

I

Preaching *Sub Specie Crucis*

An Introduction to the Preaching Ministry of P. T. Forsyth

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IT WAS NOT ALWAYS so, but even fewer sermons than poems today find a home in published form. This is not altogether to be lamented, for while the sermon manuscript may still speak, as it were, and while sermons continue to find extended voice via other media, the sermon itself remains an unrepeatable *event*. Such an avowal may appear a strange way to introduce a collection of “old” sermons, but the author of the forty-eight creations gathered in this volume would have insisted on no less a claim being made at the outset. He who once described preaching as “the Gospel prolonging and declaring itself” and as “a creative sacrament by the medium of a consecrated personality,” and the preacher as “a hierophant from the holiest place” and “a living oracle of God,”¹ knew well that the Word of God is ever a dynamic and free personality who, in the proclamation of the apostolic message, “makes and unmakes us,” who creates and “does not simply elicit” the power to answer him.² Clearly, the *event* of which I speak here is not an

1. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 1, 3; Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 142.

2. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, 80.

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event owned by history. Rather, it is the action of the living God upon and in history who, in the sheer freedom of his holy benediction and felicity, unveils to and for human persons. This is to give history its proper due, to take it seriously, to receive its offerings with thanksgiving, and to resist the temptation to make an idol out of its parts or personalities. Of course, a volume like the one in your hands seeks to bespeak something else about history too, and about God; namely, that societies or persons which ignore or abandon their heritage are societies or persons which have abandoned any soteriology that involves time. This is a particular problem for those who wish to claim any interest in God. “A people without history,” wrote T. S. Eliot in *Little Gidding*, “is not redeemed from time.”³ Eliot might properly be read here as saying, “To lose one’s history is to be condemned to an ‘unredeemed’ condition, to absolute bondage to the temporal process.”⁴ This is not to encourage a kind of gross nostalgia or veneration of persons. On the contrary, it is to confess that our ability or otherwise to be liberated from the ways in which the present and the imagined future might serve to ensnare us requires that we engage in an ongoing work of historical awareness. It is in part towards this end, to the end of not losing one’s history and so one’s self, that this book is directed. But only in part.

In his essay “On the Reading of Old Books,” C. S. Lewis gave voice to “a strange idea abroad that in every subject the ancient books should be read only by the professionals, and that the amateur should content himself with the modern books.” “This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shyness of the old ones,” he continued, “is nowhere more rampant than in theology.”⁵ Here Lewis encouraged his readers to maintain a balanced diet in their reading habits. We ‘moderns’ would do well to heed Lewis’ advice not only in overcoming our shyness for classic texts but also in reading contemporary work in light of and alongside those words which have stood the test of time, which help us to see and hear again—as if for the first time—the eternal truths upon which rest the heavens and the earths. I suspect that few, if any, readers of P. T. Forsyth (1848–1921) will require convincing of Lewis’ observation that the only palliative to the “characteristic blindness of the twentieth century . . . is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same

3. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, 58.

4. I am indebted to Rowan Williams for this point; see Williams, *Resurrection*, 30.

5. Lewis, “Introduction,” 3. Lewis’ essay, first published in 1944, was republished in Lewis, *God in The Dock*.

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mistakes . . . To be sure, the books of the future would be just as good a corrective as the books of the past, but unfortunately we cannot get at them.”⁶

To return to Forsyth, there can be little doubt that one of the real gifts that this great Congregationalist and Edwardian theologian bequeathed to the Church is the encouragement of her ministers to forego the “affable bustle”⁷ that would see them running errands for the culture motivated in no small part by an attempt to convince the world—and the Church!—of the use, value and worthiness of their vocation, and to instead give themselves wholly to echo and bear witness to divinely-ordained foolishness—what Forsyth calls “the Folly of the Cross”⁸—and to trust the outcome to God. Those who carry the burden—a joyous burden to be sure, but a burden nonetheless—of preaching week after week will no doubt be familiar with that anxiety that attends the sweat marks staining the manuscript, the fruit of one’s wrestling with the very impossible possibility of the preacher’s task⁹—which is nothing less than witness to and confession of God’s self-disclosure—of addressing those not only desperate to hear the Word of life but also those long deafened by the drums of seemingly endless counter-words, that feeling that despite all one’s best efforts the fire that burns so freshly in the heart of the biblical witness has all but been snuffed out by the time the sermon is made public. Such an experience is not uncommon among ministers; nor is the quest for some trustworthy guides. The pulpit is a demanding mistress!

A generation after Douglas Horton discovered Karl Barth’s *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* in the library of the Harvard Divinity School and in Barth’s “strange new world” a potent alternative to the dehydrated humanism in which he had been trained, Browne Barr, who later taught homiletics at Yale, made a similar discovery in 1944 when, as a green minister in a recently-vacated parsonage he found himself among old-looking and left behind books which lined the study walls where the “practice pulpit set up by his predecessor . . . faced the street.”¹⁰ He reasoned:

The church was in such poor shape—no worship center, no 16mm projector, no personality games in the youth society or new signs

6. Ibid., 5.

7. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, 119.

8. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church*, 338; see also Forsyth, “The Foolishness of Preaching,” 153–54.

9. As articulated so powerfully by Karl Barth in “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” and “The Word of God and the Task of the Ministry”; and by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Spiritual Care*, 85–86.

10. Barr, “P. T. Forsyth: The Preachers’ Theologian,” 37.

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on the front lawn—because the old minister, the stricken one, was a Britisher who simply was not up-to-date, modern. It was obvious he did not understand American needs nor use contemporary methods. There wasn't a single flannel cloth board in the whole church or parsonage, but he certainly had a lot of books! The young man glanced at the titles and his eye fell on one about "preaching" and the "modern mind." He picked it up and flipped a few pages into it . . . He remained there transfixed for a long time . . . He read until darkness and cold woke him to the hours' passing. He tucked that single volume under his arm and went down out of the attic and through the cold house and into the street. He had found the place where he was to study and practice to be a preacher for the next years of his life. He had also found the man, then dead 23 years, who was to be his instructor.¹¹

The cause of the hypnosis was Forsyth's *Positive Preaching and [the] Modern Mind*. In many ways the origin of the book in your hands lies in a similar experience (or, more accurately, in a series of such experiences) in myself half a century and more since Barr's encounter with "the homiletician's theologian."¹² While sitting at a Melbourne bus stop some years before I entered pastoral ministry, the last bus for the evening had long departed before I looked up from my first reading of Forsyth's *The Justification of God*. During those late hours, I was given to see myself as one having been carried into the very crisis where God and the world meet. There was something arresting, too, about Forsyth's style. It seemed to simultaneously bear witness to the elusive nature of divine truth and to open up that space which had been cleared and invite—nay, command—me to enter, or, better still, to find myself already in, the new landscape created by the crisis, the view of and from which was entirely unexpected. Moreover, as I came to learn, this landscape, satiated as it is with the occupation of holy love, rendered hollow and disenchanting much of what my reading of theology had taught me, and what my own arrogance had assured me, and underlined the impotence of all creaturely aspirations, including and perhaps especially religion, to speak to the real issues facing human persons, their consciences and their communities. Here, I was confronted with a Word that one could live by with the honesty and integrity that being human demands, a Word which faced the world and not only a select minority within it living, as it were, in an ark, a Word destined to be made public to those living in the cynicism and despondency of the time, and of all times.

11. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

12. *Ibid.*, 38.

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Words from Czesław Miłosz come readily to mind: “I have read many books but I don’t believe them/When it hurts we return to the banks of certain rivers.”¹³ One of those banks is called “reading P. T. Forsyth.” On that bank, I experienced not only a dying but also a resurrection, a resurrection into a new and still largely-unsurveyed world wherein everything and every one—including God—is viewed *sub specie crucis*; that is, under the vista or form of the cross. Forsyth’s thought, drenched as it is in the cruciality of God, came as a lifeline, even as something like a sacrament or as medicine which charged life itself with the Spirit who makes life life, with the Son who is the living content of God’s own good news and who experienced in a divine life our death “unsustained by any sense of the grandeur and sublimity of the situation,”¹⁴ and with the Father who in all the jealousy and joy of holy love transforms “bold and bitter”¹⁵ mutineers into the delighted and forgiven children of God who “in their living centre and chronic movement of the soul experience sonship as the very tune of their heart, the fashion and livery of their will,”¹⁶ and which cleared for me a way which bespoke of realities I can do little more than point to regarding the task of Christian ministry into which I was being called. Reading Forsyth, I also came to believe in preaching, and to keep on preaching when the content of my speech finds so little echo in the shape of my own living, or when my spirit is as dry as the Simpson Desert, or when it is soaking wet but off course and perilously close to the rocks, or when in darkness so overwhelming that escape seems impossible, and when, like Maurice Gee’s Reverend George Plumb, I make “loud noises to persuade back my memories.”¹⁷

To be sure, to believe in preaching is to believe in miracles; or, more properly, it is to believe in One who not only already longs to speak but who also “gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist” (Romans 4:17). Moreover, to believe in preaching is to believe that such calling into existence occurs via the irresponsible method of liberally sowing seeds whether in places where there is no soil, or on rocky ground, or among thorns, or in fertile and productive soil. Of course, to believe in preaching is not the same thing as to believe in preachers. Forsyth too taught me that, and enabled me to hear what I later learnt and heard again in Barth and in others—that “the Church does not live by its

13. Miłosz, “I Sleep a Lot,” 178.

14. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, 57.

15. *Ibid.*, 9.

16. *Ibid.*, 6.

17. Gee, *Plumb*, 218.

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preachers, but by its Word.”¹⁸ To those who so believe—or who wish to believe in such things in spite of all appearances—I hope that the words of Forsyth contained in this volume might come as an encouragement. As John Huxtable describes the testimony of not a few preachers, “a few pages of [Forsyth’s] work recharges that battery as little else.”¹⁹

In this introductory chapter, I consider some of the background to the material presented in this volume, and offer some comment on Forsyth’s somewhat-enigmatic style. But first, it would be helpful, I think, to briefly introduce Forsyth, to ask what place preaching occupied in his tradition and theology, to enquire as to what Forsyth understood by preaching, its *raison d’être* and its relationship to more conventional forms of systematic theology, and also to express something of how, for Forsyth, the pulpit belongs to the Church in a way that the platform never can.

Peter Taylor Forsyth, the first of five children, was born on 12 May 1848 at 100 Chapel Street, Aberdeen, and was baptised the same year by the Rev. W. Grant at the Blackfriars Street Congregational Church. Peter’s father, Isaac, was a merchant, church deacon, book courier, bibliophile, and postman who earned eleven shillings a week, and his mother, Elspet McPherson, was a Gaelic-speaking crofter’s daughter who was born and raised on the foothills of the Cairngorm and Monadhliath ranges in Kingussie, the capital of the Highland district of Bàideanach, a region better known today for its Speyside waters of life. After a nine-year engagement, Isaac and Elspet were married in June 1847 in Old Machar, a coastal parish some four miles north of Aberdeen, by the minister of Blackfriars Church, the Rev. George Thompson. Elspet was employed as a housekeeper to Peter Taylor, a well-to-do retired shoemaker, a devout and public-spirited citizen of Aberdeen, and one of the founding members of the old Blackfriars Church. In 1851, the Forsyth family moved to Marischal Street, Aberdeen (near the docks), and they began to take in boarders to help make ends meet.

18. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 41.

19. Huxtable, “Forsyth,” 77. Such an assessment is echoed by, for example, Edgar DeWitt Jones who, in 1951, set about surveying the first eighty years of Yale’s Beecher Lectures on Preaching (a series which by then had occupied such renowned names as Phillips Brooks, R. W. Dale, George A. Buttrick, H. H. Farmer, and W. H. Auden), and noted of Forsyth’s lectures—which were “one of the fattest, physically, in the Series”—the following: “In talking with scores of ministers about the Lyman Beecher Lectures, I found without exception that those whose opinions are most highly valued, rated Forsyth’s series at Yale as unrivaled of their kind, and a ‘must’ book for alert, studious preachers everywhere. This is superlative praise, for these distinguished preacher-scholars also rated highly the Lectures [*sic*] of Andrew M. Fairbairn, George Adam Smith, and Reinhold Niebuhr, in the same series.” Jones, *The Royalty of the Pulpit*, 128, 134.

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In 1853, Peter began his formal education at the local parish school, and in 1859 he entered Aberdeen Grammar School where he was dux in 1864. In October that same year, Forsyth entered the annual Bursary Competition at Aberdeen University and was placed twenty-first in a class of 204, thereby winning a Cargill Bursary (£20 per year for four years). Between 1864 and 1869, Forsyth excelled in his undergraduate studies (in Latin, Greek, English, Mathematics, Natural History, Natural Philosophy, Logic, Chemistry, Natural Philosophy, and Moral Philosophy), and took prizes in Greek, Humanities, English and the “Special Prize for Excellence in Latin Composition, Prose and Verse.” It was during this time that illness began to affect his plans; he was unable to complete his third year, for example. It was probably also during this period that he was first introduced to the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Immanuel Kant, two of the thunderous voices with which he would tussle for the remainder of his life.

After his graduation with an MA with first-class honours in Classical Literature in 1869, Forsyth came under the influence of John Hunter (b. 1848) with whom, probably during 1870 or 1871, he sought to resuscitate the recently-closed Congregational Chapel in Dee Street, Aberdeen. During these years, he first tried his hand at teaching, as a private tutor to the family of Patrick Davidson of Inchmarlo, and, during the 1871–72 academic year, as Assistant to Professor John Black, the teacher of Latin at Aberdeen University. He may well have continued along this path were it not for a call to ordination. And so, at the close of the academic session in 1872, and at the urging of W. Robertson Smith, Forsyth spent a semester with Albrecht Ritschl and Carl Stumpf in Göttingen (a familiar destination for young Nonconformist theological students at the time). Ritschl’s impact on Forsyth’s thought was brobdingnagian and abiding, and in not a few ways survived the departure with “Ritschlianism” which escorted Forsyth’s famed theological turn in the late 1880s “from a Christian to a believer, from a lover of love to an object of grace,”²⁰ a turn which was perhaps most public in the publication, in 1891, of Forsyth’s *The Old Faith and the New*.

In September 1872, upon Forsyth’s return from Göttingen, he was accepted (on probation; he was fully admitted in 1873) at New College (London) to study theology. While his health continually restricted his attendance at classes, and he seems to have felt a “misfit” who was increasingly “wasting his time” there (which led to his resignation in 1874, before completion and in circumstances difficult to square with sound order²¹), there are two lasting results of his time at New College. First, he met Maria Hester

20. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 193.

21. See Council of New College, “Extract from 386 Council Meeting,” n.p.

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(Minna) Magness (1850/51–1894), the intellectual, cultured and devout Anglican whom he married in 1877. Second, he came under the influence of James Baldwin Brown, Congregationalism’s mediator of F. D. Maurice.²² In fact, it may have been Brown who first drew Forsyth to London, Forsyth travelling the six and a half miles out to Brixton every Sunday to hear the devout Maurician who he later described as “the greatest Independent of our times,” indeed, the greatest since the seventeenth century.²³

Forsyth’s first pastoral charge, which began in November 1876, was at the Congregational Church in Springwood, Shipley (near Bradford, Yorkshire), where he was ordained by his mentor and former pastor J. Baldwin Brown, and by the Principal of New College, the Rev. Dr Samuel Newth. History records that the latter “preached an excellent sermon, full of good counsel to the congregation and in the evening the pastor [P. T. Forsyth] delivered an able discourse from the following text: ‘But I am among you as he that serveth.’ Luke xxii. 27. The congregation was very large.”²⁴ Whilst at Shipley, Forsyth became a father—Jessie, whom he once called “a little candle of the Lord,”²⁵ was born in 1877 and baptised at Shipley in 1879; she was his only child. He also began to make a name for himself as a “challenging and unconventional preacher,” attracting such eccentric characters that his church was nicknamed “The Cave of Adullam.”²⁶ It was here too that his ministry was rejected by the Yorkshire Congregational Union and he experienced an increasingly awkward relationship with the denomination’s more “orthodox” seniors, a parting which came to something of a head at the Leicester Conference in mid-October 1877.²⁷ Indeed, Forsyth’s name appeared in no official denominational handbook for the best part of a decade, and even though his ordination, or “recognition” (as it was referred to), was reported by the local press and some key denominational leaders (including his own college principal, and J. Robertson Campbell) played prominent parts in it, the ordination was unrecorded in the national Congregational Year Book.²⁸ The first four sermons in this volume—“The Turkish Atrocities,” “Mercy the true and only

22. Maurice was arguably the greatest of English preachers of the day and, at the recommendation of W. Robertson Smith, Forsyth studied Maurice’s work closely.

23. Forsyth, “Baldwin Brown,” 139, 142.

24. Forsyth, “Ordination Statement,” 4.

25. Forsyth and Hamilton, *Pulpit Parables*, 50–51.

26. Andrews, “Memoir,” xii–xiii.

27. On the Leicester Conference see Johnson, *The Dissolution of Dissent*, 63–114.

28. It is possible, of course, that the ordination took place too late in the year to be included in 1877 edition of the Year Book. Still, Forsyth’s first mention in the Congregational Year Book is 1885, and the Shipley Church is steadily listed as “vacant.”

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Justice,” “The Strength of Weakness,” and “The Bible Doctrine of Hell and the Unseen”—were preached during this period.

