a community springing not from the repose of the incarnation, but the recuperative work of God in Christ on the cross. Any confusion of the incarnation and the being of the Church is liable to forget that ‘that which owes itself to a rebirth cannot be a prolongation of the ever sinless’.<sup>16</sup>

Attention to the gospel’s primacy in founding the Church meant that there could be no understanding of the Church as a voluntary association. An individual sincerely regenerated by the gospel had no other option *but to join* the fellowship of the faithful.<sup>17</sup> A Christian cannot be regenerated by the gospel, progress along a certain distance and *then* feel a yearning for fellowship – the very act of faith draws one into communion with other believers.<sup>18</sup> Fellowship, it needs to be said again, is not that which makes the Church: it is what Christ did that creates a community of the redeemed. Membership of a Church is,

<sup>12</sup> P.T. Forsyth, ‘Religion, Private and Public’, *London Quarterly Review* 131 (1919), pp. 19–32 (p. 29).

<sup>13</sup> Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> P.T. Forsyth as reported in W. Sanday (ed.), *Priesthood and Sacrifice: Report of a Conference* (London: Longmans, 1900), p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> P.T. Forsyth, ‘Does the Church Prolong the Incarnation?’, *London Quarterly Review* 133 (1920), pp. 204–12 (p. 205).

<sup>16</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Independent Press, 1953 [1917]), p. 83.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Sykes, ‘P.T. Forsyth on the Church’, in Trevor Hart (ed.), *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of P.T. Forsyth* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, pp. 43–44.

nevertheless, an outward expression of something that is true as soon as faith claims us – to believe is to be united to the Church.<sup>19</sup> ‘No man can fully believe in Christ who refuses association with some Christian community... Faith is not the act of an atom to an atom. It is the act of a social unit towards One who is the unity of His society’.<sup>20</sup>

Forsyth held to this high doctrine of the Church without succumbing, as he would see it, to institutionalism.<sup>21</sup> Believers were saved *into* the Church, but not *by* the Church. Whilst the Church was the inescapable correlate of the gospel, salvation was of the gospel alone. ‘The Church’, Forsyth insisted, ‘is not the object of faith but only its home. It does not produce faith, but it is the home where faith is born and brought up’.<sup>22</sup>

Forsyth was acutely aware of the charge that could be levelled against his own denomination of Congregationalism – that it is perennially fissiparous, friable, and entrenches a ‘consecration of individual independence’.<sup>23</sup> Free Churches had to be led away from the ‘excess and abuse’ of liberty and be reminded that their freedom is not free-wheeling: their charter is the gospel.<sup>24</sup> The Church’s indestructible mustering point is the apostolic *kerygma* – the regenerative proclamation of what God has done in the gospel. ‘No Word, no Church’, is how Forsyth understands the importance of this foundation in four words.<sup>25</sup> In typically lively language Forsyth spoke of what happens to churches that forget that their freedom is not innate to it, but marshalled by the gospel, ‘we can but end in wreck if we have more wind in our sails than ballast in our hold, more passion than pilotage, and more way upon us than steering power’.<sup>26</sup> The Church with this correct grasp of its liberty rests not on truth as a body of knowledge deposited for its safekeeping but rather on the decisive action of God. Freedom shaped all along the line by the ‘spiritual

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<sup>19</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *The Charter of the Church: Six Lectures on the Spiritual Principle of Nonconformity* (London: Alexander and Shephard, 1896), p. 45.

<sup>20</sup>) Forsyth, *Charter of the Church*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction: Four Lectures on the Religious Situation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), pp. 92–93.

<sup>22</sup>) Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 143.

<sup>23</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, ‘Congregationalism and the Principle of Liberty’, *Constructive Quarterly* 1 (1913), pp. 498–521 (p. 498).

<sup>24</sup>) Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup>) Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912), pp. 174–75.

logic' of the gospel evinces the decisiveness of a 'positive core' and the litness of a 'flexible casing'.<sup>27</sup>