From a Bradford hinterland, Forsyth moved to a historic though equally marginalised church at St Thomas’s Square in the established and middle-class London suburb of Hackney where, between 1879 and 1885, he filled the pulpit once occupied by the author of the famous “Protestant Dissenters’ Catechism” Samuel Palmer (1741–1813), the early nineteenth century pulpit prince Henry Forster Burder (1783–1864), and James Allanson Picton, and a local tradition whose theological capital included William Bates and Matthew Henry. In 1879, however, St Thomas’s Square was a difficult pulpit to fill. Having severed its affiliation with both the London and national Congregational Unions, its minister, who would be Picton’s successor, would unavoidably be branded for life as one carrying a dubious theological pedigree. As C. E. Larter recalled some forty years later in a letter to *The British Weekly* (a Nonconformist newspaper founded by William Robertson Nicoll), “it has seemed probable that the young minister might follow his predecessor along lines that led the latter ultimately to sever his connection with the churches, and to devote his noble powers rather to the exposition of Spinoza than any faith distinctly Christian.”²⁹

Forsyth’s call to Hackney, like that to Shipley, was orchestrated by J. Baldwin Brown, and was to a church which was, like the Shipley Church, unaffiliated with any Congregational Union.³⁰ His daughter recalls:

Here again he collected a congregation of heretics and suspects; and here, too, he was rejected by the London Congregational Union. When I look at contemporary portraits of orthodox nonconformist ministers I am not surprised, for in appearance he did not even conform to nonconformity. My baby memories begin during this period, and I see him in the pulpit, wearing a short black coat, shepherd’s-plaid trousers, turndown collar and a brilliant tie. (He first began to preach in an academic gown to hide a sling, after breaking his collar-bone in a collision when he was figure-skating on the Serpentine.) London was like wine to him. He was in touch with so many sides of its life—politics, literature, art, music, and even the theatre, taboo to so many Victorian

29. Larter, “Letter, St. Mary Church. 18 November 1921,” 196. The reference to Spinoza recalls Picton’s *Spinoza: A Handbook to the Ethics* (1907).

30. The Hackney Church’s affiliation with the London Congregational Union took place in 1884, the same year that Forsyth joined the same Union and Board, and a year before he left London for Manchester. Evident here is something of the young Forsyth’s denominational looseness, a looseness which often signified some extreme positions and which, among Congregationalists during the 1870s and 1880s, were likely to be those of a “liberal” rather than “conservative” sapidity.

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saints. A rich friend took him to Bayreuth, and he was there at the crown of Wagner's career, the first performance of *Parsifal* in 1882; and henceforth it always seemed to my father a sacrament rather than an opera. All his enthusiasms he put into his preaching, and people of all denominations and of none came from everywhere in London to hear his Sunday evening lectures.³¹

He was, it seems, something like how John Updike described William Blake—"a triumph of eccentricity, the Englishman's cherished privilege and informal purchase on freedom."³² His congregations at Hackney were small. But Forsyth was well known in the city, and his evening sermonic lectures, such as the one on Alfred Tennyson's "Vastness" (republished in this volume) drew large audiences. On 1 December 1921, just a few weeks after Forsyth's death, *The British Weekly* published a letter by "F.R.C.S" recalling memories of student life in London some thirty-seven years earlier, in 1884. F.R.C.S, then "a medical student, unsettled in matters of belief by the scientific teaching of the materialistic school," recalled being attracted to St. Thomas's Square by a course of lectures which were being offered by Forsyth on "the origin of the Gospels." F.R.C.S spoke enthusiastically of their content, and even republished some notes of the lectures which he had taken and kept, including this sentence: "The Word of God was not the Bible; it was left for us to get as low as that. The Bible contains the Word of God—Jesus Christ." And he ardently recalled Forsyth's style—a summary of the lecture chalked beforehand on the blackboard; questions and discussion afterwards; and a collect to preface each lecture: "Prevent us, O Lord, in all our doings . . ." So moved was he by Forsyth's lectures that he resolved to stay on and become part of the congregation at St. Thomas's Square. Forsyth's lectures on literary themes were "a great treat," he said, and if on Sundays the congregations "were comparatively scanty . . . to students like myself, unsettled in their religious thinking by the current materialism of the day, it was a godsend to find a preacher of outstanding intellectual power, who had fairly faced our modern difficulties for himself, and yet preached Christ with all the fire and earnestness of a prophet." He especially recalled a phrase Forsyth used in one of his prayers, "thanking God for the 'dark dis-peace' which besets us when we stray from Him." And he evoked memory of Forsyth's farewell sermon to the Hackney congregation—a "dramatic denunciation of the men who had applauded him for preaching a more liberal religion because it seemed to them to permit the moral laxity which they preferred to a higher life. Looking up from his manuscript, he

31. Andrews, "Memoir," xiii.

32. Updike, *Higher Gossip*, 241.

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peered round the congregation. ‘I hope I have offended such men’ he said. ‘I think I see some of them here tonight.’³³

While at Hackney, Forsyth instigated the monthly children’s service—the sermons during which “were delightful, and were enjoyed by the adults in his congregation as much as any”³⁴—and he was finally admitted to the Congregational Union. His sermons on “Egypt” and “Pessimism” (also republished in this volume) were preached from the pulpit at St Thomas’s Square.

From Hackney, Forsyth moved to Cheetham Hill, Manchester, where he served until 1888. It was while at Cheetham Hill that his interest and involvement in political debate expanded. This is evident in the increase of political and social essays he penned for the *Manchester Examiner* as well as other forums (such as his 1888 lecture on “The Relation of the Church to the Poor” given before the Lancashire Congregational Union), and in letters which were published in that same newspaper between 1885 and 1889 under the pseudonym “Publicola.” While he was at Manchester, Forsyth also saw the publication of his first book, *Pulpit Parables for Young Hearers* (1886), a collection of sermons primarily the product of his ministry at Hackney and co-authored with his closest local ministerial friend, John Arthur Hamilton (1845–1924),³⁵ and preached his sermon on “Sunday-Schools and Modern Theology” (included in this volume). Both the book and the sermon betray an acute awareness of the key role that Sunday schools played in Victorian religion, and of the influential and strategic relationship that they shared with social spheres and cultural formation far detached from usual chapel life. As one historian remarked of the period: “Sunday school earthed the culture and politics of Evangelical Dissent in the complexities of contemporary industrial society. It was radical acculturation.”³⁶ These two publications of Forsyth’s also

33. F.R.C.S, “A Medical Man’s Tribute to Dr Forsyth,” 203.

34. Ibid.

35. Hamilton held three pastorates spanning fifty-four years: Crowle (Lincolnshire), Saltaire (Yorksire), and Penzance (Cornwall). He died three days after the latter made him its Pastor Emeritus. He wrote *The Life of John Milton* (1870), and assisted in the preparation for publication of Forsyth’s *Religion in Recent Art* and R. J. Campbell’s *The New Theology*. The *Congregational Yearbook* of 1925 obituarizes of him: “One of the old Independents, he was a fearless seeker after truth, and a man of wide culture” (147).

36. Binfield, “The Significance of Baby Babble: P. T. Forsyth’s *Pulpit Parables* and their Context,” 4. Binfield cites a passage from J. Allanson Picton’s biography of his father who described the formative influence of the Leeds Street Sunday School thus: “The Sunday School was to me a new world of activity and energy: the republican form of government; its teachers’ meetings; its library; the connexions and friendships to which it led; and the constant current of healthy excitement which it generated, in addition to the usefulness of the main objects at which it aimed, were, to me, sources of the keenest enjoyment and, I think, of improvement.” Picton, *Sir James A. Picton*, 67–68.

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signify a genuine commitment to, and love and keen sense for, children and young people which was never to leave him. Indeed, one of Forsyth's first published sermons, "'Maid, Arise': A Sermon to School Girls," was preached during his first charge in Shipley on Sunday 18 July 1878, and one of his final addresses as a minister in pastoral charge was a contribution in late-1900 to "The School at the End of the Century: A Symposium on the Alleged Decline in Sunday School Attendance: Some Opinions and Suggestions."³⁷ In May 1913, *The British Weekly* published his piece on "The Church and the Children,"³⁸ and a year later, on 17 June 1914, on the eve of the Great War, Forsyth was at Stockwell College's valedictory day serving as the meeting's chairman. He had come, he said, "to say words to those girls who were going out of the College," and to enlist them into what to our sensitive ears might be easily dismissed as rank utopian liberalism but which for this Victorian college principal was both judiciously subversive and filled with evangelical realism—namely, a Christian commonwealth, "the growing up of each individual member of society into a holy temple of the Lord; an ideal society, a true brotherhood of mankind, the kingdom of the new humanity, which is the Kingdom of God."³⁹

The year 1888 saw the beginning of Forsyth's fruitful and vibrant ministry at Clarendon Park, Leicester, a charge which included a regularly filled church lecture room for monthly lectures where, as was the case at Hackney, he drew large audiences on topics such as art, politics and popular literature, and which included his lecture on "Handel, with Musical Illustrations." His acceptance letter⁴⁰ to the Clarendon Park Church is worth citing here in full for it expresses not only how Forsyth articulated his faith but also something of the Congregational notion (in the late-nineteenth century) of the relation between the minister and the local congregation, as well as something of the nature and responsibility of preaching itself.

Binfield's reference to Picton is not without significance. Picton, as we have noted, was an ex-Congregational minister who, after twenty-three years in pastoral ministry (at Cheetham Hill, Manchester; Gallowtree Gate, Leicester, some people from which later became core members at Clarendon Park during Forsyth's time there; and St Thomas's Square, Hackney, where Forsyth was his successor), turned, in 1879, to politics and who in 1891 was Radical MP for Leicester during Forsyth's time in that city. Picton's younger brother married Mary Helen Stafford who came from a prominent family in Forsyth's Leicester congregation, and Picton's first wife, Margaret Beaumont of Cheetham Hill and Wilmslow, came from a family of active Congregationalists in Manchester, several members of which played a prominent role in Forsyth's Cheetham Hill Church.

37. Forsyth, "As to the Causes of Decline," 850.

38. Forsyth, "The Church and the Children," 169.

39. See Anonymous, *The Educational Record*, 106–12.

40. Published as "Appendix I," in Waddington, *The First Ninety Years*.

I: Preaching Sub Specie Crucis

Cheetham Hill,
Manchester,
12 May 1888

To the Church and Congregation,
Clarendon Park,
Leicester

My dear friends,

I have the honour of your Christian call; and you are aware of the special reasons for my delay in reply. I cannot longer defer my decision. I am your servant in Jesus Christ, if, when you hear the whole of this letter, you still will have it so. And let us trust that our interpretation of the Lord's will is right, and that we unite because *He* will have it so. In coming to you I come on a twofold footing which it is important to understand.

First, I come, not, in the main, to make a certain congregation a prosperous concern, but as a minister of Christ and of the Church Universal, to declare and to apply the gospel of the Cross. I believe in the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God in the sinless person of Jesus Christ; in the Redemption of Mankind through His death; and in His risen life as the unseen personal power which guides both the world and the Church to fulfil the Kingdom of God—especially through personal union with the Saviour. You have a right to know thus clearly my position on such central points.

But secondly, I view these great truths not as a mere seal of orthodoxy, not as confining the action of the human mind, nor as hedging it up, so to speak, against mistake. But I view them as a *Gospel*, as the charter and impulse of the Soul's liberty and the guide to heights and ranges of freedom both in heart and head, which without Christ's gospel we should never have won. While therefore I should think it my duty if ever I departed from these truths to release you from any obligation to retain me among you, yet it is of the greatest importance that I should make clear this spirit in which they are held. In my present congregation I have the completest freedom in this respect. And I should not sustain the idea of a change to any sphere where my freedom should be less. This applies both to the specific ways of applying these truths to modern conditions and to my own personal style of phrase and speech. I always feel that my freedom is a responsibility, that the feelings of others are entitled to respect, and that it is cowardly to use the privilege of the pulpit to the disadvantage of those who have both to listen and perhaps to differ. I ask for

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no agreement with me except in such great principles as I have specified. And outside the region of thought and teaching, in the practical affairs of the congregation, I am as any other member who must either persuade the majority or go with it. But in the matter of teaching[,] the concession of the liberty aforesaid is paramount, and no other possible advantages I might gain in coming to you would atone for the loss of it as I have it here. The deacons quite understand this, but I am anxious there should be no mistake about it on the part of the church and congregation; I may farther add that I have neither time nor energy to waste on such contentions as sometimes arise in churches on doctrinal points. And if you receive me, and if you should desire in course to be rid of me, an ordinary vote of the church with a decided majority to that effect will be quite sufficient for the purpose.

I did not think it would be so hard for me to reach this decision as I have found it to be. I need not trouble you with any reference to the considerations which make parting more than difficult—painful, here. And I am far from absolutely certain that I have done the right thing. But I have used such effort as I could to attain a right judgment. I must go forward like so many greater ones, in a faith which is content not to see everything perfectly clear. I cast myself upon the help of the Spirit we serve and upon your Christian hearts. No man surely can make a fatal mistake who does that. May God help us to bend all our personal hopes, fears and ambitions to His great glory and the obedience of His Son. And may you be found to have no more made a mistake in me than I in you.

I am Yours for Jesus Christ,
P. T. Forsyth

Forsyth's interest in politics and art, which took a more mature turn while at Cheetham Hill, continued to find expression while at Clarendon Park. This is evident, for example, in his public support for the dock workers in the London Dock Strike of 1889, in his lectures on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, George Frederic Watts, William Holman Hunt, and Richard Wagner, given in January that same year to a mostly "promiscuous audience"⁴¹ in Leicester (though largely the product of his ministry at Cheetham Hill, and published as *Religion in Recent Art*), and in his appointment, in 1893, as a member of the borough's Museum and Art Gallery Committee. Some of these commitments also informed his ministry at Leicester, as is evident in some of the sermons from that period which are included in this

41. Forsyth, *Religion in Recent Art*, vii.

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collection, such as “Preaching and Poetry,” and in his concern for a recently unemployed and distressed local woman whose situation Forsyth raised at a deacons’ meeting where it was agreed that a representative from the congregation would visit her and “take her £1 to pay off her arrears to her landlady.”⁴² An appeal from the pulpit the following Sunday found work for her.

A snapshot of Forsyth’s first few months at Clarendon Park describes the kind of activities which occupied his energies:

On August 1 1888 the Rev. P. T. Forsyth presided over his first church meeting, at which he was obviously getting to know the Church members, but at the next Church meeting, held on October 31, he showed that he had already gone into action. He announced that he had arranged for “a course of Sunday Evening Lectures to Young Men and Women” on the first Sunday morning in each month—also that he intended on the second Sunday morning in each month to have a Children’s Service and Sermon. The 2nd Anniversary of the Opening of the Organ would be held on November 18 and in the evening Mr. Forsyth would preach upon the “Song of Miriam.” After the service Schubert’s “Song of Miriam” would be performed. The week night service was to begin at 7 o’clock in order that the Bible Class might commence at 8 o’clock.

For an infant of 2 years old, Clarendon Park Congregational Church was not only alive and kicking but filled with an adult sense of purpose and determination.⁴³

In the following year, during which the church was embroiled in debate over whether or not to hold a bazaar to raise money to purchase land for the Sunday School, Forsyth announced the formation of a Bible Class which would be open to all, and which would be held on Tuesdays at 3 pm. They would begin by studying Mark’s Gospel. Certainly, there is no evidence that Forsyth here neglected his pastoral and wider ecclesial responsibilities, responsibilities which included his being appointed Chairman of the Leicestershire and Rutland Congregational Union in 1891, and then, in March 1893, his appointment as College Pastor at Mansfield College, that prestigious Nonconformist institution previously located in Birmingham (where it was named Spring Hill College) and which opened in Oxford in 1886, a fruit of the Oxford University Act of 1854 which granted Independents and Dissenters legal admission to the University. Forsyth’s time at Clarendon Park ended sadly, however, due to illness. So Waddington: “In 1893 Mr.

42. Waddington, *The First Ninety Years*, 7.

43. *Ibid.*, 4.

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Forsyth's health was proving unsatisfactory with consequent depression and he appealed for the sympathy of the congregation in these circumstances. A resolution was unanimously passed sympathising with Mr. Forsyth, heartily approving his efforts in the work of the Church and pledging the Church to support him in his work.⁴⁴ Following doctor's advice, Forsyth took three months off for complete rest. Forsyth's wife, Minna, too, was gravely unwell and, sometime in early 1894, suddenly became infirm.

In February 1894, Forsyth received a call to Emmanuel Church, Cambridge, a significant church not only in terms of the denomination's life, but also because it was the chief Congregational Church in Cambridge, the university from which so many Nonconformist students graduated. "In May, to everyone's regret, he left [Leicester] and the Church was faced with the problem of finding a suitable successor to its first Minister, who had done so much to help it to start and to continue on its way."⁴⁵

Minna died of paralysis during Forsyth's first week at Emmanuel Church. When, in October, the news regarding her death reached Clarendon Park the congregation resolved to send a "letter of deep regret at the death of (their) friend Mrs. Forsyth," and in which the church recalled how their former minister had "in the past shared their griefs and troubles and they would pray that the same Healer and Consoler he set forth to them may be his consolation."⁴⁶ Forsyth's reply was delayed because he himself was ill in bed for a fortnight, but in due course he penned the following words: "Your letter came to me like a warm air from the circle of those who knew her and esteemed her so well . . . But she is free and at rest, and crowned with glory and honour, having tasted of death in Him who tasted it for us all. Her life was a long death to herself. Her new life is a new living to God—and I must believe also, living for us whom He has visibly left but not spiritually forgotten."⁴⁷ This letter was accompanied by a copy of a poem that he had written in Minna's memory, and which was later published in *The British Weekly* under the title "The Healing of the Paralytic":

'Relaxed in death'! From death released also;
Blest double sense of Faith—loosed, and let go.