It is no coincidence that the largest book that Forsyth penned was his 1913 volume, *The Principle of Authority*. Again and again in this volume, Forsyth reinforces that obedience and authority are more important notes for the Church to sound than liberty.<sup>28</sup> The gospel is not a charter for free thought, but a mastery and command of our souls. Lest Free Churches were to become the prey of models of liberty forged outside the Church their first attention must be to that specific authority donated to the Church. Inseparable from Forsyth's thought here is the insistence that the Church is created by the gospel: a church with a proper grasp of this would properly grade its liberty. Although authority and liberty were inseparable - the Church suffered if either was allowed to wander from one another - the direction was heavily tilted in the direction of authority. The persistent refrain of the Church is obedience to an authority.<sup>29</sup> Christian faith has its genesis in obedience to the gospel from which the peculiar Christian freedom develops by its own logic.<sup>30</sup> It was therefore imperative to define liberty in distinction from secular understandings; religious liberty sprang from the very nature of religious authority.<sup>31</sup> It is necessary, Forsyth implores, for individuals to move *beyond* the claim, 'I am certain' to concentration on the actual ground of certainty. A church is not first an association of individuals possessing a certainty, but primarily a community where each is personally claimed by a decisive gospel. The more the Church focuses on this certainty on which it is grounded the greater will the Church's realisation be that the object of its certitude 'is not in us. It is of grace'.<sup>32</sup> Attending to the graceful nature of the Church's authority re-orders the liberalism whose charter is little more than a spirit of 'free inquiry' and discovery. Liberty shaped by the positive gospel 'is given, or it is nothing.

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<sup>27</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'The Evangelical Basis of Free Churchism', *Contemporary Review* 81 (1902), pp. 680-95 (p. 682); P.T. Forsyth, 'Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, Heresy, and Freedom', *Hibbert Journal* 8 (1910), pp. 321-29 (p. 322).

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 374, 'We are saved into an obedience before we are saved into a liberty'.

<sup>29</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 290, 'to put liberty, which is a secondary matter, before authority, which is primary and fontal even for liberty itself, is to confess a sect and not a Church'.

<sup>30</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 211.

<sup>31</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 82.

The genius of it is specific, exclusive, and even monopolist. It is not at its core eclectic, compromising, broad in the vague sense'.<sup>33</sup>

Spiritual freedom is not a synonym for spiritual anarchy and the Church's native freedom has nothing to do with 'the rights of man'. The Reformation rescued salvation from a transaction between believers and the Church as an institution, re-instating a personal, *not* individual, relationship between believers and Christ, and especially his cross.<sup>34</sup> Evangelical freedom does not prioritise the freedom of the unredeemed, individual conscience but advances the conscience held sway by the risen and ruling Christ which it is '*not possible*' to understand on individualist lines, '[t]he soul. ... is free only in a society of the saved. It is free only through an act which by its very nature creates a society. ... the same act which redeems the individual to a freedom creates a Church'.<sup>35</sup>

If gospel-shaped freedom was not individual, but could only be realised in a community, then equally the business of the Church was not the consecration of individual autonomy. The Reformation was not a movement of individualism, as if we were all isolated centres of authority for the claims of religion. The principle of the Reformation was personalism, which 'has submission to authority in its very being, since it owes itself and everything to absolute grace, and. ... has a church lying, inevitable, in its very nature, because it means union with him whose presence dissolves egoism in a common salvation'.<sup>36</sup> Or, put boldly, 'Christ, as it were, put us into the eternal Church'.<sup>37</sup> The Church must keep distinct therefore the personal claim which Jesus Christ makes on us and the individualism where everyone becomes their own arbiter. In this regard it is interesting that Forsyth rarely deployed the phrase, 'priesthood of all believers',<sup>38</sup> preferring instead to speak of the collective Church *as a priesthood*.<sup>39</sup> 'The Church. ... is God's corporate priest in the

<sup>33</sup>) Forsyth, 'Positive Gospel', p. 76.

<sup>34</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, 'Unity and Theology: A Liberal Evangelicalism the True Catholicism', in *Towards Reunion: Being Contributions to Mutual Understanding by Church of England and Free Church Writers* (London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 51-81 (p. 81).

<sup>35</sup>) Forsyth, 'Congregationalism and the Principle of Liberty', p. 513 (emphasis added).

<sup>36</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, 'Faith, Metaphysic, and Incarnation', *Methodist Review* 97 (1915), pp. 696-719 (p. 700).

<sup>37</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1946 [1910]), p. 87.

<sup>38</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion: Two Lectures* (London: Independent Press, 1952), p. 33, is one of the few places where Forsyth uses this phrase.

<sup>39</sup>) Forsyth, *Rome, Reform and Reaction*, p. 214.

world. ... By Christ's grace it believes for the world, it confesses vicariously sins the world is too sinful to confess, it offers itself as a sacrifice for the world, it praises God for the world, it stands and acts between sinful man and holy God'.<sup>40</sup>

Such a view of the Church's corporate ministry was linked to Forsyth's perspective on salvation which we have already seen. Granular accounts of the Church as a mere 'concourse of atoms' marked the reaping of individualist theories of salvation.<sup>41</sup> For Forsyth, salvation is never a 'private bargain' between individuals and God,<sup>42</sup> but is solidary, a reality expressed by the very nature and office of the Church. 'We are created, redeemed, judged as members of a race or of a Church. Salvation is personal, but it is not individual. It is personal in its appropriation but collective in its nature'.<sup>43</sup>