I've seen her drag herself to meet
Me home from foreign stay;
And lumber down the perilous stair
Her poor pathetic way.

44. *Ibid.*, 8.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Cited in *ibid.*

47. Cited in *ibid.*, 8–9.

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I've seen her, in the house unseen,
Devoted, tireless, free,
Smiling on her transfigured grief
Seen through the crystal sea.

And down the golden stair I'll see
Her run with stately life,
When from earth's foreign inn I turn
And go home to my wife.⁴⁸

Minna's death precipitated, for her widower, a period marked by deep depression, physical and nervous weakness, and with descents into hypochondriasis. During the period of his charge at Emmanuel Church, a period that spanned the years 1894 to 1901, Forsyth lived with his school-girl daughter Jessie, who later wrote of this period, "There can never have been a happier or more harmonious church than Emmanuel, Cambridge."⁴⁹ Forsyth's health, however, continued to deteriorate and he was forced to severely curtail his pastoral work. Throughout this period, he received loyal support from the church. Regarding his preaching at Cambridge, we might recall the diary testimony of Neville Keynes, who was "a trustee though never a member of Emmanuel."⁵⁰ On 24 January 1892, Keynes writes of Forsyth for the first time, and notes of his preaching: "his matter was excellent, but his delivery too rapid . . . Personally we liked him very much."⁵¹ Then on 29 October the following year, Keynes referred to a "fine sermon from Forsyth of Leicester."⁵² Keynes believed that Forsyth's preaching took a "very severe line," but was remarkably well received and often drew crowded congregations.⁵³ T. R. Glover, a Cambridge undergraduate student and the son of a Baptist minister, Dr Richard Glover of Bristol, also found himself drawn, along with a considerable number of undergraduates, to Emmanuel Church, and that largely through the preaching ministry of W. S. Houghton, from 1879, and Forsyth, from 1894.⁵⁴ In his diary entry on 21 October 1894,

48. Forsyth, "Paralytic," 4.

49. Andrews, "Memoir," xviii.

50. Thompson, *Cambridge Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, 150. The following citations from Keynes' and Glover's diaries are taken from *ibid.*, 154–55.

51. Neville Keynes, *Diary*, 24 January 1892, Cambridge University Library Add Mss 7842.

52. Neville Keynes, *Diary*, 29 October 1893, Cambridge University Library Add Mss 7843.

53. Neville Keynes, *Diary*, 23 June 1895, 20 October 1895, 27 October 1895, Cambridge University Library Add Mss 7845.

54. On Keynes and Glover, see Thompson, "Nonconformists at Cambridge," 180–84.

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Glover wrote: “Mr Forsyth at last on Acts xii 19 . . . A splendid sermon on the obstructed power of a great enthusiasm, full of many serious points.”⁵⁵ And just a fortnight later, he penned: “Mr Forsyth on the Sacrament—a striking sermon though I don’t follow it all.”⁵⁶ And a week later still, this time after hearing Forsyth preach on Romans 8: “He is out of one’s reach a great deal. But it is stimulating and good.”⁵⁷

In 1895, Forsyth was made a doctor of divinity (in absentia) by Aberdeen University,⁵⁸ and the following year saw him take up the invitation to be the Congregational Union preacher for the Autumnal Assembly at Leicester where he preached what is among his greatest sermons, “The Holy Father.”⁵⁹ Certainly this period was marked by a growing public role for Forsyth. In September 1899, he accepted the invitation to serve as the English delegate and to speak at the Decennial International Congregational Council in Boston. His address was entitled “The Evangelical Principle of Authority,” a lecture so stirring that at its conclusion the audience uncharacteristically rose to their feet and started singing John Bowring’s rousing hymn, “In the Cross of Christ I glory.” From this time onwards, Forsyth enjoyed international repute as a theologian and preacher. In December of that same year, Forsyth was also invited by Professor William Sanday (who was, from 1895 until 1919, the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church at Oxford) to speak at a two-day conference at Oxford on the theme of Priesthood, Sacrifice and Apostolic Succession. In addition to Professor Sanday, an august assemblage of the nation’s leading theologians was present to hear Forsyth, including Robert Campbell Moberly, Charles Gore, Henry Scott Holland, Cosmo Gordon Lang, Andrew Fairbairn, Stewart D. F. Salmond and William Theophilus Davison. In May the following year, Forsyth preached the annual sermon of the Colonial Missionary Society; the sermon, “The Empire for Christ,” is included in this volume. This period was also marked by the advance of what was to become a significant writing ministry, evidenced in the publication of a number of titles, including *The*

55. T. R. Glover, Diary 21 October 1894, St John’s College Archives.

56. T. R. Glover, Diary 4 November 1894, St John’s College Archives.

57. T. R. Glover, Diary 11 November 1894, St John’s College Archives.

58. Honorary doctorates could wield enormous cultural capital for Dissenting ministers (having been prohibited from earning them until the middle of the nineteenth century). On the other hand, doctorates dishonorably sought or given by disreputable institutions could also bring ridicule and scorn to those who pursued them.

59. The sermon was subsequently published the same year in *Independent and Non-conformist*, *Christian World Pulpit*, *British Weekly* and abstracted in *Homiletic Review*, before appearing in *The Holy Father and the Living Christ* (1897) and *God the Holy Father* (1957, 1987).

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Charter of the Church (1896), *Intercessory Services for Aid in Public Worship* (1897), *The Holy Father and the Living Christ* (1897), *Christian Perfection* (1899), *Rome, Reform and Reaction* (1899), and *The Taste of Death and the Life of Grace* (1901), as well as a very considerable essay on the atonement published in *The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought* (1899).

Concerning things closer to home, it was a period which welcomed, from their marriage in 1897, Bertha Ison (“a much younger woman of great wit, charm and vivacity”⁶⁰) into the Forsyth residence. Reflecting on this period some years later, Forsyth’s daughter, Mrs Jessie Andrews, considered her step-mother to be “the real turning point of Forsyth’s life”: “This charming and devoted woman,” she said, “was a true helpmate and unfailing inspiration, helping her husband to focus on the future rather than the past. There followed for him a great upsurge of physical and intellectual vigour.”⁶¹ And in her *Memoir* on her father, Mrs Andrews suggested that her step-mother “rescued” her father from the hypochondriasis that threatened to engulf his life during his first three years at Cambridge:

[Bertha Ison] was many years younger than he, possessing great charm, and even fascination, of looks and manner, incredible vitality, much wit, and a born gift as a hostess. It was typical of her courage to take over a delicate man who was minister of a large congregation; and she carried her enterprise through more than triumphantly. For she gave him a new hold on life, she renewed the zest he had lost; and though he never could become a strong man, her devoted care of him, and perhaps still more, simply her charm and personality, made possible for him the twenty-four years in which his greatest work was done. It was a happy thing to see his face light up when she came into the room.⁶²

Forsyth’s affection for Bertha, and his deep gratitude for the new lease on life which came to him through her, is apparent in his dedication of his 1917 lectures on *The Church and the Sacraments*: “To My Wife, who contributes more than she knows, or I can tell her, to all I try to do.”⁶³

His ministry at Cambridge was relatively short and was marked by grief and ill-health, as well as by new energy and significant adjustments on the personal front. His seven years there also witnessed his signature on a number of significant shifts for English Congregationalism. I will highlight just two.

60. Carter, “Foreword,” xv.

61. Jones, “The Christological Thought of Peter Taylor Forsyth and Emil Brunner,” 10. The interview with Mrs. Andrews was conducted on 7 December 1968.

62. Andrews, “Memoir,” xvii–xviii.

63. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, v.

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First, as B. L. Manning has noted, it was while Forsyth was in this university town that he “made dogmatic theology attractive even to undergraduates”⁶⁴—overcoming an impediment as exigent in Forsyth’s day as in our own. Second, Forsyth procured his reputation as a laudable nonconformist leader on a national scale. From the summer of 1901, though Forsyth continued to preach on occasion at Emmanuel, and though he remained on the membership role of that church until 1917, his service to Congregationalism took him to London and from there, to an emergent global audience.

By far the majority of Forsyth’s time in London—twenty of the twenty-four years of which Mrs Andrews spoke—was given to his work as Principal of Hackney College. And apart from the years 1905 and 1907 when Forsyth was ill for most of the year, and 1920 when he suffered an illness that gradually reduced his strength, this time between the spring of 1901 until his death on the fourth Armistice Day (11 November 1921) was to be the most prolific period of his public ministry. Not only was he elected Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales in 1905, but he also increased his already substantial lecture load (the two are not unrelated),⁶⁵ addressing, in July 1908, the Third International Congregational Council in Edinburgh, and presenting in April and May the following year, the Congregational Lectures on “The Person and Place of Jesus Christ” and, also that year, a series of lectures at Campbell Morgan’s annual summer conference for young ministers—lectures which were later prepared for publication in *The Work of Christ*. As an example of both his vigour and the costliness of such, we might recall that in the same year that he experienced significant ill health he also gave, in March 1907, his Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale (subsequently published under the title *Positive Preaching and [the] Modern Mind*), and, in August, he lectured at the Cambridge Summer School of Theology. The years of his principalship were also marked, between 1907 and 1910, with The New Theology controversy associated with R. J. Campbell,⁶⁶ and by an extraordinarily fertility in terms of his maturing theology, his growing repute both at home⁶⁷ and abroad, and his published work, made palpable, for example, by the publication of the following titles which cover

64. Manning, *This Latter House*, 28.

65. So, for example, in 1905, Forsyth gave two public addresses in his capacity as chair: “A Holy Church the Moral Guide of Society,” on May 9 at the City Temple, and “The Grace of the Gospel as the Moral Authority in the Church,” on October 10 at the Coliseum, Leeds.

66. On which, see Goroncy, *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, 35–41.

67. Evident, for example, in his being made Dean of the Faculty of Theology in the University of London in 1910, and, during the following year, his appointment as Dean of the London Theological Colleges.

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a diverse number of themes: “The New Congregationalism and the New Testament Congregationalism” (1903), “The Evangelical Churches and the Higher Criticism” (1905), “Some Christian Aspects of Evolution” (1905), *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (1907), *Missions in State and Church* (1908), *Socialism, the Church and the Poor* (1908), *The Cruciality of the Cross* (1909), *The Power of Prayer* (1910), *The Work of Christ* (1910), *Christ on Parnassus* (1911), *Faith Freedom and the Future* (1912), *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion* (1912), *The Principal of Authority* (1912), *Theology in Church and State* (1915), *The Christian Ethic of War* (1916), *The Justification of God* (1916), *The Soul of Prayer* (1916), *Reunion and Recognition* (1917), *The Roots of a World Commonwealth* (1918), and *This Life and the Next* (1918), a book which, as William Bradley reminds us, is “unmatched for spiritual depth and beauty.”⁶⁸

What I hope has already been evident in this brief sketch of Forsyth’s public ministry is that whereas most traditions of the Church are marked by the production of countless hefty theological tomes, this has largely not been the case within Congregationalism. This is not to say, of course, that Congregationalism has not produced some sturdy theologians but only to register that, by and large, Congregationalist theologians have gone about their task in other ways. This was well noted when A. J. Grieve, Principal of the Lancashire Independent College, Whalley Range, prepared, in 1931, a bibliography of Congregational theology wherein he inserted the following footnote:

While one is naturally expected and obliged to keep to literary contributions, it is imperative to remember that these, so far from exhausting the subject, are probably but a small part of it. The teachers in our Academies and Colleges have not always reduced their instruction to the printed page; our preachers for 350 years have delivered more sermons than they have published; and perhaps as effective contributions to theology as any, if theology is a knowledge of God, have been those made one to another by members of the household of faith, the fellowship of the saints, in one generation after another.⁶⁹

68. Bradley, *P. T. Forsyth*, 60.

69. Grieve, “Congregationalism’s Contribution to Theology,” 359n1. Grieve’s use here of the word “always” is important for at least three reasons: (1) few knew better than Grieve that Congregationalists such as John Owen and Thomas Goodwin had been more than a little prone to publish on theological themes; (2) in the eighteenth century, much of the theology came in the form of published sermons (not least funeral discourses) and in the hymns of Isaac Watts, Philip Doddridge, and others; and (3) from 1890 until around 1950 there was a flowering of Congregational theology such as had not been seen for some time (see Sell, *Christ and Controversy*, 121–72). By the time Grieve wrote in 1931, Robert S. Franks, Alfred E. Garvie, Robert Mackintosh, and

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The sermons included in this volume bear witness to that tradition, for it would certainly not be going too far to say that the greatest portion of the public life of one of Congregationalism's favorite sons was given over to preaching. By any standard, Forsyth's literary output was significant, and included an impressive number of pamphlets, reviews and letters to editors, but by far the majority of the words in his more than 340 published articles and twenty-five books are sermons, or were ideas developed from sermons and public addresses. And even those relatively few that are not betray the rhetorical form of one shaped by the pulpit and the tasks that attend such space. As one commentator of an earlier generation noted, "Forsyth was no theorist in Christian theology, working out a system *in vacuo*, out of relation to [human beings] and their actual needs. He was essentially a *preacher*; his books were really printed *sermons*; and his message is, therefore, always living and warm, in close relation to the needs of his audience and the problems of his age."⁷⁰

Three things might be noted about this assessment: The first concerns this matter of "working out a system," the second concerns Forsyth's determination to speak to real human needs, and the third concerns Forsyth's belief in preaching itself. Regarding the first of these, Forsyth held with some suspicion those forms of systematics "whose clear edges are apt to reduce the impressiveness of the vast spiritual contours."⁷¹ The fairly unanimous documentation and denigration of the unsystematic tenor of Forsyth's writing would probably not have disturbed him insofar as he was suspicious of "systems" and there is something about his heterogeneous approach that makes his work less dated than most. He most certainly would have been concerned, however, if his readers deduced from his aversion to "systems" that his thought is not governed by, and around, certain crucial ideas at the heart of Christian truth. At the very least, Forsyth invited a reconsideration of what the adjective "systematic" in "systematic theology" might mean. Not only did he believe that the reduction of religion to a system eviscerates it but he also deemed that no system is fit for the task of stinging "the mind and conscience of the evangelicals out of their Hegelian day-dreams into a sense of theological reality and crisis."⁷² Frederick Maurice's words regarding his famed father, F. D. Maurice, might well apply to Forsyth too: "His thoughts and character were not . . . built up like rows of neatly ordered bricks. Rather, as each new thread of thought was caught by the shuttle of his ever-working mind, it was dashed

Forsyth himself had made numerous substantial published contributions, and there had also been solid theology published from the likes of George Payne, David Worthington Simon, Andrew M. Fairbairn, and others.

70. Escott, *Director of Souls*, 21.

71. Forsyth, "The Meaning of a Sinless Christ," 308; reprinted in this volume, 283–98.

72. Griffith, "Peter Taylor Forsyth," 1; cf. Forsyth, "Intellectualism and Faith," 328.

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in and out through all the warp and woof of what had been laid on before, and one sees it disappearing and reappearing continually affecting all else, having its colour modified by successive juxtapositions, and taking its own place in the ever growing pattern.”⁷³

Evident here is something germane to the English tradition itself—a tendency to rest its laurels on historical, exegetical, homiletical and rhetorical skills rather than on those of systematics. And while Forsyth did not share the English tradition’s “nationalist fear of continental thought,”⁷⁴ he was suspicious of “systems” that aim at a certain level of watertightness, not least because such systematizations tend to overlook the limits set by the nature of the subject itself—namely God. He was also aware that the theologian’s task is far from complete when the historian and exegete has set down her pen. Carved out *against* his rejection of Hegel’s monism, Schleiermacher’s pessimism, Lessing’s historiographical skepticism, and *from* which he developed his principle of authority, moral reality, and a proper distinction between creation and God, Forsyth’s ministry represents not a *via media* but a third way: the interpretation of all history, thought and action in light of God’s self-disclosure in Christ, the “continuous evangelical centre”⁷⁵ from which all *dogma*, *doctrine* and *theology* are developed, and to which the preacher, like the underside image of Martin Luther in Lucas Cranach’s 1547 altarpiece in Stadtkirche St. Marien in Wittenberg, bears witness.⁷⁶ Standing undeliberately in the tradition of Augustine of Hippo

73. Maurice, *Life 1*, 147. Of F. D. Maurice, Forsyth once said: “I owe a great deal to Maurice; in some respects I owe him everything.” Forsyth, “Ministerial Libraries,” 268.

74. Gunton, “The Nature of Systematic Theology,” 14.

75. Forsyth, “Newest Theology,” 581.

76. The distinction Forsyth proposes between *Dogma*, *Doctrine*, and *Theology* is critical to understanding his presentation, and it is most clearly outlined in *Theology in Church and State* (1915). Briefly put, *Dogma*, for Forsyth, nearly always refers to the one compressed statement of the gospel. Forsyth suggests that this could be John 3:16, 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 or Romans 1:16–17. It should be brief, but the important thing is its finality. It forms the basis for doctrine and theology. *Dogma* is that which “holds the Church rather than is held by it.” Forsyth, *Theology in Church and State*, vi. To employ an imperfect analogy from the world of botany, *Dogma*, if you like, is the tree’s root system and trunk. It is *Dogma* that (1) makes the Church the Church; (2) secures the Church’s freedom and rights from State interference; (3) forms the basis of ecumenical union and survival; and (4) provides the only basis by which churches might serve together in ministry and mission. *Doctrine* refers to the expansion, clarification and development of *Dogma*. It is indispensable for the Church’s practical unity and for protection against other “gospels.” To continue with the analogy, *Doctrine* refers to the tree’s branches. It has a relationship integral to the trunk, but no one branch is indispensable to the life of the tree and can (indeed must) be pruned or lopped if the life of the tree is at stake. It has no finality (as *Dogma* does) and requires editing and revision in new circumstances. *Theology* is the prime necessity for *Doctrine*, for “it is theology which prepares the material for

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and of Gregory of Nyssa, Forsyth takes seriously what Rowan Williams refers to as “the oddity of the world, its irreducibility to the tidy patterns of logic,”⁷⁷ and “premature harmonies,”⁷⁸ and, like Saint John of the Cross, “the Christian suspicion of conceptual neatness, of private revelation and religious experience uncontrolled by the reference to the givenness of Christ’s cross.”⁷⁹ By seeing things whole, rather than in isolated clumps waiting to be ordered, Forsyth avoided the Enlightenment’s traps of losing the “macro” through the dissection of the “micro.” And by not succumbing to the provisionality of any “system” but rooting theology in the blood-satiated divine economy, Forsyth remained at once deeply and “thoroughly systematic,”⁸⁰ evangelical, trinitarian, ecclesial, ecumenical and catholic. Few have voiced it more exactly than J. K. Mozley:

The student of this remarkable thinker [Forsyth] feels that language is taken by force, and strained to its utmost capacity for the expression of the conceptions which raise themselves from the great deeps of a mind wherein the Christian has triumphed over the philosopher, and then served himself of his adversary’s weapons. Systematic is not a word that one would naturally apply to Dr. Forsyth; yet I know of no theologian of the day who has fewer loose ends to his thought. To adopt a phrase of his own he never attempts to set up in his theology a subsidiary centre, but at every point which he reaches in the

the doctrine by which the Church preaches its dogma.” Pitt, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments*, 85. Forsyth also distinguishes between primary and secondary theology. Primary theology is that which is verifiable by experience. Secondary theology is that which is a scientific exposition of primary theology. Secondary theology is verified by thought. Moreover, secondary theology is necessary for the Church, its life and witness, but not for the individual. Primary theology is personal, experiential. It forms part of the very act of revelation upon which secondary theology reflects. Primary theology is sacramental itself. Secondary theology describes the sacrament given in primary theology. Primary theology is a theology of experience. Secondary theology is the experience of theology, what Forsyth calls “faith thinking.” Theology, therefore, is something like the tree’s leaves. Departure from the Church’s *Doctrine* or *Theology* ought not to be considered as heresy. The Church’s *Dogma*, its positive faith, is the only criteria for truth. Forsyth averred that we ought to be free to modify, re-evaluate and/or disregard our doctrines and theology against the Church’s *Dogma*. When such modification, re-evaluation and/or disregard actually reduces or extinguishes the *Dogma* and replaces it with a new dogma (even under the banner of “freedom”) then this is heresy (rather than freedom). Thus heresy, for Forsyth, is not an abandonment of the creeds but abandonment of the positive faith to which the creeds point.

77. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 79.

78. Williams, *Christian Theology*, 50.

79. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 180.

80. Sell, *Testimony and Tradition*, 179.

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gradual development of a position, or by some bold *coup de main* [vigorous attack], one knows that there is a straight line back, as from any point on the circle's circumference to its centre, to that which is the moral and therefore the only possible centre of the world—the Cross of Christ.⁸¹

On this matter, Karl Barth too offers words which we might employ to describe Forsyth's thought:

Let us remember first an old hermeneutical rule which says that there is no law concerning the sequence of theological topics. You can begin theology anywhere, however you like. We are allowed to begin here, or there. Let us hope that we do not do it arbitrarily, but it can be done! Each specific doctrine or topic in theology is to be understood, let us say, as a point on the periphery of a circle, a point which points to the focus and common center. So, you can begin here, or here, or here, and you always have the same subject-matter with which to deal. Each doctrine or topic can be treated and explained adequately if it is clearly such a finger pointing towards the center. The criterion is that a point must point! If we look here, and here, and here but not at the same center, then all is wrong everywhere . . . Systematization is always the enemy of true theology.⁸²

Insofar as it is possible, Forsyth directed much of his effort towards resisting the temptation to build a theology on the “foundations of the present”—on those systems which he suggested “do not last,” are built “but to house a generation or a couple,” and so are “all revisable, all on lease.” Instead, Forsyth posited that we ought be building as did our forebears, citing the Latin phrase *In aeternum pinxerunt*, “They built/made to last forever.” They built towards finality and universality—specifically, the finality and universality of God's action in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Herein, moreover, is soteriology not as a matter of scientific curiosity but of existential relation to the gospel. As he would put it in his lectures on preaching, “A few mighty cohesive truths which capture, fire, and mould the whole soul are worth much more than a correct conspectus of the total area of divine knowledge.”⁸³ By so undertaking theology, Forsyth encourages an opening up rather than a shutting down of exploratory space and so promotes situations wherein the deepest of theological truths might mesh with “the texture of reality as we experience it, which is open-ended,

81. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement*, 182.

82. Barth, “A Theological Dialogue,” 173–74.

83. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 85–86.

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complex and often elusive, resisting our efforts to pin it down.”⁸⁴ The sermons contained in this volume bear witness to this deliberate habit. So this is the first observation that the reader of Forsyth’s sermons would do well to keep in mind; namely, his suspicion of theological “systems” and his ardor for having his mind and speech governed by and around the gospel’s primary dogma or “continuous evangelical centre”—that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

The second observation concerns Forsyth’s resolve to address real human needs. Forsyth reminded us that the often-made distinction between “practical” and “speculative” theology is unhelpful. A queen of the sciences, theology remains ever a “practical” science—that is, it exists not for its own sake but for the sake of the Christian community, and for that community’s living witness to the Word of Life. Indeed, Forsyth, like those English Puritans that he appreciated so much, was an intensely practical theologian. Alan Gaunt named Forsyth “the preacher’s theologian,”⁸⁵ and so he was, not least for his conviction that responsible theology doesn’t come to birth in a vacuum, and so “we must pay attention to the world God has placed us in,” taking it as we find it. For, as Forsyth averred, “it is this age that we are set to serve, change, and raise. It is not another in which we do not live. We must deal with our own conditions.”⁸⁶ Such a conviction is evidenced in the fact that Forsyth penned what is not only one of the most profound books ever written on prayer⁸⁷ and one of the most compelling short studies on Christian perfection,⁸⁸ but also numerous articles, letters, poems and sermons on subjects as diverse as corruption,⁸⁹ politics,⁹⁰ slave labour, education,⁹¹

84. Hart, “Systematic—In What Sense?,” 342.

85. Gaunt, “Preacher’s Theologian,” 41–66.

86. Forsyth, “Gain and Godliness,” 357. Denney suggested that perhaps Forsyth’s most powerful words are spared for diagnoses of the moral condition of both Church and society at large, diagnoses which Forsyth offers in light of humanity’s neglect of God’s holiness, the inexorability of God’s love and the transforming judgement in God’s forgiving grace. Forsyth, Denney avers, “takes care not to be personal, nor to say what implies censure of individuals, but he feels free to be scornful of much on which a whole generation has nursed its self-complacency.” Denney, “Principal Forsyth on Preaching,” 57.

87. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*.

88. Forsyth, *Christian Perfection*. This essay was later included in *God the Holy Father*.

89. Forsyth, *Corruption and Bribery*.

90. See Forsyth, “Why Am I a Liberal,” 4.

91. See Forsyth, “Church, State, Dogma, and Education,” 827–36.

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faith and experience,⁹² “cheap and scrappy” journalism,⁹³ motherhood,⁹⁴ divorce,⁹⁵ children,⁹⁶ Bible reading,⁹⁷ fundraising,⁹⁸ and weariness.⁹⁹ He also sounded significantly more loudly than most how the cross is not only the locus of God’s self-justification and self-discovery but that its action is that which gifts our confidence in God’s efficacy and determination to fully sanctify the creation of which we are a part, realities which are confirmed in the evangelical experience of forgiveness and whose goal is the transformation of the human conscience, will, relationships and society. These are all immensely “practical” themes, and each is firmly grounded in the most mature theological convictions within the Church’s tradition.

In an article on Forsyth, Markus Barth described Forsyth as “the theologian the practical [person] needs!” He continued:

I cannot understand why his works are not much more widely read, why such a man of interdenominational importance is not installed as a teacher and herald in thousands of hearts. Is he forgotten because tied down to his era? Is he too hard to be read? Is he too theoretical? He [or she] must be a very narrow minded and above all unpractical [person] who by such pretexts would cut himself [or herself] off from so rich a source of good theology. Biblical theology is practical by its very being; it helps us to preach and to pray, and may keep us from going too much astray in faith and life. We desire good Christian instruction for individual life, religious experience, and the problems of the modern world? If so, the books of modern philosophers, psychologists, and moralists may be more safely neglected than those of P. T. Forsyth. It is worth while spending time on his works, for they give us a standard by which our own preaching and teaching may be judged.¹⁰⁰

And what Andrew Fairbairn has written of R. W. Dale might fittingly be applied to our subject too:

92. See Forsyth, “Faith and Experience,” 415–17; Forsyth, “Faith, Timidity, and Superstition,” 111–16.

93. Forsyth, “The Decay of Brain Power,” 41–43.

94. Forsyth, “Motherhood,” 255–56.

95. See Forsyth, “The Church and Divorce,” 885.

96. See Forsyth, “The Church and the Children,” 169.

97. See Forsyth, “A Few Hints about Reading the Bible,” 530–44.

98. Forsyth, “The Fund and the Faith,” 219; Forsyth, “Gain and Godliness, 356–58.

99. Forsyth, *The Weariness in Modern Life*.

100. M. Barth, “P. T. Forsyth,” 437.

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His theological work had the rare note of integrity and reality. It was his own; won by the sweat of his own brain; interpreted for him by the experiences of his own life. His manhood was rooted in it; and in it he had articulated the convictions by which he lived. He was a theologian by intellectual necessity, for his was a nature to which thought was native. No man ever had less of the mere rationalist in him; yet his faith, however penetrated by emotion and transfigured by imagination, had been passed through the fire of an intellect that was not so much critical as synthetic.¹⁰¹

Or, as another has written of Forsyth himself: “He does not indulge in theological abstractions for the joy of exercising his mental machinery. He wrestles with life and death, and then shows what they mean to the pastor, the church and the [person] on the street.”¹⁰² Certainly, Forsyth’s theology was carved out at the coalface with people in their doubt and hope, their grief and joy, their disgrace and virtue, and their recalcitrance and repentance. Unlike those über-leaders who carry the title “Pastor” but whose principal attention is the conference tour or the promotion of their own merchandise, Forsyth was first and foremost a local chapel minister who, for twenty-five years and in five distinctive churches, knew and loved his people, and who took seriously his responsibilities to them.

Even when he, in the spring of 1901, was called to the Principalship of Hackney College, or when, just four years later, he assumed the role of Chairman of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, Forsyth did not use these callings to wider service as excuses to retreat into the havens of a cloistered cleric or to sail into those harbors which can so easily attend an institutional office. Rather, he was in touch with the wider community and church—publicly opposing in 1904 and again in 1906, for example, the importation of Chinese labour into the Transvaal on the grounds that it was a disguised form of slavery,¹⁰³ and occupying various pulpits until near the end of his days, and hammering out on the anvil of life the implications of the reality that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,” the Pauline text to which Forsyth drew frequent attention.¹⁰⁴

That said, we must also underscore the fact that while Forsyth took his context seriously—one here recalls Barth’s oft-quoted line about “the Bible and

101. Fairbairn, “Dale as a Theologian,” 695.

102. Wiersbe, “Theologian for Pastors,” 98.

103. From 18 to 29 January 1906, Forsyth penned at least five letters to the London newspaper *The Times* raising concern about the policy of slave labour in the Transvaal.

104. On the soteriological implications of this verse in Forsyth’s theology, see Goroncy, “The Final Sanity Is Complete Sanctity,” 249–79.

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the Newspaper”¹⁰⁵ made in a 1966 interview—he theologized and preached as one who believed that Scripture proves the world, *scriptura probat mundum*, rather than the other way around. He who believed that the Bible’s expositor is “the organ of the only real and final authority for mankind”¹⁰⁶ would almost certainly have agreed with Herman Melville who, in *Moby Dick*, equated the world with a ship’s rear, and the pulpit with its prow: “The pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world. From thence it is the storm of God’s quick wrath is first descried, and the bow must bear the earliest brunt. From thence it is the God of breezes fair or foul is first invoked for favorable winds. Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.”¹⁰⁷

And this brings us to the third matter that will, hopefully, be apparent to readers of Forsyth’s sermons and which we have already had reason to mention—Forsyth believed in preaching. Or, put more exactly, he believed that God is committed to self-disclosure and to human transformation through the ministry of the Church’s pulpit work. He would even boldly announce, as he did in the opening words of his Lyman Beecher Lectures, that “with its preaching Christianity stands or falls.”¹⁰⁸ In those same Yale lectures, Forsyth proceeded to articulate this conviction that the Church suffers from three things: (1) from *triviality* (with externality); (2) from *uncertainty* (of its foundation); and (3) from *satisfaction* (with itself). And to cure these, he averred, the gospel we have to preach prescribes three remedies. For the first, *triviality*, the gospel sounds a new note of greatness in our creed, the note that sounds in a theology more than in a sentiment. For the second, *uncertainty*, the gospel sounds a new note of wrestling and reality in our prayer. And for the third, *satisfaction* (or *complacency*), the gospel sounds a new note of judgment in our salvation. “These three remedies,” he insisted, “cannot be taken by way of mere outward enterprise (which will,

105. “Der Pfarrer und die Gläubigen sollten sich nicht einbilden, dass sie eine religiöse Gesellschaft sind, die sich um bestimmte Themen herum dreht, sondern sie leben in der Welt. Wir brauchen doch—nach meiner alten Formulierung—die Bibel und die Zeitung.” See also Barth and Thurneysen, *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 45. Perhaps the clearest published statement from Barth concerning his conviction that theology doesn’t “stand on the air” but “must touch the earth somewhere, if only with one foot” (K. Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching” 99), comes from a *Time Magazine* piece published on Friday 31 May 1963: “[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians ‘to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible.’” K. Barth, “Theologians: Barth in Retirement,” cited in K. Barth, *Gespräche: 1963*, 356.

106. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 27.

107. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 35.

108. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 1.

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indeed, collapse for want of them). They can only be taken inwardly, by means of more religion, more positive religion, and more personal religion.” He continued: “I believe that a Church really sanctified would develop more power, light, and machinery for dealing with the tremendous realities of the world than is possible while we are groping in the dark, picking our timid path in economics, or flogging up the energies of a flagging faith.”¹⁰⁹

Later on in those same lectures, Forsyth took a seldom-taken opportunity to reflect quite personally on his ministry in order to encourage those young men—and, in those days, they were all men and statistically younger than contemporary crops—who were preparing to enter pastoral ministry:

Might I venture here to speak of myself, and of more than thirty years given to progressive thought in connection, for the most part, with a pulpit and the care of souls? Will you forgive me? I am addressing young men who have the ministry before them, as most of mine is behind, strewn indeed with mistakes, yet led up of the Spirit.

There was a time when I was interested in the first degree with purely scientific criticism. Bred among academic scholarship of the classics and philosophy, I carried these habits to the Bible, and I found in the subject a new fascination, in proportion as the stakes were so much higher. But, fortunately for me, I was not condemned to the mere scholar’s cloistered life. I could not treat the matter as an academic quest. I was kept close to practical conditions. I was in a relation of life, duty, and responsibility for others. I could not contemplate conclusions without asking how they would affect these people, and my word to them, in doubt, death, grief, or repentance. I could not call on them to accept my verdict on points that came so near their souls. That is not our conception of the ministry. And they were people in the press and care of life. They could not give their minds to such critical questions. If they had had the time, they had not the training. I saw amateurs making the attempt either in the pew or in the pulpit. And the result was a warning. Yet there were Christian matters which men must decide for themselves, trained or not. Therefore, these matters could not be the things which were at issue in historic criticism taken alone. Moreover, I looked beyond my immediate charge, and viewed the state of mind and faith in the Church at large—especially in those sections of it nearest myself. And I became convinced that they were in no spiritual condition to have forced on them those questions on which scholars so delighted

109. *Ibid.*, 115–16.