If the liberty of the Church was not an extrapolation from the vocabulary of emancipation, then neither too was the polity and governance of the Church (here, presumably, Forsyth's attention is restricted to Congregationalism) to be understood along democratic lines. Indeed, to conceive the Church so was to succumb to a new form of Erastianism.<sup>44</sup> Those who understand the Church along parliamentary lines evince more faith in the idea of the State, then they do the unique charter of the Church.<sup>45</sup> The Church wasn't a religious association which gauged opinions and voted on matters religious and spiritual and Congregationalism wasn't democracy with a religious hue.<sup>46</sup> Whilst 'democracy will acknowledge no authority but what it creates', a church 'has no authority but what creates it'.<sup>47</sup> Whereas a democracy merely creates an authority, the Church is uniquely *created by* an authority. In democracy, authority is utilitarian and essentially rootless, in the Church authority is donated and fontal. Faith demands obedience and submission which citizens of a democracy give but grudgingly. The Church is thus best seen as a *theocracy*: in the midst of a church meeting stands one to whom 'our conscience has neither rights nor merits'.<sup>48</sup> Christ did not therefore found the Church, wind

<sup>40</sup> Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 243.

<sup>42</sup> Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, p. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, p. 119.

<sup>44</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 9.

<sup>45</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 246.

<sup>46</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'Dr Dale', *London Quarterly Review* 91 (1899), pp. 193-222 (pp. 207-08).

<sup>47</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 118.

<sup>48</sup> P.T. Forsyth, 'The Grace of the Gospel as the Moral Authority in the Church', in *Church, the Gospel and Society*, pp. 65-127 (p. 73).



it up and release it into time, as it were, but abides in it as its permanent tenant. The Church which understood that it was ruled by the present Christ would see their ministers not as delegates of members' views, nor as chairmen, but 'sacramental elements, broken often, in the Lord's hands, as He dispenses His grace through us'.<sup>49</sup>

Discussion of the Congregational Church's polity provides a fitting link with Forsyth's perspective on inter-denominational relationships. Forsyth was candid that Congregationalism could not assert that its polity was the only form of Church government validated by the New Testament.<sup>50</sup> If Congregationalism did not hold the monopoly over Church government union with episcopal churches would not be inconceivable: unity was not a matter of creating a uniform polity.<sup>51</sup> Those who thought that Christianity is a religion of polity exalted church organisation above the gospel which created the Church and to which the Church was ultimately responsible.<sup>52</sup> Polity is instrumental and ministerial, not fixed and magisterial.<sup>53</sup> 'If unity is in polity Christ died in vain', Forsyth pronounces.<sup>54</sup> The flipside of this is that recognition would have to be mutual. The Church of England could not assert that its polity was the exclusive guarantor of apostolicity. Apostolicity wasn't conveyed through ordination or an institution, but by the Church's adherence to the gospel. Succession was evangelical, not canonical.<sup>55</sup>

Attention to this evangelical centre supplies the correct posture towards ecumenical relations. Union across churches isn't a matter of mutual sympathies or a uniform polity but a coming together of consciences redeemed by the same action, a mutual attention not to 'a common experience but a common revelation'.<sup>56</sup> The 'only condition of Church union' is the Church rallying around its dogmatic centre of gravity - as expressed in such germinal statements

<sup>49</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998 [1916]), p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, p. 63.

<sup>51</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 68, 'The unity of the Church is purely supernatural and is an object of faith - it is not a matter of organisation, it is not any polity, even the Congregational'.

<sup>52</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 246, 'the procedure or polity of a church, its form, is indifferent for faith ... there is but one test for the machinery or action of any church; and that is its power. ... to confess, serve, and promote the Gospel which gave the Church birth'.

<sup>53</sup> Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>54</sup> Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, p. 21.

<sup>55</sup> Forsyth, 'Unity and Theology', p. 63.

<sup>56</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *P.T. Forsyth: Prophet for Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), p. 163.

as 2 Corinthians 5:19.<sup>57</sup> The same gospel which founded the Church must now be looked to as the Church's indestructible point of unity. Such union would express itself in federal form,<sup>58</sup> with a variety of polities at work. Viewing ecumenical relations through the lenses of the gospel Forsyth poured scorn on those who saw ecumenical relations a matter of utility rather than a sincere reconciliation across divisions, signalling that inter-denominational co-operation must come about because we are more 'ruled by a faith of power than by a fear of fizzling out'.<sup>59</sup> Inter-denominational relations, Forsyth avers, can be rushed or confused with bustle and affinity: the unity that endures arises only from a moral process resting 'on an objective basis'.<sup>60</sup>