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and differed. They were not entrenched in that reality of experience and that certainty of salvation which is the position of safety and command in all critical matters. It also pleased God by the revelation of His holiness and grace, which the great theologians taught me to find in the Bible, to bring home to me my sin in a way that submerged all 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 be sure that what they needed was evangelization, in something more than the conventional sense of that word. "What we need is not the dechurching of Christianity, but the Christianizing of the Church." For the sake of critical freedom, in the long run that is so. Religion without an experimental foundation in grace, readily feels panic in the presence of criticism, and is apt to do wild and unjust things in its terror. The Churches are not, in the main, in the spiritual condition of certainty which enables them to be composed and fair to critical methods. They either expect too much from them, and then round upon them in disappointed anger when it is not forthcoming. Or they expect so little from them that they despise them as only ignorance can. They run either to rationalism or to obscurantism. There was something to be done, I felt, before they could freely handle the work of the scholars on the central positions.

And that something was to revive the faith of the Churches in what made them Churches; to turn them from the ill-found sentiment which had sapped faith; to re-open their eyes to the meaning of their own salvation; to rectify their Christian charity by more concern for Christian truth; to banish the amiable religiosity which had taken possession of them in the name of Christian love; and to restore some sense not only of love's severity, but of the unsparing moral mordancy in the Cross and its judgment, which means salvation to the uttermost; to recreate an experience of redemption, both profound and poignant, which should enable them to deal reasonably, without extravagance and without panic, with the scholars' results as these came in. What was needed before we discussed the evidence for the resurrection, was a revival of the sense of God's judgment grace in the Cross, a renewal of the sense of holiness, and so of sin, as the Cross set forth the one, and exposed the other in its light. We needed to restore their Christian footing to many in the Churches who were far within the zone which criticism occupies. In a word, it seemed to me that what the critical movement

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called for was not a mere palliation of orthodoxy, in the shape of liberal views, but a new positivity of Gospel. It was not a new comprehensiveness, but a new concentration, a new evangelization, that was demanded by the situation.¹¹⁰

In a moving memoir of her father, Jessie Andrews recorded the impressions offered by one of her father's friends and disciples:

What a mental energy he had! There was something demonic in it. He never approached his themes with the studied grace of the academic. His mind flung itself on them, tearing away everything that was insensible, and pursuing until he got to the heart. His work will remain a puzzle to everyone who imagines that it was deliberate, that it was an affectation. It was just that energy of mind that flung him upon his themes, that kept him catching glimpse after glimpse of the truth, that kept him endeavouring with words to keep abreast with the pursuit of his mind. And just because words can never keep pace with mind, his style is difficult. It was the man himself and his passion speaking in it.¹¹¹

But above all else, it was always the cross that drove him on, the cross that provided the content of his ministry, and the cruciality of which was given in his preaching like a perpetual offering. The Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Wales, T. Charles Williams, spoke for not a few when, in his moving tribute upon Forsyth's death in 1921, he articulated: "No one have ever made preaching a bigger thing, nor the Cross more real and central to me than he did."¹¹² And as Forsyth's "closest friend and colleague in the later years," his own son-in-law and Professor of New Testament Exegesis at New College and Hackney College, Herbert Tom Andrews, would write of Forsyth:

He might have been a burning and a shining light in almost any intellectual firmament, but like St. Paul, he imposed upon himself the limitation, 'I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified' . . . He was a theologian, but as a theologian he was *sui generis*, and totally unlike the other theologians with whom I was acquainted. As I came to know him more intimately there gradually grew up in my mind the conviction that he was a prophet—the greatest prophet of our times—a second Amos, an Amos with the vision of the Cross. And it is as the prophet of the Cross that I have regarded him

110. *Ibid.*, 192–94.

111. Andrews, "Memoir," xxvii.

112. Williams, "A Tribute from Wales," 154.

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ever since . . . For him the Cross was everything—‘his rock, his reality, his eternal life.’ Apart from the historic act of redemption, there was nothing in Christianity that counted for very much with him. He used all the weapons in the prophet’s armour to confound his opponents. People thought sometimes that some of his blows were too hard, but he felt that he was fighting for the very life of the Faith, and that he had no option but to contend to the uttermost for his soul’s convictions.¹¹³

In May 1918, at the invitation of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, Forsyth addressed the Assembly on the topic of “Congregationalism and Reunion,” subjects that had occupied considerable energy of his for some decades. In that lecture, Forsyth suggested that those who would lay the blame for the Church’s contemporary challenges at the feet of clericalism or materialism might more accurately and appropriately lay such at the feet of a number of other “isms,” among which he named naturalism, humanism, and idealism, and also “spirituality of the æsthetic sort, which treats faith as but human nature at its best, knows nothing of a new birth, writes off sin as but a moral neuralgia, and regards atonement as but an anodyne.”¹¹⁴ It was against precisely such powers—such “isms”—that Forsyth would persuade fellow preachers to aim their pulpits. But not only there, for there was enough of John Calvin and of the English puritans in him—indeed, there was enough of St Paul in him!—to know that preaching must speak not only to the broad movements and ideas that give rise to human history but also, as we have seen, to living souls. Indeed, in a universe unified by the one moral reality, Jesus Christ, one ought not speak of one apart from the other. If Christianity is about “the absolute kingship of God in Christ,” then its corollary involves putting to death that counter-word or “creed that preaches the humanities, the amenities, the urbanites, the sentimentalisms, and even the adventure and research

113. Andrews, “Memoir,” xxvii–xxviii. In fact, not a few considered Forsyth to be something of a prophet, and J. K. Mozley was certainly correct when he wrote just a few years after Forsyth’s death: “The fact is that Forsyth was eminently what the mind of his time, not least the Christian mind, needed, but not what it wanted.” Mozley, *The Heart of the Gospel*, 69. On the notion of Forsyth as prophet see, for example, Anderson, “P. T. Forsyth: Prophet of the Cross,” 146–61; Brown, *P. T. Forsyth: Prophet for Today*; Cunliffe-Jones, “P. T. Forsyth: Reactionary or Prophet?,” 344–56; Escott, *Director of Souls*, 10–11; Higginson, “Peter Taylor Forsyth: Prophet and Pastor,” 309, 315; Hunter, “P. T. Forsyth Neutestamentler,” 100; Miller, Barr and Paul, *P. T. Forsyth: The Man, the Preachers’ Theologian, Prophet for the 20th Century*; Pitt, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments*, 176–87; Simpson, “P. T. Forsyth: The Prophet of Judgment,” 148–56.

114. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, 69.

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in life, at the cost of the moral realities, divinities, powers, and dominants of the historic Kingdom of God.” Forsyth continues:

The subtle danger is when mere impressions from the Unseen, pietist, aesthetic, or occult, take the place of moral regeneration by the Spirit. It is the construing of Christianity by the social affections instead of reading these by the affections of grace. It is the domination of religion by the homely instead of by the holy, by the hearty instead of by the heavenly. It is pre-occupation with a love that loves much instead of the love that is forgiven much, with love passionate in its intensity, instead of love moral in its quality. It is the type of religion that treats the supernatural as superior to nature only in degree and not in kind.¹¹⁵

It is at this point that Forsyth insisted that there is all the difference in the world between lecturing and preaching. Forsyth was certainly engaged in both activities, but he was clear that whereas the former plays with themes, the latter handles powers. And when he was preaching, he understood that to undertake the former only is fatal, both to the hearers and to the Church’s witness to the living Word of God. To take up the mantle of the latter, however—that is, to be a preacher—was to work “in the wake of the prophet and the succession of the apostle.”¹¹⁶ And because preaching is nothing less than the cross—which is itself “God’s ‘preachment’”—declaring and prolonging itself, preaching, Forsyth insisted, is sacramental in a way that the lecture can never be.¹¹⁷ It is the act, therefore, of the missionary church which understands that its power lies in Christ, not as an ideal but as the Redeemer, and whose “saving sacrament is the sacrament of the Word and of the living faith it stirs.”¹¹⁸ Or, as Forsyth would put it in his Yale lectures, “The gift of God’s grace was, and is, His work of Gospel. And it is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher, and not merely proclaimed. The great, the fundamental, sacrament is the Sacrament of the Word.”¹¹⁹ We shall say more about this below. All we need note at this point is that here, as in other key places, Forsyth’s position on preaching bore some resemblance to Rome’s notion of the perpetual sacrifice of the cross in

115. Ibid., 70.

116. Ibid.

117. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, 55. Indeed, Forsyth understood the pastoral office in both prophetic and sacramental terms. See Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 133, 142, 144; Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New*, 121; Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, 72–73. Unless stated otherwise all references to *The Soul of Prayer* in this volume are to the 1951 edition.

118. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church*, 25–26.

119. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 3.

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the Eucharist, and anticipated some of Barth's best insights about the struggle that takes place in the confrontation between the gospel and the "false, mendacious thoughts about the world and life," when the "despotic rule" of the latter is "being overthrown" and "the new truth set up in its place."¹²⁰ For Forsyth, as for Barth, the preaching of the gospel (as with the reading of Holy Scripture) is not about the transference of data but is always an *event*, always a *becoming* of God afresh, and always, in the gracious economy of Holy Love, a *dynamic* possibility. So, in a volume of sermons by Barth and Eduard Thurneysen, we read:

Preaching the gospel, the coming to the fore of God's truth, is always an occurrence, an event. The truth of God, no doubt, is true, too, irrespective of us; it wants to become true among us, by gaining entrance here and there with some person who surrenders to truth. In order that this may come about we must go to a particular place. As the fiery heat in the earth's interior breaks forth here and there, as a mountain smokes and a crater forms where we can come upon this heat, thus also the glowing fire of God's truth has broken forth at some place. This place, this breaking forth on the part of God's truth in this world, that is the place of the Saviour, that is Jesus Christ Himself.¹²¹

Or, as Forsyth himself had earlier articulated: "The greatest thing you can give any man is your God and your Saviour. The reason why some Ministers are valuable for other things than preaching, even valuable in spite of their preaching, is that they preach about God, and about Christ; they do not preach Christ. They are only messengers, not Sacraments."¹²² To so recall this dynamic nature of revelation is to remember that Forsyth was, in the theological sense, a "positive" preacher. His Yale lectures published on North American soil are a vigorous articulation of the recent modern-positive theo-biblical program so dominant in Germany and championed through the likes of Theodor Kaftan, Karl Beth, Richard Grützmacher, Richard Rothe, Martin Kähler, Reinhold Seeberg, and others. In those lectures, Forsyth offered a two-pronged protest against both a scholastic and sterile orthodoxy—"canned theology gone stale,"¹²³ he called it—and the "negative" word proposed by the program associated with theological liberalism. In their place, he proposed a "positive" theology the task of which concerns expounding the saving facts (*Heilstatsachen*) given graciously and

120. Barth and Thurneysen, *God's Search for Man*, 71, 72.

121. *Ibid.*, 72. See also Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*.

122. Forsyth, "Ordination Address," np. Republished in this volume, 352–55.

123. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 138.

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fully before we begin. This places us in a situation in which the Church is spared from beginning the theological task all over again, and which, while related to and thankful for the genius of the past, is unafraid of the currents of contemporary thought. Forsyth's is far removed from the mediating theology of the mid-nineteenth century, and expresses no interest in mediating between positions. Indeed, his concern was neither to preserve the truths of a "stiff old orthodoxy"¹²⁴ nor to dismantle liberalism *per se*, but rather to unleash the reserve of evangelical faith to promote not a new system of theology but a new pronouncement, a theology with different dialect, what Grützmacher, Seeberg and Beth termed "the modern positive theology" and Kaftan named a "modern theology of the old faith."¹²⁵ If not in the academy, then certainly a number of his twenty-seven years in the pastorate taught Forsyth that the "sunny liberalism"¹²⁶ he had once embraced with such naïve enthusiasm acquired dysphonia when faced with the actual moral situation wherein human existence happens. Written off by the sterile orthodox for espousing the value of biblical criticism, and by theological progressives for promoting an "out-of-date" gospel, Forsyth carved his own path and refused to be pigeonholed. His own name for his position was "heterodox"—the preservation of "a positive core and a flexible casing"¹²⁷—and he regarded himself as a "large and generous *evangelical*"¹²⁸ while longing that the Church might too become such again, as she once was with Athanasius, convinced as he was that the very survival of the Church catholic was at stake. He wrote: "For no Church unity can be welded merely by the pressure of its environment, by the utilitarian need of cohesion in the face of social and moral ills. Such is the nature of the Church that its unity is possible only by the internal energy of the creative redemption that gave it birth; in a word, by the Holy Ghost."¹²⁹

Forsyth considered himself advancing not a "theology" *per se* but an actuality earthed in the economy of the supreme holiness of God's love.¹³⁰ He championed a return to the personalism and evangelical authority which made the Reformation truly reforming: "new life and not a new creed, a new

124. Forsyth, "The Attitude of the Church to the Present Unrest," 214.

125. See Häring, *The Christian Faith*, 122–23.

126. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 106.

127. Forsyth, "Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, Heresy and Freedom," 322.

128. *Ibid.*, 325.

129. *Ibid.*

130. See Goroncy, "The Elusiveness, Loss, and Cruciality of Recovered Holiness," 195–209.

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power and not a new institution.”¹³¹ British theology, at the time, recovering from a stiff and hackneyed orthodoxy, tended to misconceive vagueness for breadth and maudlinism for love. And so accusing his age of being “unreal, sentimental and impressionist,” Forsyth sought to “go to the bottom of things”¹³² and re-ground Christian dogmatics in the positive authority of the great eternities announced in the apostolic word—the triumph of holiness over that sin which would see God murdered. It is to here that we must “continually return,” Forsyth insisted, “to adjust our compass and take our course.”¹³³ This, it might be suggested, is part of Forsyth’s enduring allure. While some of his ideas deserve more attention, and some others are distracting, his theocentric vision resists being contained or defined by passing fads or scaled down to capitulate to human systems, especially those which make a light thing of sin, and so a cheap and easy thing of its overcoming.

In his presentation of “The Meaning of a Sinless Christ,”¹³⁴ Forsyth insisted that we could neither respect nor honor nor worship a God who “smothered our conscience” in uncostly love, a God who thought so little of his “eternal and universal Righteousness” that he owed nothing to himself. Such a kindly God, Forsyth averred, would demand even less than our own consciences and would be incapable of that forgiveness which regenerates and creates anew. Indeed, such a God would be incapable of anything “beyond amnesty and benevolence.” The God who has, in the crucified Christ, laid bare the very face of holiness and has thrown his all against sin “with the whole passion of His eternal energy” is the sole content of the gospel that the Church is called—nay, commanded—to proclaim, even at the threat of her own extinction. So Forsyth’s apprehension at so much of what passed for preaching in his day, preaching which, he claimed, was concerned with notions of God fundamentally other than the God unveiled in Jesus Christ: “With such a cordial God as has taken the place of Christ’s God need we ask why the moral influence of the pulpit decays in the very midst of its popularity; why preaching, as it grows interesting, and delightful, and humane, grows ineffective also upon moral life wherever the conflict is severe; why, especially, it is without effect on the ethic of international life, of public life, and of business life, where energy is tense and serious?”¹³⁵

And Forsyth’s response to such a situation? He told his students:

131. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 210.

132. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society*, 100.

133. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom, and the Future*, 119, 120.

134. Reprinted in this volume, 283–98.

135. Forsyth, “The Meaning of a Sinless Christ,” 302.

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It is not a new theology we need so much as a renovated theology, in which orthodoxy is deepened against itself, and not pared away. It is a new touch with our mind and, conscience on the moral nerve of the old faith. We have had many new theologies in the last hundred years. Theological enterprise has been turning them out freely. But the vein of liberalism, which thus followed on the old Orthodoxy, has been worked out for the preacher's purpose. It is now exhausted of religious ore. The spring has given out (to change the image), and the stream runs thin, and whispers softly among little pebbles, though once it roared among great boulders now left behind in the hills. It is not sermons we need, but a Gospel, which sermons are killing. We need to go behind and beneath all our common thought and talk. Liberal theology is a standing necessity and a rich growth; but theological liberalism, abroad and at home, thins down into Unitarianism infallibly. What we require is not a race of more powerful preachers, but that which makes their capital—a new Gospel which is yet the old, the old moralised, and replaced in the conscience, and in the public conscience, from which it has been removed. We need that the Gospel we offer be moralised at the centre from the Cross, and not rationalised at the surface by thin science. We need that more people should be asking “What must I do to be saved?” rather than “What should I rationally believe?” We need power more than truth. We need a new sense of the living God as the God whose eternal Redemption is as relevant and needful to this age's conscience as to the first. It is not a ministry we need but a Gospel, which makes both ministry and Church. The Church will not furnish the ministers the age requires unless it provide them with a Gospel which they will never get from the age, but only from the Bible for the age. But it is from a Bible searched by regenerate men for a Gospel, and not exploited for sermons by preachers anxious to succeed with the public. It may be best to preach to the sinners and to the saints and never mind at present the public, who feel neither. If we do that well the public will respect us. If we think of the world, let us think chiefly of the world as the arena of an eternal Redemption, and not of a professional success, or of a social revolution.¹³⁶

At this point, we might profitably recall the words of W. B. Selbie (who, in 1886, enrolled as Mansfield College's first student and who, from 1909, served as its second principal) that were contained in his tribute to Forsyth in the week following Forsyth's death. After noting that his “greatest debt” to

136. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 20–21.

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Forsyth was that the latter enabled him to remain a Congregationalist and so resist the Protestant scourge of denominational ship-jumping to which so many of us have succumbed, he wrote:

But this, though the greatest debt, was not the only debt I owe him. To me, from the time I first heard him, he has been the most valued of all preachers of the Gospel, and that for two reasons. In the first place, I never heard him without going away enlightened, without receiving a new point of view. Of no other preacher can I say this. In the second place, he was conspicuous among the preachers that I have known, in the fact that his Gospel was such as a man could accept without surrendering his manliness. Too often in our age have we been offered milk-and-water doctrine which may be fit for babes and the shallower type of women, but Forsyth was always conscious of the reality, the deadly reality of sin, on the one hand, and the awful holiness of God on the other. A listener felt ready to bare his back for the punishment he served. All idea of a namby-pamby, foolishly indulgent God was banished for ever from our minds.¹³⁷

Forsyth's confidence in the ever-present good news of God meant that he was not content to let the grammar employed in the past be redeployed to speak on his behalf in a time of crisis that came to its head with the loss of poise in liberal Protestantism's failure to speak to a world whose confidence in progress had been buried in the "chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful . . . abode of madness"¹³⁸—the No Man's Lands of Flanders and France.

The changeless Gospel must speak with equal facility the language of each new time, as well as of each far land. If it be missionary to every soul it is also missionary to the whole soul of history. There is an ironic, socratic docility in the everlasting Gospel. It must be flexible if it is to search and permeate. It must be tractable and reasonable because it is so supreme and sure. It must have the power to vary, and to meet the forms of thought and life which it does so much to produce. We could never preach to the time if our Gospel had but a lapidary and monumental eternity.¹³⁹

But Forsyth was not only a preacher who was "positive" in the sense of avoiding extremes and staying off hobby-horses. He was also deeply positive in his encouragement of preachers to do so as well—not only to those who find

137. Selbie, "Tributes to the Late Rev. Principal Forsyth," 153.

138. Letter of Wilfred Owen to Susan Owen, 4 February 1917, in Owen, *The Collected Letters of Wilfred Owen*, 431.

139. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 140–41.

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themselves contending for the faith at the very battle lines where those ideas which shape and disrail the world, at least for a time, are marching against the gospel and its Christ, but also to those who find themselves cast into despair by the “spiritual skeletons” about them, and within them. “What preacher,” he asked, addressing with words animated with the hope of divine determination those who know all too well the sense of failure which overwhelms and the hopelessness which broods at the door, “has not many a time to answer with Ezekiel that they can only live by some miracle of God.” Here, one preaches, perhaps, “out of duty more than inspiration . . . prophesies in obedience rather than in hope.” To such, Forsyth would say: “Well, preach hope till you have hope; then preach it because you have it. ‘Prophesy over these bones; call out to the Spirit,’ says the Lord. At the Lord’s call, if not at your own impulse, call; call with a faith of life when the sense of life is low; speak the word you are bidden, and wait for the word you feel; and then the matter is the Lord’s, and you win a new confidence in the midst of self-despair.”¹⁴⁰

And because it is neither bones nor mummies who is the object of the preacher’s word, but flesh and blood, and flesh and blood often neither inspired nor kindled by the Spirit of life, the preacher, Forsyth averred, must also woo and wait upon the Spirit of life, and preach to the Spirit of life, invoking the very energy of God “to enter these easy forms” and blow new life on and in them that their feet might be set in the kingdom of God.¹⁴¹ Such is the forbearing breath of love—love whose patient quests are finally inexplicable, whose gracious self-giving is never to be presumed upon, whose eucatastrophic nature never finally fails (in the words of Micheal O’Siadhail) to birth “a freak twist to the theme, subtle jazz of the new familiar, [a] trip of surprises.” “Gratuitous, beyond our fathom, both binding and freeing, this love re-invades us, shifts the boundaries of our being.”¹⁴²

In June 1909, Forsyth addressed a number “about to go into the active ministry, and to become stewards of the mysteries of God,” a reference to his chosen text (1 Cor 4:1) for that particular gathering. In that “Valedictory Address,”¹⁴³ Principal Forsyth was quick to tell those valedictorians present that they were “first of all stewards, not owners,” that they were those “with a trust” rather than “with a property.” He continued:

140. Forsyth, “An Allegory of the Resurrection,” 315; reprinted in this volume, 204–23.

141. *Ibid.*

142. O’Siadhail, “Out of the Blue,” 124.

143. Reprinted in this volume under the title, “Stewards of the Mysteries of God,” 349–55.

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You have to carry what many others have tried to carry, a Gospel, a Truth many times uttered. And so I would warn you not to strive to win notice by originality but only by the Gospel you preach. The truest things you will have to say are those that have been said many times, but they are still the most original. Grace is the most original thing in the world. However original sin may be, Grace is more original still. The Grace of God is so original as to be unexplainable. It is great to have gifts to bring home to your hearers, truths, great truths, in a clever way, but remember always that the essential thing for a Minister is not gifts but faithfulness. Faithfulness not to your people but to God . . . [Y]our duty as preachers is not to preach sermons, but to preach a Gospel. What you have to dispense to the people is not anything of yours but a revelation of God's mystery. The great storehouse of this mystery is the Bible. The Bible is your source.

"The Bible is your source." Here one recalls that while Forsyth's writings are not bruised with the exegetical work of a Calvin or a Barth, they nevertheless betray a profound wrestling with Scripture and a mind irrigated with its words, images and themes. That said, his exegesis was sometimes less assiduous than it could have been. So, for example, his comments on Revelation 2:28 from his previously unpublished sermon which appears in this volume: "The peculiarity of this verse is that nobody knows exactly what it means, and we are therefore at liberty to let it suggest what it will."¹⁴⁴ One might well suppose that Forsyth's advice here is not the best posture to adopt when confronted with an obscure or ambiguous text, and, thankfully, this does not represent the default setting for how Forsyth viewed and practiced the expository task generally.

Forsyth wrestled with the implications of his own claim that "the Bible is the supreme preacher to the preacher," asking questions such as how then is the preacher to preach the Bible? And, is the preacher's relationship with the Bible merely suggestive or expository? What is the most fitting association between eisegesis and exegesis? Does the preacher preach whatever might tantalise his or her mind as if the Bible were "a jewelled mass of facets of trembling lights," or is the preacher's task to lead people "into the Bible's own great renewing heart?"¹⁴⁵ Forsyth was convinced of the latter, and he was persuaded that this meant cultivating the practice of preaching through large sections of Scripture and resisting (as certainly the mature Forsyth did) the widespread practice of reducing the Bible to a "religious

144. Reprinted in this volume, 340–41.

145. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 18.

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scrap book,”¹⁴⁶ or of leading people “out of the Bible into subjectivities, fancies, quips, or queries.”¹⁴⁷ The Bible, he insisted, has a world, a context, an ethos and even a cosmos of its own, and the preacher must lead people into that world—that is, into “the eternal of holy love, grace and redemption, the eternal and immutable morality of saving grace for our indelible sin.”¹⁴⁸ Or again, “We must all preach to our age, but woe to us if it is our age we preach, and only hold up the mirror to the time.”¹⁴⁹ Those who do the latter will feed up a word which is ever antiquated. There is, no doubt, a challenge here to our age for, as Forsyth was fully aware, the Bible has ceased to be “the text book”¹⁵⁰ of the preacher’s audience. He confesses: “Our people, as a rule, do not read the Bible, in any sense which makes its language more familiar and dear to them than the language of the novel or the press. And I will go so far as to confess that one of the chief miscalculations I have made in the course of my own ministerial career has been to speak to congregations as if they did know and use the Bible.”¹⁵¹

He was equally adamant that preaching is concerned with both instruction and edification: “We cannot do without either. On the one hand instruction with no idea of edification at all becomes mere academical discourse. It may begin anywhere and it may end anywhere. On the other hand, edification without instruction very soon becomes a feeble and ineffective thing.”¹⁵² But his foremost concern was to answer what he believed was “the great need of the religious world today”; namely, “a return to the Bible.”¹⁵³ Encouraging a group of mainly young ministers at an annual conference at Mundesley, Norfolk, in July 1909, he declared:

I have always done much in my ministry in the way of expounding the Bible, and I would say to the younger ministers particularly who are here, Do not be afraid of that manner of preaching . . . Do not be afraid of long texts, long passages. Preach less from verses and more from paragraphs. If I had my time over again I would do a great deal more in that way than I have done . . . You have to work your way through the chapter with the aid of the best commentary that you can get; and you have to

146. *Ibid.*, 19.

147. *Ibid.*, 20.

148. *Ibid.*, 22.

149. *Ibid.*, 5.

150. *Ibid.*, 23.

151. *Ibid.*

152. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 3.

153. *Ibid.*, 33.

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exercise continual judgment in doing so lest you be dragged away into little mallets of detail instead of keeping to the larger lines of thought in the passage in hand.¹⁵⁴

While rejecting the temptation of dragging people back to the dogmas of scholastic Protestantism, and while embracing, with some caution, the insights of modern biblical criticism,¹⁵⁵ here he re-sounded the note he trumpeted two years earlier and some two-and-a-half thousand miles away in New Haven, Connecticut:

We must meet criticism of the Bible with a hospitable face. We have learned much from it, and we have much to learn. We preachers, especially, must realize how it has rediscovered the Bible, as Luther rediscovered the Gospel. We must use all wise and tender means to give our people the results of that rediscovery, and to make the Bible for them the real historic and living book which it has so widely ceased to be. We must avoid irritating them with discoveries of what it is not, and statements of what is upset; and we must kindle them with the positive exposition of what it is now found to be for heart, history, faith and grace. We must get rid, as we wisely can, of the amateur and fantastic habit of laying out the Bible in diagrams and schemes, which treat it like a public park, and which ignore historic and critical study. We must give up the allegorical interpretations by which some attempt to save its verbal inspiration, now hopelessly gone. And we must restrain ourselves in the fanciful use of texts at the cost of the historic revelation which the whole context gives. These practices have a show of honouring the Bible, but they really treat it with the disrespect that is always there when we presume people to mean another thing than they say. If you treat a text mystically make it clear that you take a liberty in doing so. Preach more expository sermons. Take long

154. *Ibid.*, 34–35, 36.

155. Forsyth believed that even if some of the critics had lost their way, biblical criticism itself exists to witness to faith's historicity, and to assist the Church to hear more clearly "the contingent reality of the early Church's witness to the *kerygmatic* Christ." Rodgers, *The Theology of P. T. Forsyth*, 169. Forsyth would agree with David Yeago's claim that "historical research is propaedeutic to the real theological-exegetical task . . . and it will not fare well if it is not pursued by the means proper to theological reflection." Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 97. Or, in Forsythian parlance, the biblical exegete helps the Church and its preachers to "disengage the kernel from the husk, to save the time so often lost in the defence of outposts, and to discard obsolete weapons and superfluous baggage." Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 280; cf. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society*, 67–70; Forsyth, "The Evangelical Churches and the Higher Criticism," 24, 34–35.

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passages for texts. Perhaps you have no idea how eager people are to have the Bible expounded, and how much they prefer you to unriddle what the Bible says, with its large utterance, than to confuse them with what you can make it say by some ingenuity. It is thus you will get real preaching in the sense of preaching from the real situation of the Bible to the real situation of the time. It is thus you make history preach to history, the past to the present, and not merely a text to a soul.¹⁵⁶

And again:

Even if you leap from book to book, finish one book before you take up another. Spend days or weeks at a time in the spiritual climate of one writer and one work. If you go to Switzerland for strength you do not go for a day. You make as many weeks as you can of it. So with the bracing air of Scripture. Live in one district long enough to rest there, to get its benefit, and to feel its spell. Then you come to know it, you possess it, you are built up upon it, and it is amply worth your while. And within each book ministers might preach more on long passages, and unfold their spiritual dialectic, with some care not to import their own or that of the seventeenth century.¹⁵⁷

Forsyth's response to what he perceived to be "a growing desire for expository preaching—for a long text, and the elucidation of a passage"¹⁵⁸—was matched by a distaste for short sermons. The impatient demand for homiletical brevity—often coupled with appeals for incessant visits, religious bustle and social events—paralyses the preacher and represents "one of the most fatal influences at work to destroy preaching in the true sense of the word. How can a man preach if he feel throughout that the people set a watch upon his lips? Brevity may be the soul of wit, but the preacher is not a wit. And those who say they want little sermon because they are there to worship God and not hear man, have not grasped the rudiments of the first idea of Christian worship."¹⁵⁹ What such seek, Forsyth decried, is "no more than a warm bath or a sacred concert."¹⁶⁰ In an address delivered on the occasion of his public recognition as Minister at Cheetham Hill, Forsyth lamented:

156. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 112–13.

157. Forsyth, "A Few Hints about Reading the Bible," 531.

158. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 5.

159. *Ibid.*, 75; see also p. 120.

160. *Ibid.*, 100.

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Among other regrettable tendencies of the hour is the disposition to depreciate the power of the spoken word. It exists both in the pew and in the pulpit itself. I know preachers who regard their Sunday duty with a contempt (which is evident), compared with the so-called practical work with which they fill five days of the week. And we are constantly pressed with the demand for short sermons. I believe myself that short sermons are mostly themselves too long. The man whose preaching is simply tolerated has no right to preach as long as ten minutes. The man whose preaching is welcomed has no right to be always as short as twenty. We listen gladly to political speeches of an hour, and the reason is that we have an interest, amounting to a passion for the subject. Let us have enough knowledge of the subject of religion as to choose only competent men for ministers, and let it be so real and passionate to us that we can take pleasure in what our prophet or expositor has to say for an hour if he likes. I don't hint that all sermons should be an hour long. But I do think short sermons are killing the pulpit and sending the people to the altar or the platform.¹⁶¹

Soon after Forsyth's death, T. Charles Williams recounted: "[Forsyth] spoke with solemn emphasis about the perils of the pulpit. He could see no hope except in the return of strong, expository preaching, with a Gospel 'which had not been discovered but received'. His mind pictured the pulpits occupied with elegant young men 'with the Mansfield manner,' as he slyly put it, indulging in beautiful ritual, genial philanthropy and Italian art, and so denying the faith and Cross of our Redeemer and Lord."¹⁶² And W. Robertson Nicoll, writing during the same week, recalled that Forsyth "grew to be a really eminent preacher. He had always the defect of being lengthy, but he put so much life and fire into his discourses that he carried his hearers with him."¹⁶³

It will be clear by now that what was of primary concern to Forsyth, however, was neither the sermon's length nor the preacher's passion but rather the sermon's content. Again, he was well aware that preaching the Bible or preaching theology is not the same as preaching Christ! "It is a light matter," he wrote elsewhere, "having to cast about for a text to face Sunday compared with having to cast about for a message to face our world." He continued:

Mere theologians try with all earnestness to do things for the Gospel, or correct opinion about it or bespeak interest in it. And, their result is so lean, so ineffectual, because they do not

161. Forsyth, *The Pulpit and the Age*; reprinted in this volume, 131–44.

162. Williams, "A Tribute from Wales," 154.

163. Nicoll, "Principal Forsyth," 146.

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appropriate what the Gospel has done for them, and they are not broken to it. Many are touched, fewer are seized, and fewer still are broken. We are much too theological, and we need more religion. We believe in the Gospel as a piece of theology, sometimes stodgy, sometimes thin. It is part of our equipment. But is it not possible to preach ardently about Christianity and be a stranger to grace, to hold a brief for Christ ably, eloquently, and even feelingly, and not preach Christ?¹⁶⁴

We noted earlier Forsyth's lament of those fellow ministers who, while they may have been engaged in some valuable ministry, preach *about* God and *about* Christ rather than actually preach *Christ*. Such, Forsyth insisted, "are only messengers, not Sacraments,"¹⁶⁵ and preachers are called to be the latter. In his series of essays published as "The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ," Forsyth powerfully trumpeted that to preach Christ is neither to carry a word *about* Christ, nor to preach the same message that Jesus preached: "His preaching days were to His consummate work of the Cross what the Baptist was to Himself—forerunners."¹⁶⁶ The Church, as the fruit of that consummate work, does not simply restate the message of the Sermon on the Mount, for example, but must proclaim the message of the Sermon in the fuller light of the redeeming work of God's cross and God's Easter. There is wide disparity, too, between preaching *about* the forgiveness of sins and actually preaching the forgiveness of sins. To do the former is to merely make public some information which may or may not be true, to reflect aloud on what may or may not be a possibility, to speak about what is presumably interesting but which may safely be kept at arm's length, so to speak; to do the latter is, in Luther's words, to be one who "calls the thing what it actually is."¹⁶⁷ This is what it means to be a theologian of the cross—a "sacrament" and not a mere reporter, one who preaches him "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:14).

To preach the *totus christus* of the Bible means, for Forsyth, to announce the apostolic *kerygma* of the cross. This does not mean that every sermon ought be explicitly concerned with the atonement so much as that the crucified and risen Lord is the content of all Christian preaching:

To preach Christ is indeed fundamentally to preach His atonement; but it is not incessantly to preach about it. We must always

164. Forsyth, "The Ideal Ministry of the Church," 22.

165. Forsyth, "Ordination Address," np. Republished in this volume, 352–55.

166. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, 10.

167. Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation," 40. See also Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross*.