### The Positive Gospel and Preaching

Forsyth's theological output was to a large extent energised by what he saw as a contemporary malaise in preaching. If Forsyth's commentators have seen him as 'the preacher's theologian' this is only an echo of Forsyth's deep concern that '[i]t is doubtful if anywhere so much ability is going to seed as in the pulpit, if so much toil, ingenuity, intelligence, and feeling are being wasted anywhere as in the thousands of sermons that go their drawers as to their last cradle and long home'.<sup>61</sup> It is little surprise therefore to find Forsyth launching his Yale lectures on preaching with the pronouncement that, '[w]ith its preaching, Christianity stands or falls'.<sup>62</sup> Forsyth diagnosed two types of preaching active in the Church: the preaching of impression and the preaching of regeneration.<sup>63</sup> There were a number of problems with the preaching of impression.

First, preaching of impression was evanescent. It did not decisively turn its hearers around, but merely stoked the spiritual embers smouldering within. Faith is fleeting when sustained by our native sympathies, but perduring when it originates from obedience to the one who claims us.

Second, it reduced the Church to an association of spiritual seekers. Preaching a subjective gospel, rather than the completed, objective work of

<sup>57</sup>) Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, *The Christian Ethic of War* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999 [1916]), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup>) Forsyth, 'Church, Ministry and Sacraments', p. 34.

<sup>60</sup>) Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 105.

<sup>61</sup>) P.T. Forsyth, 'Veracity, Reality, and Regeneration', *London Quarterly Review* 123 (1915), pp. 193-216 (pp. 193-94).

<sup>62</sup>) Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup>) Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 62.

the gospel, a gospel of impression dissolves the Church ‘into a concourse of saintly atoms, not lighted by a common dawn, but visited with a sunrise for each’.<sup>64</sup> Only a preacher who pointed away from him or herself and towards the regenerative gospel could hope to communicate the common faith of the Church. To return to an earlier theme: the Church isn’t ‘a society for untrammelled spiritual research’ but a community *of necessity* created by the gospel.<sup>65</sup> Preachers of impression have succumbed to the notion of the Church which is more free than ruled, more a band of ‘inquirers’ than a society of ‘regenerates’,<sup>66</sup> and their speaking represents little more than their ‘self-assertion turned on moral or social subjects’.<sup>67</sup>

Third, preaching of impression appealed to our responsive feelings, rather than to the shattering and reconstruction of our consciences.<sup>68</sup> Whilst impression ‘may stir manhood’, regeneration ‘makes a new man of it’.<sup>69</sup> A gospel of impression presumes that ‘the way to reach a warm and steady revelation of God is to go deep into the interior of human nature’.<sup>70</sup> Such a rosy anthropology neglects that our religious feelings are a poor barometer for the re-creative work of the gospel;<sup>71</sup> in failing to fix on the *holiness* of God preachers of impression lack the resource that would expose and lay bare the reality and extent of human sin. So whereas impressionist preaching leaves its hearers affirmed the end of regenerative preaching must be that ‘it is not possible to hear the gospel and go away just as you came’.<sup>72</sup> Such preaching lays bare the extent of our sin *and* makes known the holiness of God in his graceful action on sin.<sup>73</sup> Preaching has more in common with sifting than confirmation; it is

<sup>64</sup> P.T. Forsyth, ‘Dr. Martineau’, *London Quarterly Review* 93 (1900), pp. 214–50 (p. 239).

<sup>65</sup> Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, p. 84.

<sup>66</sup> Forsyth, *Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 11–12.

<sup>67</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 271.

<sup>68</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 184, ‘The pulpit is doomed to futility if it appeal to the heart in any sense that discredits the final appeal to the conscience’.

<sup>69</sup> Forsyth, *Christian Ethic of War*, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> Forsyth, ‘Moral Authority in the Church’, p. 111.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 182, ‘The good man can never forgive himself. Conscience will give us sound footing up to a point, till it rouse the sense of the holy, and then it creates in us the passion for forgiveness as life’s one need’.

<sup>72</sup> Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> P.T. Forsyth, ‘The Pessimism of Mr Thomas Hardy’, *London Quarterly Review* 118 (1912), pp. 193–219, ‘We only grow in repentance as we grow in grace. Where grace abounds sin abounds. The worst of sin is only shown us as we look down on it from where the Saviour lifts us’ (p. 211).

a convicting energy before it is a reassuring energy. The ‘signs’ of a successful preacher are not a swelling church but resentment amongst her hearers as to the guilt which she has made space for the gospel to rouse. Only the Spirit turns our resentment at what preaching first exposes into gratitude at what preaching also makes known - the regeneration made available by God’s act in Christ.<sup>74</sup> Put simply, to understand Jesus’ words in John 16:33 (‘Take courage, I have overcome the world’), the preacher must first apprehend *what* God in Christ has overcome.

As an act which effectually prolongs the gospel into the congregation preachers ‘are adding to the judgement of some as well as to the salvation of others. We are not like speakers who present a matter that men can freely take or leave’.<sup>75</sup> The end of preaching, as I have said, is not the cultivation of our dispositions, but to make known that what makes God ‘most God is something whose deep need in us we do not know till His gift awake it’.<sup>76</sup> Lecturing to a group of ministers, Forsyth therefore made this important plea, ‘Do not tell people how they ought to feel towards Christ. That is useless. It is just what they ought that they cannot do. Preach a Christ that will make them feel as they ought. That is objective preaching’.<sup>77</sup>

Regenerative preachers therefore are preoccupied not with latent resources within their individual hearers, but the guilty conscience where the revolution of God’s act in Christ takes root.<sup>78</sup> Only preaching which impacts upon the conscience is sacramental. The responsibility of the preacher is accordingly to extend into their congregations the one event with the capacity to invade, master, and regenerate every guilty conscience: the action of the holy God in Christ made present through the Spirit.<sup>79</sup> Regenerative preaching is not about entertaining spectators, as in preaching of impression, but drawing participants into an action. There was, Forsyth insisted, a need to ‘rise above the idea that the preached Word of God is a mere message warmly told. It is a creative sacrament by the medium of a consecrated personality. ... the Word’s bearer is more than a herald; he is a hierophant from the holiest place’.<sup>80</sup> Forsyth was never shy of recognising that this was a dizzying vocation for the preacher to assume.

<sup>74</sup>) Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, p. 18.

<sup>75</sup>) Forsyth, *Soul of Prayer*, p. 72.

<sup>76</sup>) Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 38.

<sup>77</sup>) Forsyth, *Work of Christ*, p. 41.

<sup>78</sup>) Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 184.

<sup>79</sup>) Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 38.

<sup>80</sup>) Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 142.

The great appeal of Christianity, from which all else flows, is to the conscience, and, in the actual situation, to the sinful conscience. It is easy to make any assembly we may address cry with a few pathetic illustrations. ... But, to follow evil to its inmost cell, to track the holy to the heart of things, to touch the devious and elusive conscience of a world, to rouse, to renew it – that is hard.<sup>81</sup>

Such a high view of the preacher and the preaching-act was totally dependent upon the cross, not as a moral ideal, ‘but as a historic Act, as an objective deliverance and a subjective regeneration of man’.<sup>82</sup> Preaching this certainty is not a matter of being assured that in Jesus we have ‘an impressive revelation of a love stronger than death’, rather, ‘[w]e need to realise a love. ... engaged in the very act of destroying sin as holiness alone can do’.<sup>83</sup> Just as Jesus led a life orientated towards God so too is the preacher to rivet his or her concentration on the cross as ‘the great sermon in history. ... because, although addressed to men, it was far more offered to God’.<sup>84</sup> When Forsyth writes ‘as our Cross is, so will our Church be’,<sup>85</sup> he is not pointing to a ministry of imitation, but a ministry attentive to what Jesus on the cross has achieved in the moral sphere, a cross that built not upon our innate goodness but acted upon our actual guilt and our standing, as sinners, with God.

Preaching therefore has its base in the cross - if it was from the empty tomb that it was enlivened, it is from the cross implanted in the world that preaching is resourced. It is this action done that should be allowed to shape ‘the whole deep tone and form of the church’s word and action with the world’.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, as was noted above, the apostolic preaching of the cross was co-constitutive in the foundation of the Church.<sup>87</sup> The cross was therefore the act from which all subsequent preaching-acts were funded – the act of preaching lay in continuity with the fountal act on the cross. Preaching isn’t just something we say; it is an act through which Christ conveys himself through our words.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Forsyth, ‘The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ. V’, p. 347.

<sup>83</sup> Forsyth, ‘The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ. V’, p. 351.

<sup>84</sup> P.T. Forsyth, ‘The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ. VI: In what sense did Jesus Preach the Gospel?’, *Expositor* 8th Series, 10 (1915), pp. 445-65 (p. 455).

<sup>85</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 35.

<sup>87</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 87.

<sup>88</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 220.