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preach it, but we need not always preach about it. Only it must not be denied or denounced, never ignored or levelled down to the category of man's efforts to atone his own sins. It is true there are historic stages and junctures when to preach Christ in the more theological form is the only preaching relevant to the mental and moral situation. It was so at the Reformation. But today it may be more needful in certain positions to preach the Christ of the cross than the cross of Christ. There is a strategy in the holy war. It is the last crisis that calls the reserves to the front. But whether we preach the Christ who atoned or the atonement of Christ it is still an atoning Christ and an atoning cross we preach. To preach only the atonement, the death apart from the life, or only the person of Christ, the life apart from the death, or only the teaching of Christ, His words apart from His life, may be all equally one-sided, and extreme to falsity . . . Preach the total Christ therefore in the perspective of evangelical faith, but with immediate stress on that aspect most required by the conscience of the hour.¹⁶⁸

Forsyth's challenge to preachers to "preach the total Christ . . . in the perspective of evangelical faith" recalls his frequent echo that above all else the Bible is "a preaching book," a sacrament which directs us away from itself to Christ. Hence "faith is not faith in the Bible, but in Christ through the Bible; yet there are many preachers who preach the Bible more than Christ."¹⁶⁹ The Bible, in other words, exists to bear witness to the gospel—Jesus Christ himself—and not to provide mere lessons or precepts. It exists to create faith and not to merely instruct. Consequently, Forsyth held that the gospel for whose sake alone the Bible exists has "no meaning whatever apart from dogmatic truth."¹⁷⁰

Forsyth may not write as a biblical theologian "in the strict sense of the term,"¹⁷¹ and one might well wish that Forsyth had shared more with us not only of the finished fruit of his Bible reading but also of the processes of his mind given to disciplined and attentive exegesis of Holy Scripture, but at least one New Testament professor observed that Forsyth "bottoms all his theological thinking" upon scripture and that his biblical scholarship was "twenty or thirty years ahead" of most of the exegetes of his day.¹⁷² Forsyth

168. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 81–82, 83.

169. Forsyth, "The Efficiency and Sufficiency of the Bible," 16.

170. Forsyth, "Church, State, Dogma and Education," 830. See also Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church*, 304–6; Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* 38, 55.

171. Jones, "The Christological Thought of Peter Taylor Forsyth and Emil Brunner," 61.

172. Hunter, *P. T. Forsyth: Per Crucem ad Lucem*, 31. See also Jackson, "The Biblical

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never wrote a commentary, but this expositor—a third of whose library was in German, who read numerous biblical studies journals every week, and who championed the value of biblical criticism to a British audience still hard of hearing—was clearly on top of his game. He was no hypocrite when he wrote, “No man should ask for a public hearing on a theological question unless he has mastered his New Testament at first hand.”¹⁷³ Certainly Forsyth’s sermons betray evidence of a Bible well-worn, affectionately and prayerfully studied, and trusted to interpret the shifting sands of great movements and ideas with which the Church must wrestle and interpret in light of the divine economy.

This was particularly evident, perhaps, when Forsyth turned to Scripture rather than to the creeds of the Church or to the Fathers to construct his christology, and when he defended the notion that it is the *kerygma* itself which is the unifying reality of the Bible, and especially of the New Testament. Richard Lischer put the latter point well, if not in somewhat hyperbolic form, when he wrote of Forsyth:

His “positive” theology resisted orthodox biblicism and opposed the shallow liberalism of culture-Christianity decades before Barth and the later crises-theology (a term coined by Forsyth). He focused on the kerygma as the principle of unity in the New Testament long before Dodd brought such thinking into vogue. Before Dibelius and Bultmann introduced the academy to Gospel criticism, the evangelical Forsyth made this startling observation: “The New Testament (the Gospels even) is a direct transcript, not of Christ, but of the preaching of Christ.” No one since Luther had so firm a grasp on the kerygmatic nature of the New Testament, and no one in the twentieth century translated that insight into homiletical theology with greater passion than P. T. Forsyth.¹⁷⁴

Forsyth believed not only that the gospel must save the Church and its beliefs, even save the Church from itself—certainly the Church is in no position to save the gospel!—but also that the Church does not require the “permission of the critics” in order to hear the good news. While grateful for sound biblical criticism, “faith,” he wrote, “does not wait upon criticism, but it is an essential condition of it.” And because of the nature of the subject matter, the fullest critics are believers and not mere inquirers. He continued: “The passion of an apostolic missionary faith is an essential condition to a sound criticism and a safe; and by ‘sound’ I don’t merely mean sound to the

Basis of the Theology of P. T. Forsyth”; Jackson, “P. T. Forsyth’s Use of the Bible,” 323–37.

173. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 70.

174. Lischer, *The Company of Preachers*, 98.

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Confessions, I mean sound to the mind; and by 'safe' I do not merely mean safe for the Church, but safe for the soul. I mean that faith in the Gospel, evangelical faith, is essential for that full, complete view of the case upon which sound results are based; it is essential in order to be fair to all the facts.¹⁷⁵

Forsyth was no bibliolatrast. An infallible book implies that our primary need is intellectual rather than moral. To be sure, he believed that it should be difficult for us not to believe in verbal inspiration, but the locus of belief is not the Bible *per se* but that word of grace which both creates the Bible and to which the Bible bears faithful witness. The text itself, he insisted, is of secondary value to the holy intent of its inspiration. It is the communication of the gospel itself which elevates the Bible "above a mere chronicle of events to be dissected and discussed by scholarly pedants"¹⁷⁶ and sets it free to be a "sacrament"¹⁷⁷ and "sermon"¹⁷⁸ of the good news. Indeed, Forsyth considered Holy Scripture to be not only a "sacrament" of the gospel, but also Christ's "holy sepulchre"¹⁷⁹ wherein we realise the living Christ who, as we "pore and wait" for him to address us in Scripture, surprises us from behind by announcing his living presence with us. This is evident in his poem, "A Hymn to Christ":

O sword that finds, O word that binds
The weakness of the soul!
O piercing Word! O healing sword!
Our terror, and our goal.
...
O light of God! O fire of God!
And Truth that maketh true!
Pierce, search us, burn us, bring to dust,
But, O, create us new.¹⁸⁰

Evident here is Forsyth's belief in the dynamic action of the divine Word as he who not merely impresses but who "makes and unmakes," who creates and not simply elicits "the power to answer and understand"

175. Forsyth, "An Allegory of the Resurrection," 314.

176. Sykes, "Theology Through History," 232.

177. See Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 134–35, 372–74; Forsyth, "Churches, Sects, and Wars," 620; Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 132; Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society*, 68–69, 125–27; Forsyth, "A Few Hints about Reading the Bible," 530, 542–43; Forsyth, "The Efficiency and Sufficiency of the Bible," 28–29.

178. Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society*, 68–69, 80; Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 7.

179. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, 88.

180. Forsyth, "A Hymn to Christ," 133.

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himself.¹⁸¹ The poem also betrays something of Forsyth's conviction that the preacher is to function as "the exegete of the eternal," as one who leads "out of the Bible fold on fold of all that is in it," and who expounds the Bible "in its freshest light . . . drawing forth into the interest of our own day the faiths and truths that were already old in God when they first flashed upon the writers of the Book."¹⁸² And like the Apostle Paul, in order to express a reality as incogitable as the revelation of God in the cross, Forsyth too strained language and tortured ideas which he enlisted from any quarter available to him in an effort to communicate the cruciform shape of grace-filled actuality. But Scripture was not the only chalice from which Forsyth drank. Those themes characteristic of his theology also betray a debt to Anselm, Luther, Kant, Carlyle, Ritschl, Troeltsch, Dorner, Kähler, Schlatter,¹⁸³ Turner, Dale, Goethe, Law, Harnack, Arnold, Eliot, Kierkegaard (that "modern 'Pascal of the North'"¹⁸⁴), Maurice, Fairbairn, Denney, Newman, Schleiermacher, Butler, Nietzsche, Milton, Greenwell, Hardy, Zahn, Seeberg, Schopenhauer, Ibsen,¹⁸⁵ Lessing, Ihmels, Loofs, Bunsen, Schelling, Ruskin (who had made Italy voguish for English Protestants), Browning (London Congregationalism's own poet), and many others. Hegel's ghost too, for example, so prevalent in Forsyth's lectures published as *Religion in Recent Art* and *Christ on Parnassus*, also haunts the sermons in this volume, some (like "Egypt," "Music and Worship" and "An Allegory of the Resurrection") more than others, and his presence recalls Forsyth's wide and deep reading habits, and a mind engaged with those ideas and movements that move not only individuals but centuries and nations too. Just as Forsyth described Ezekiel's preaching, so too it might be said of the Aberdonian himself that "the words that he overheard took wings in his genius."¹⁸⁶ So, while his daring mind remained hospitable to innovative ideas, Forsyth did not take ideas over from others directly. Instead, he ingested their insights, he breathed deeply of their vapor; but these were transformed in his lungs so that what was expired was no longer pure Kant or Kierkegaard, but was now Forsyth.

Forsyth, emboldened by his conviction that the preacher's task is to listen for the echoes of Christ's voice and seek traces of Christ's footsteps in the culture and to bring every thought captive to Christ, read broadly; so,

181. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, 80.

182. Forsyth, "Things New and Old," 275; reprinted in this volume, 259–69.

183. On the deep influence that Schlatter had on Forsyth's thought, see Goroncy, *Hallowed Be Thy Name*, 90–93.

184. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 71.

185. On Forsyth's indebtedness to Ibsen, see Goroncy, "Bitter Tonic for our Time," 105–18; Goroncy, "Fighting Troll-Demons in Vaults of the Mind and Heart," 61–85.

186. Forsyth, "An Allegory of the Resurrection," 312.

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while the Bible remained his principal text, and while he could celebrate the energetic turn in his day towards expository preaching, he was equally free in the gospel to employ other texts, what he called “new texts.” In a fine essay on preaching and poetry, for example, he argued that “nothing is far foreign to the Gospel which helps us to acquire our own souls, or elucidate our true spiritual quality. Indeed, it is the divorce of culture with its spaciousness from the power of the cross that has done so much to make culture pagan, and the Gospel either strident or dull.” And he proceeded to ask whether modern literature (and we might here add other arts, too) does not offer us “a much neglected opportunity of expounding the old Gospel from new texts.”¹⁸⁷ And again:

May the expository style not be occasionally applied in the interests of Christian truth to the forms of delight with which our modern literature clothes spiritual truth as it follows into the detail of the modern soul the broad principles of Christ? We mean no jugglery with the word Inspiration. We intend no crude identification, in current literary fashion, of the inspiration of today with the Inspiration which breathes uniquely for all time through the first literature of a unique Redemption. But it is one Spirit, even if His ancient movement is “once for all.” We gladly accept, and deeply need, the aid of those thinkers who pursue into the complexity of the modern conscience the large and eternal ethics of Christ. Might we not make more use of those men of genius who in the subtle and beautiful forms of literary art enshrine the pearls of the Christian soul. Literary feeling is not religion, and literary religion is not Christian piety. But are we overdone with teachers who can make the spiritual principles of the Christian soul come home to the contemporary imagination, who speak especially to the best of the young, and who would deliver us, if we would let them, from the sentimental fancies which make so much religion nauseous to the robust mind. A sermon of quotations is usually bad, both as art and as Gospel. Might not the pulpit go a long way beyond mere quotation in occasionally interpreting these great poetic interpreters, who, if not inspired as text, are at least inspired as commentary, and who illuminate from the broad margin of modern time the mysteries of the small immortal page?¹⁸⁸

187. Forsyth, “Preaching and Poetry,” 269; reprinted in this volume, 157–63. See also Goroncy, *To Mend the World*.

188. Forsyth, “Preaching and Poetry,” 269.

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Evident here is not only Forsyth's commodious reading habits and firm grasp on matters philosophical but also his Dostoevskian insight into human nature and into the limberness of the Christian message to address every location on the map of human experience. Certainly, Forsyth entertained no illusions about the real challenges and complexities that attend preaching from a "new text"—that it "calls for skill, taste, and tact," that it "requires that the passage be thoroughly mastered, and the preacher saturated with its turns and shades as well as with its ideal unity," and that it was not to everyone's taste—but, he insisted, it is possible to do it "without either wresting the text or forcing the gospel," and it represents a challenge incumbent upon preachers to expound the "spiritual movement" of the culture as represented in its artistry "from the standpoint of the gospel of Christ."¹⁸⁹ Some of his own attempts to so do are evident in this volume, and those interested in meandering further with Forsyth along this path might also be helped by reading his piece "The Pessimism of Mr Thomas Hardy," or his early reflections on Robert Burns.¹⁹⁰

We have seen that Forsyth considered preaching to be the word of God—God's speech to God's people. He considered it also to be, however, the action of "the Church confessing its faith." "It is less organized," Forsyth said, "but no less collective than the great creeds. And in the Churches where there are no formal creeds it takes their place. The place of the sermon in the more democratic and non-Catholic Churches is due, in part, to the absence in their ritual of a recited creed. It is all that some of them, like the Congregationalists, have for a creed."¹⁹¹ And insofar as preaching is the word of God, preaching, Forsyth insisted, is also a "sacrament." Indeed, the Sacrament of the Word, he wrote, is "the distinctively Protestant Sacrament" which "invests the pulpit with the dignity, if not the solemnity which elsewhere is bestowed on the altar." Consequently, "the preacher of the Word must regard its distribution as a Sacrament. He breaks to the people the living bread and inspires them with the wine of God."¹⁹²

When it came to the matter of worship, and especially to the sacraments, Forsyth was a high churchman: "Sacraments, and not socialities, make the centre of our Church life and social unity—Sacraments, and not even social beneficence. Make much of them."¹⁹³ That said, Forsyth held that there is really only one primary sacrament—the good news of God's grace in

189. Ibid., 271. See Goroncy, "Bitter Tonic for our Time," 105–18; Goroncy, "Fighting Troll-Demons in Vaults of the Mind and Heart," 61–85.

190. See Forsyth, "The Pessimism of Mr Thomas Hardy," 193–219; Forsyth, "Robert Burns 1878," 4; Forsyth, "Robert Burns 1879," 4.

191. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 68.

192. Forsyth, *The Pulpit and the Age*; reprinted in this volume, 131–44.

193. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 244.

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Jesus Christ. According to Forsyth—and here he is in harmony with his own Reformed tradition—the locus of the true sacrament is the single event of the incarnate presence of God. Those derivative events, or what the Church commonly calls “the sacraments”—namely, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and, we might add with Forsyth, the preaching of the Word and the Bible itself—are aspects of the one event. They are, if one prefers, the secondary proclamation activities that bear witness to, are bound to, and are correlated expressions of, the one primary and objective “sacrament” or mystery of God made known in the unique event called Jesus Christ. In these proclamation activities, the original presentation of God to human persons and of human persons to God—the two-fold event or movement that takes place in the hypostatic union¹⁹⁴—is re-presented in the sacramental life of the Church; that is, the gospel is proclaimed, God makes himself available to us.¹⁹⁵ With characteristically rhetorical power, Forsyth put it thus: “The Word and the Sacraments are the two great expressions of the Gospel in worship. The Sacraments are the acted Word—variants of the preached Word. They are signs, but they are more than signs. They are the Word, the Gospel itself, visible, as in preaching the Word is audible. But in either case it is an act. It is Christ in a real presence giving us anew His Redemption.”¹⁹⁶ Or, as he had articulated it in an earlier lecture:

The great sacrament of Christianity is the sacrament of the living and preached Word of Reconciliation, whether by speech, rite, or work. The elements may be anything; the Word is everything, the active Word of God’s Act, Christ’s personal Act met by His Church’s. That sacrament of the Word is what gives value to all other sacraments. They are not ends, they are but means to that grace. They are but visible, tangible modes of conveying the same gospel which is audible in the Word. In the sacrament of the Word the ministers are themselves the living elements in Christ’s hands—broken and poured out in soul, even unto death; so that they may not only witness Christ, or symbolise Him, but by the sacrament of personality actually convey Him crucified and risen. This cannot be done officially. It cannot be done without travail.¹⁹⁷

I indicated earlier Forsyth’s conviction that the pulpit belongs to the Church in a way that the platform never can. Perhaps it is clearer now why

194. See Goroncy, “‘Tha mi a’ toirt fainear dur gearan,” 253–86.

195. See Goroncy, “John Calvin.”

196. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 176.

197. *Ibid.*, 141.

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Forsyth recognized this to be the case. The great and fundamental sacrament of the Word is “an act and a power”:

It is God’s act of redemption before it is man’s message of it. It is an eternal, perennial act of God in Christ, repeating itself within each declaration of it. Only as a Gospel done by God is it a Gospel spoken by man. It is a revelation only because it was first of all a reconciliation. It was a work that redeemed us into the power of understanding its own word. It is an objective power, a historic act and perennial energy of the holy love of God in Christ; decisive for humanity in time and eternity; and altering for ever the whole relation of the soul to God, as it may be rejected or believed . . . And it is this act that is prolonged in the word of the preacher, and not merely proclaimed.¹⁹⁸

And again:

To be effective our preaching must be sacramental. It must be an act prolonging the Great Act, mediating it, and conveying it. Its energy and authority is that of the Great Act. The Gospel spoken by man is the energizing of the Gospel achieved by God. Its authority is not that of the preacher’s personality, nor even of his faith, nay, not even of his message alone, but that of the divine action behind him, whereof he himself is but as it were the sacramental element, and not the sacramental Grace. If our preaching is not more sacramental than the Catholic altar—I do not say more eloquent or more able, but more sacramental—then it is the altar that must prevail over all our No-Popery. For religion *is* sacramental. Where it is not it becomes bald. And the only question is, where the sacrament lies. We place it in the Word of Gospel. *Accedit verbum et fit sacramentum*. Nothing but the Word made Sacrament can make a Sacrament out of elements, and keep it in its proper place. But what a task for our preachers to fulfil!¹⁹⁹

Evident here again is Forsyth’s unyielding conviction that preaching is not lecturing, and that the preacher is not at hand to entertain. The preacher’s principal work is apostolic, priestly, prophetic and sacramental.²⁰⁰ First and foremost, the minister exists to serve the gospel and *only insofar as this is the case* does the minister serve the Church. And so the minister takes their

198. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 3.