It is the cross alone that has the sufficient range, finality, and decisiveness to prevent preaching degenerating into preaching styles which Forsyth urged retreat from: testimonials, entertainment, lectures, and flourishes of rhetoric.<sup>89</sup> Such styles impede the reality that God wills to act on us through the instrument of preaching. So too, in an age not short of pulpit personalities, was Forsyth suspicious of pulpits ruled by magnetic personalities.<sup>90</sup> Preaching is commanding neither because of the force of the preacher's personality, nor the delightful manner of his or her rhetoric, but by virtue of what is preached: the objective gospel which scorches humanity with a sense of its sin and assures its hearers of their redemption by the holy love of God. The ethos of a preacher was her convulsive encounter with the cross and a willingness to 'work less with his own personality than with the personality provided him in Christ, though Christ's work in him'.<sup>91</sup> Preachers unwilling to preach out of this regenerative reality present before their congregation 'the views of a mere groping individual, who, as such, has no more right to demand reverent and silent attention to opinions of his than any intelligent person he addresses'.<sup>92</sup>

The preacher is one who trusts in the freedom of the gospel more than her own innate freedom. On the question which vexes many preachers, namely the question of authority, Forsyth implores that certainty in the gospel is not a question of self-serving aggression. The preacher's certainty is never a confident *self*-certainty. Rather, 'certainty means certainty of *something* ... If I am certain, it does not really mean that I am certain of being certain ... The more we fix our attention on the object of our certitude, the more we humbly realize that it is something *given*'.<sup>93</sup> In other words, the certainty of faith is ostensive: it points not to ourselves, but to the object of certainty, a person, Christ. That is why, Forsyth states, 'we must preach Christ, and not about Christ; why we must set the actual constraining Christ before people, and not coax or bully people into decision. If we put the veritable Christ before them, He will rouse the faith before they know where they are'.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>89</sup>) For rhetoric see Forsyth, *Soul of Prayer*, p. 78.

<sup>90</sup>) See Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 231, 'Many preachers have come to idolise the gifts of the preacher more than the gifts of grace'.

<sup>91</sup>) Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 56.

<sup>92</sup>) Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>93</sup>) Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, pp. 81-82 (emphasis original).

<sup>94</sup>) Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 42. This is why Forsyth is also not keen on testimonial preaching: it has not moved on from faith's certainty (or even experience) to *the object of certainty* whose act is the common bond of the Church. Preaching of experience may illuminate the individual in the pulpit but it does little to prolong the common, objective

Such regenerative preaching was a firmly ecclesial act, hardly surprising given the themes hitherto explored. Precisely as an act of the Church, preaching had a responsibility not to answer ‘the call of the wild in the soul’s unexplored interior, but the call of the Grace that finds it’.<sup>95</sup> Preaching was properly not just the act of an individual, but was the act of the Church, its faithful response to the reverberation of the gospel in its company. ‘Preaching then is the Church confessing its faith. And it is as surely a part of the service as the reciting of a creed could be. It is another aspect of the same response to the Word given. It is less organised, but no less collective than the great creeds’.<sup>96</sup>

It was for this reason that Forsyth implored preachers, lest their preaching degenerate into a recounting of *their* faith and experience, to be trained in theological thinking, as a reminder of the ancient company they have entered into when they dare to speak of the gospel.<sup>97</sup> The preacher’s first charge is not to their inquisitiveness, but to the objective gospel of which theology is the corporate exposition. When Forsyth said that ‘the one great preacher in history. ... is the Church’ he understood this to refer not just to the present Church,<sup>98</sup> but the whole communion of the faithful, dead and living. It is from *the Church’s* pulpit (not his or hers) that the preacher extends the gospel, and preachers anxious to turn the pulpit into an arena for the airing of personal inquiries should be reminded that ‘[h]e is the Church’s organ rather than the Church his’.<sup>99</sup>

To be sure, preaching is not the Church chattering away to itself about its faith, merely ‘the Church calling to its own soul’.<sup>100</sup> Forsyth’s emphasis on the past and present Church reinforces that the preacher is resourced by something more than the Church’s present understanding. The Spirit ensures that the preacher speaks not just as the voice of her own time, but is enveloped by the seen and the unseen Church.<sup>101</sup> The veracity of the type of preaching Forsyth speaks of could only be possible through the activity of the Holy Spirit.<sup>102</sup> The effectiveness of preaching is the cross of Golgotha working on us

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gospel. It is a further manifestation of the detachment between the Spirit and the Word: see Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 347.

<sup>95</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 40.

<sup>96</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 62–63.

<sup>97</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 63.

<sup>98</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 49.

<sup>99</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 72.

<sup>100</sup> Forsyth, *Church and the Sacraments*, p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, p. 59.

<sup>102</sup> See John H. Rodgers, *The Theology of P.T. Forsyth: The Cross of Christ and the Revelation of God* (London: Independent Press), pp. 129–30.

through the Spirit's peculiar office of 'always changing Time into eternity, and turning the Christ into a real present'.<sup>103</sup> The Spirit mediates the immediacy of the historic cross,<sup>104</sup> destroys the passing of time,<sup>105</sup> and transforms impressive preaching into regenerative preaching. 'Sermons preached by a lover and venerator of Jesus can impress us for long; but they do not regenerate till the Word is taken out of the preacher's lips and spoken by a present Spirit, through whom he is far more than Christ's lover ... but an apostle'.<sup>106</sup>

### Conclusion: The Lure of the Positive Gospel

As far as possible I wanted to let P.T. Forsyth speak to us, before I speak back to him in grateful, if sometimes critical, response. To that task I now turn.

It is necessary to acknowledge the importance and resilience of Forsyth's thought. After reading Forsyth one is under no misapprehension as to the cruciality of the Church. His theology is a powerful reinforcement of why in the creed Christians confess their *belief* in the church – 'the church is God's creation, not our own'.<sup>107</sup> The effectiveness of the Church's ministry, Forsyth robustly reminds us, withers or flourishes in direct proportion to its attention to the cross. For Forsyth, God's act on the cross is not a doctrine to be respectfully tended and curated, but is always a convulsive and lively reality which convicts the world and sears the Church. Forsyth's enduring contribution to contemporary reflection on the Church and its mission reminds us of the inevitably interwoven nature of theological thinking and Christian praxis (how, for example, is the preaching of today a reflection of current thinking on the nature of the Church and salvation?) and provides us with a model of how theological reflection might flow from concentration on the gospel. Forsyth's

<sup>103</sup> Forsyth, *Justification of God*, p. 48.

<sup>104</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 316.

<sup>105</sup> Forsyth, *Principle of Authority*, p. 116. It needs to be said that Forsyth did not believe that the passing of time and Church history marked a descent and declension from any imagined 'purity' of the New Testament church. The Church's history is not an alienating reality, but a space through which the preacher may explore what the Church must say now. Indeed, to leap back over 2000 years and attempt to re-create the polity or morals of the New Testament would be to shun foolishly the accumulation of history through which the Church faces the future. See Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>106</sup> Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, p. 33.

<sup>107</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 9.



ecclesiology is a permanent reminder that we cannot speak of the Church adequately without speaking of such theological loci as Christ, sin, and salvation.

There is much that is obviously invigorating in Forsyth's ecclesiology. In a time when many fear that the Church's ministry has become disorientated in a fog of psychological subjectivity,<sup>108</sup> that the Church has lost its distinctiveness in its haste to be socially active,<sup>109</sup> that membership of the Church has been erroneously seen as just a consumerist choice,<sup>110</sup> or that the Church has lost the authoritative note of its preaching,<sup>111</sup> much of Forsyth's rhetoric and constructive proposals are remarkably prescient. The most uninteresting criticism we can therefore make in response to Forsyth is to dismiss his contribution as relevant only to his time. Demoting P.T. Forsyth to a historical curiosity simply fails to take seriously the extent to which he continues to be heard by many in the contemporary Church.<sup>112</sup> A much more fruitful line of response is to engage Forsyth's contribution seriously and raise some questions about the overdrawn emphases and under-developed aspects of his thought.

The lure of Forsyth's theology is to a large extent a result of his characteristic antinomies which protect us from one extreme but inhibit us from exploring other fruitful and legitimate lines of approach. Forsyth presents a determinedly theological depiction of the Church and its ministry but readers might be

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<sup>108</sup> See, for example, L. Gregory Jones, 'The Psychological Captivity of the Church in the United States', in C.E. Braaten and R.W. Jenson (eds.), *Either/Or: The Gospel or Neopaganism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 97-112. See also the sociological discussion of North American Presbyterian and Baptist preaching on the Prodigal Son in Marsha G. Witten, *All is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 130-32.

<sup>109</sup> I have in mind here Stanley Hauerwas' reaction against the 'social gospel'. See Stanley Hauerwas, 'The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretative Power of the Christian Story', in *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 89-110 (p. 90).

<sup>110</sup> Philip D. Kenneson, 'Selling [Out] the Church in the Marketplace of Desire', *Modern Theology* 9 (1993), pp. 319-48.

<sup>111</sup> For defences of the 'authority' of preaching, see Paul C. McGlasson, *Invitation to Dogmatic Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), pp. 147-80, and Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of Christ-Centred Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), pp. 61-79.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Alan P.F. Sell, 'Telling the Story: Then and Now', in S.F. Gibson (ed.), *Story Lines: Chapters on Thought, Word, and Deed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 146-56, and Alan P.F. Sell (ed.), *P.T. Forsyth: Theologian for a New Millennium* (London: United Reformed Church, 2000).

justified in asking whether they recognise the Church he is talking about. Does his ideal depiction do justice to the lived reality of the Church with all its failures, discord, and sin? In speaking of the Church as ‘holy’ does Forsyth pay enough attention to the Church as a *creaturely* reality taken up into the triune God’s sanctifying activity?<sup>113</sup> Forsyth’s theology in the indicative mood may not be helpful to a Church which believes itself to be, in the words of R.R. Reno, ‘in ruins’.<sup>114</sup> In this sense it is ironic that someone who was so alert to the tragedy of the life of Christ was so reticent about pondering on the tragedy of the Church.<sup>115</sup> Nicholas M. Healy’s diagnosis of much modern ecclesiology, that it has been focused upon ‘discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy ... body that the church actually is’ is strikingly pertinent to locating Forsyth’s ecclesiology.<sup>116</sup> In his imprecations against Roman Catholic notions of the Church as the incarnation’s extension, Forsyth charged that the Church is surely not sinless in the same manner as Christ. Ironically, however, Forsyth’s own presentation of the Church is one that seems ideal to the point that one wonders how it is part of the created order.

Forsyth’s concentration on the body that ‘the church actually is’ might have been aided by a greater concentration on the Holy Spirit, not just as an adjunct of regeneration (the constant focus of Forsyth’s attention),<sup>117</sup> but as a person with a distinctive ministry of sanctifying the Christian and his or her practices.<sup>118</sup> Linked to this is surely Forsyth’s characteristically punctiliar notion of grace, an emphasis which serves the language of regeneration better than it does the language of growth in the Christian life. Instructive here is Forsyth’s

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<sup>113</sup> My thoughts on the Church as holy have been stimulated by reflection on *Holy Scripture*, and the exposition of this attestation in John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 27–28.

<sup>114</sup> R.R. Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

<sup>115</sup> For tragedy as an aspect of Forsyth’s theology see George Hall, ‘Tragedy in the Theology of P.T. Forsyth’, in Hart (ed.), *Justice the True and Only Mercy*, pp. 77–104.

<sup>116</sup> Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>117</sup> I am drawing here upon the criticisms of Sykes, ‘P.T. Forsyth on the Church’, pp. 13–14, who argues that Forsyth’s redemption-centred ecclesiology, to the neglect of a trinitarian ecclesiology, leads him to neglect the Church’s location within the fallen and created order.

<sup>118</sup> I say ‘greater’ because although Forsyth talks rarely of Christian formation he does treat the topic of sanctification in the little volume, *Christian Perfection* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899).

robust scolding that the Church is no band of seeking disciples but a society of regenerate apostles. In the light of such flourishes one might ask whether this simply does justice to the reality of congregations in which many *would* speak of themselves as disciples on a journey of faith. Certainly, this notion seems to be more faithful to any church that wants to read itself into the gospel narratives (an observation which is linked to the oft-made criticism that Forsyth is insufficiently attentive to the life and ministry of Jesus). Forsyth offers little or no guidance for how the Church might imitate the story of the gospels - for Forsyth we are always at *the end* of the gospels. So rooted is Forsyth's thinking in the finality and decisiveness of salvation, with the consequent concentration on a realised eschatology, that he neglects the necessary emphasis that the Church's location 'is always provisional because not yet ended'.<sup>119</sup>

The criticism that Forsyth dislocates the Church from the reality of the world is allied to concerns about his presentation of preaching which, with its dismissal of the character and rhetoric of the preacher is at risk of supporting a 'homiletical Docetism'.<sup>120</sup> Forsyth's theology of preaching, taken to the extremes which *his* rhetoric invites, gives insufficient consideration to the proper role of the character of the preacher and his or her words in re-fashioning Christians. Forsyth's polemic lures us to see too many things in competitive relationship. The reality of Christian behaviour may, however, be a good deal more nuanced than his polemic allows for. If we were to turn away our attention from preaching as a punctiliar instrument of regeneration could we not also view preaching as a pastor's gradual re-inscribing of a congregation into the story of God's people as made known in Scripture? Is preaching not also an instrument of sanctification as well as regeneration, of formation as well as transformation? If the preacher is one who 'speaks into existence an alternative world',<sup>121</sup> are we not right to ponder on the role of the embedded nature of preaching in human words which we dare to believe portrays a different story than the world's? Preaching, in this key, may require skills and virtues which Forsyth's often shrill pronouncements occlude: patience, narrative attentiveness, and an awareness of the eschatological time of which the

<sup>119</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24.

<sup>120</sup> André Resner, *Preacher and Cross: Person and Message in Theology and Rhetoric* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 104.

Church is part. Such preaching may also require a base in churches whose Spirit-generated action indicate awareness that the Christian life is a slow, Spirit-led conformity of our lives with the life of Christ. The theological rigour of Forsyth's ecclesiology bears within it a temptation to neglect the Church's – sometimes faltering – practices of discipleship which are made possible in the time God has gifted.