199. *Ibid.*, 57.

200. See Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 133, 142–46, 184–85; Forsyth, *The Church, the Gospel, and Society*, 33; Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, 37, 57, 74–78; Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New*, 97–99; 112–13; 121; Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer*, 72–73.

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job description not from congregational expectations, and still less from the management theories which abound, but from the gospel itself, proclaimed from font, pulpit and table. So Forsyth:

An ideal ministry is one which is ideal to the Gospel not to humanity. That is, the ideal minister is not the minister of the human ideal, but of the Gospel ideal in the New Testament. The ideal Minister is first the servant of the word, then of man. It is the Gospel revelation that sets up the ideal; it is not the needs, aspirations, or possibilities of human nature. The ideal ministry is not even to be measured by the demands, dreams, or expectations of the churches. The ideal of the church is apt to be a ministry that fills and manages large and busy buildings, undertakes much, and is kind, even to softness; whereas the dominant note of the New Testament, and especially of Christ's teaching, is love's severity. In His lifetime at least, Christ alienated far more than He drew, and made trouble for almost everybody who touched Him. The early Protestants described themselves not as servants even of the Church, but as *V. D. M.*, *Verbi divini ministri*. They served the Gospel rather than the Church, and the Church for the Gospel's sake. A man is an ideal minister not by his success with the public but by his stewardship of the word, by his adequacy and fidelity to Him that called him.²⁰¹

And again, this time in what was possibly his first address to the Cheetham Hill congregation, from "The Pulpit and the Age":

You have called and I have answered gladly. But it is not your call that has made me a minister. I was a minister before any congregation called me. My election is of God. Paul speaks of 'a faithful minister of the new covenant' . . . The minister of this covenant, therefore, the minister of Christ, has his call, first, in the nature of God and God's Truth; second, in the nature of man and man's need. We have on one side the divine Gospel; we have on the other the cry of the human. His call is constituted both by the divine election and the requirements of human nature. Would that some who are sure of their election by God, were as sure of their election by man, and their fitness to adapt God's truth to human nature. It is not therefore the invitation of any particular congregation that makes a man a minister. It is a call which on the human side proceeds from the needs rather than from the wishes of mankind, from the constitution of human nature as set forth in Christ, rather than from the appointment

201. Forsyth, "The Ideal Ministry of the Church," 22.

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by any section or group of men. I am here, not to meet all your requisitions, but to serve all your needs in Jesus Christ. You have not conferred on me my office, and I am Christ's servant more than yours, and yours for His sake. The minister is not the servant of the Church in the sense of any special community or organization. The old Latin theologians used to subscribe themselves V. D. M., Minister of the Word of God,—Minister not of the Church, but of that Christian human nature which our particular views and demands so often belie. A minister may, on occasion, never be so much of a minister as when he resists his congregation and differs from it.²⁰²

“Only an age engrossed with impressions and careless about realities”²⁰³ could regard the minister's principal work otherwise, or could embrace that monster of *reductio ad absurdum* of treating the sermon as if it were a mere public address, or some assignment whose goal involves anything less than the death of the congregation, and of the preacher! With wobbly eyes and stammering lips, the preacher carries the very word which carries him or her, a word which is an effective deed of God, and which is “charged with blessing or judgment. We eat and drink judgment to ourselves as we hear. It is not an utterance, and not a feat, and not a treat. It is a sacramental act, done together with the community in the name and power of Christ's redeeming act and our common faith.”²⁰⁴

“I have no hesitation in speaking strongly,” Forsyth announced in his first published sermon, “The Turkish Atrocities.” “I am not a statesman who has to weigh every word and consult a thousand interests. I have no responsibility upon me but that of uttering the truth.”²⁰⁵ And although this sermon demonstrates that the newly ordained Forsyth was far less concerned with biblical exposition than was the more mature expositor he would become, even here he is as clear as he was in the winter years of his ministry when he addressed, in May 1918, the Assembly Meetings of the Congregational Union of England and Wales, and reminded them—and no doubt himself too—“I am handling powers and not themes. I am not lecturing; and I am not playing with touching things. I am preaching.”²⁰⁶

Forsyth championed that the Church must recover the dogmatic positivity of evangelical faith. Where the exigency of the Word has been

202. Reprinted in this volume, 131–44.

203. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 54.

204. *Ibid.*, 56.

205. Forsyth, “The Turkish Atrocities,” 4; reprinted in this volume, 69–74.

206. Forsyth, *Congregationalism and Reunion*, 70.

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abandoned, there seems to be little or no reason for a congregation to assemble each Sunday, no matter how stimulating a particular preacher's personal views might be, or how talented its musicians. Without Christ proclaimed from pulpit, font and table, the Church quickly becomes a harbinger of mediocrity, quackery, and "the gossipy side of life" which is "associated with the small and negligible side of the soul."²⁰⁷ It is the real presence of Christ crucified, and not great oratory, that makes preaching. And it is the real presence of Christ crucified that transfigures a mere sermon into the good news and self-announcement of God. To cite Forsyth, again at length:

Preaching . . . is the most distinctive institution in Christianity. It is quite different from oratory. The pulpit is another place, and another kind of place, from the platform. Many succeed in the one, and yet are failures on the other. The Christian preacher is not the successor of the Greek orator, but of the Hebrew prophet. The orator comes with but an inspiration, the prophet comes with a revelation. In so far as the preacher and prophet had an analogue in Greece it was the dramatist, with his urgent sense of life's guilty tragedy, its inevitable ethic, its unseen moral powers, and their atoning purifying note. Moreover, where you have the passion for oratory you are not unlikely to have an impaired style and standard of preaching. Where your object is to secure your audience, rather than your Gospel, preaching is sure to suffer. I will not speak of the oratory which is but rhetoric, tickling the audience. I will take both at their best. It is one thing to have to rouse or persuade people to do something, to put themselves into something; it is another to have to induce them to trust somebody and renounce themselves for him. The one is the political region of work, the other is the religious region of faith. And wherever a people is swallowed up in politics, the preacher is apt to be neglected; unless he imperil his preaching by adjusting himself to political or social methods of address. The orator, speaking generally, has for his business to make real and urgent the present world and its crises, the preacher a world unseen, and the whole crisis of the two worlds. The present world of the orator may be the world of action, or of art. He may speak of affairs, of nature, or of imagination. In the pulpit he may be what is called a practical preacher, or a poet-preacher. But the only business of the apostolic preacher is to make men practically realize a world unseen and spiritual; he has to rouse them not against a common enemy but against their common selves; not against natural obstacles but against spiritual foes; and he has to

207. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 116.

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call out not natural resources but supernatural aids. Indeed, he has to tell men that their natural resources are so inadequate for the last purposes of life and its worst foes that they need from the supernatural much more than aid. They need deliverance, not a helper merely but a Saviour. The note of the preacher is the Gospel of a Saviour. The orator stirs men to rally, the preacher invites them to be redeemed. Demosthenes fires his audience to attack Philip straightway; Paul stirs them to die and rise with Christ. The orator, at most, may urge men to love their brother, the preacher beseeches them first to be reconciled to their Father. With preaching Christianity stands or falls because it is the declaration of a Gospel. Nay more—far more—it is the Gospel prolonging and declaring itself.²⁰⁸

More specifically, it is Jesus Christ—who *is* the gospel—preaching *himself* as the eternal Son who reveals the Father, the holiness of the Father’s inexhaustible and enduring love, and “the Father’s passion to redeem,”²⁰⁹ a passion flaunted in the costliness of the cross where holiness comes home “bringing His sheaves with Him,”²¹⁰ and where God “found Himself.”²¹¹

As Forsyth said of Christ’s preaching, so the same might be said of his own:

His speech was not clear-cut and unambiguous. He set more store by an eloquent flexibility, a suggestiveness in language than by stiff accuracy. He cared more for the pliancy of forms than their correctness. It was more to Him that they should mean greatly than that they should speak exactly and lucidly. He was more ready to keep old formularies, and interpret them, than to found a sect on their rejection for bald new summaries. He was a great Nonconformist, but He was not a separatist, not a sectary. He was always craving to be understood as He Himself understood the past.²¹²

This brings us to the matter of Forsyth’s writing style, a subject requiring some ink particularly for those readers unfamiliar with Forsyth’s penmanship for it might appropriately be said of Forsyth that *Le style c’est l’homme même* (“The style is the man himself”).

“The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is

208. *Ibid.*, 1–3.

209. Forsyth, *The Holy Father and the Living Christ*, 86.

210. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 192.

211. *Ibid.*, 224.

212. Forsyth, “Things New and Old,” 274.

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neither a 'singing saint' nor a 'moralizing poet,' but an assaulter of the mind. Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends."²¹³ So wrote the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel about the Hebrew prophets. Not a few would say that these words might also be appropriately conferred upon Forsyth. Indeed, scattered even among the obituaries that appeared in *The British Weekly* during the week after Forsyth's passing are references to "a tendency to grandiloquence,"²¹⁴ and to "a style unusually complex, which did not grow simpler with years."²¹⁵ That most prolific of British journalists, W. Robertson Nicoll, who was much loved by nonconformist readers and of whom it was said he had "the keenest nose for a book that will sell of any man in the book business,"²¹⁶ observed in Forsyth a style which was both "deliberately adopted" and which "suited him." Still, Nicoll would pronounce of Forsyth: "I have never known a great theological writer who proceeded so much by the way of iteration."²¹⁷ Many of Forsyth's students (among whom he "spent himself without stint"²¹⁸) were surprised to hear that others regarded their teacher's books difficult when they themselves "found his familiar lectures not only clear to follow, but a theological education to digest."²¹⁹ One of Forsyth's former students, possibly named Elliot, wrote of him: "About his books, I question whether those who knew him only through his books could ever really know him. It was [a] surprise to me when I first discovered that many people regarded his books as difficult. To me they have always been the most readable of theological books. The explanation doubtless is that I had learned, a little at least, to know the man. He took pains to make his thought plain to us students. Though probably our understanding may often have been misunderstanding!"²²⁰

The reality, however, is that most reviewers comment unenthusiastically on his writing style. One fellow minister famously referred to Forsyth's writing as "fireworks in the fog."²²¹ And even Forsyth's close friend James Denney confessed to finding Forsyth's book of sermons published under the title *Missions in State and Church* "very difficult to read," and wrote that

213. Heschel, *The Prophets*, 10.

214. Nicoll, "Principal Forsyth," 145.

215. Darlow, "Tributes to the Late Rev. Principal Forsyth," 146.

216. Clement Shorter, as cited in Price, "W. Robertson Nicoll and the Genesis of the Kailyard School," 73.

217. Nicoll, "Principal Forsyth," 146.

218. Darlow, "Tributes to the Late Rev. Principal Forsyth," 146.

219. *Ibid.*

220. From an anonymous, undated and unpublished letter headed "Dr. Forsyth," in Dr Williams's Library, London.

221. Stephenson, "Letter," 22.

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“If this is how one feels who is heartily at one with the writer, how must it strike an unsympathetic reader?”²²² Moreover, regarding *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, Denney wrote, “The peculiarity of [Forsyth’s] style is such that only people who agree with him strongly are likely to read him through.”²²³ Certainly few could disagree with the assessment that “the Forsythian style is rugged and some of his paragraphs are enormous. Often he gives the impression in print of a turgid, swift-flowing river, hurrying to hurl itself over some lofty precipice, midst showers of spume.”²²⁴ Most criticisms, however, betray a failure to account for the occasional and preached-genre of most of Forsyth’s work, prepared in the midst of busy college life and denominational responsibilities, and of the impossible task of speaking and writing about the cross unparadoxically. Moreover, they betray a disregard for Forsyth’s theological methodology which nourishes the imagination with displays of breathtaking freedom. To be sure, Forsyth’s published work—though evidencing a profound and rigorous mind full of “the stimulus of the spoken word, [and] nuanced by paradox and artful ambiguity,” and which “convey the lecture room’s privileged immediacy”²²⁵—remains as curiously undisciplined as it is almost entirely free of the modern concern with footnotes and customary referencing. Even Forsyth’s most systematic work, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, was not, Forsyth recalled, “meant for scholars, but largely for ministers of the Word which it seeks in its own way to serve.” His stated aim was to “be as popular as the subject and its depth allowed,” and he confessed that the lack of bibliographical apparatus is not only unnecessary for lectures, but would give the book “an aspect of erudition which its author does not possess.”²²⁶

But the failure to understand this “patently original thinker”²²⁷ is, I suggest, due more to the taxing nature of his gospel, and to a decline in affinity with the evangelical experience out of which he wrote, than to his writing *per se*. “The merchantmen of these goodly pearls must be seekers;

222. Denney, *Letters of Principal James Denney to W. Robertson Nicoll*, 118–19.

223. *Ibid.*, 97. For Denney’s fuller review of Forsyth’s *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, see Denney, “Principal Forsyth on Preaching,” 57.

224. Jones, *The Royalty of the Pulpit*, 131.

225. Binfield, “The Significance of Baby Babble,” 1.

226. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, vi. Camfield suggests that there were practical, rather than theological or philosophical reasons for why Forsyth never embarked on a systematic theology: “The truth is that the thought of Forsyth required that ‘treatise’ which he never gave. Partly, one suspects, from chronic ill-health, and partly, through a disinclination to, and perhaps incapacity for, the work of research.” Camfield, “Forsyth,” 9.

227. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 141.

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and without even divers they cannot be had.”²²⁸ Just as T. F. Torrance would later confess that “the difficulty of my style is sometimes due to the difficulty of the subject-matter!,”²²⁹ so too with Forsyth’s idiosyncratic writing. One commentator on Forsyth has helpfully drawn attention to an affinity with Gerald Manley Hopkins, noting: “[The] variation in response (to Hopkins’ style) is not primarily a matter of *literary* judgement, though it may rationalize itself as such. It depends upon the degree to which the reader is ready to respond to the exceptional and in some ways over-taut intensity of Hopkins’ *experience*. Those who have complained that he strove against the genius of the English language have really been complaining that he strained unwarrantably against the measure of human experience which they wish to accept.”²³⁰ And Colin Gunton suggested that Forsyth had about him “something of the capacity of Kierkegaard to utter the kind of lapidary judgement that both breaks through cliché and comes, upon reflection, to appear to be undeniably true.”²³¹ Certainly at no point does Forsyth suggest that the preacher’s task is to promote obscurity. Still, of the accessibility or otherwise of his language Forsyth was well aware: “I own I tax you, and I am sorry, but it has taxed me more.”²³² Eugene Peterson was right to describe Forsyth as “a no-nonsense theologian who goes for the jugular.”²³³ Forsyth’s daughter remembers that although her father could certainly write simply (never simplistically), when writing for trained theological minds he “demands everything we have of mental and spiritual grasp.” When writing, this master of English prose was wrestling—like Jacob at Peniel—with thoughts mysterious, unconquerable and beyond human mastery. He also wrote with “a physical and nervous intensity which shook the desk, and which after an hour or two left him utterly spent, stretched out white and still upon his study couch, until the Spirit drove him back to pen and paper.”²³⁴ Such intensity was the germane product of the subject itself; “the Browning of theology”²³⁵ entertained no illusions that the truth of the gospel might be lubricated for easier swallowing: “It is not the simple things which make

228. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, vii.

229. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, xi.

230. Escott, *P. T. Forsyth and the Cure of Souls*, 20–21.

231. Gunton, “Real as the Redemptive,” 37.

232. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 171–72.

233. Peterson, “Foreword,” 5.

234. Andrews, “Memoir,” xxvi. Another has noted: “[Forsyth] did not usually sit at a table when he wrote, but had a small square board on his knee. He used specially ruled paper, with the lines very far apart.” Williams, “A Tribute from Wales,” 154.

235. Bishop, *Review of Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 305.

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the soul,” he said. Rather, “the greatest powers are those that break through language and escape.”²³⁶

Writing on the centenary of Forsyth’s birth, Gwilym Griffith noted:

Forsyth did not rank with Spurgeon and Parker, Maclaren and Dale, among the great preachers of his age, nor had he the platform gifts of Hugh Price Hughes, John Clifford and Silvester Horne, though on occasion he could, and did, move great assemblies. Nor, again, was he an engaging ‘sun-beshone’ personality that makes disciples and devotees through the magnetism of personal contacts. He gained his great, enduring and still-growing influence through his books, which were pre-eminently books of witness. He ‘wrote for God and for souls,’ and under the stress of inner constraint. He commanded (though this has been denied) an opulent and fluent style, but he sacrifices it when sluggard readers complained of ‘obscurity.’ He could not ‘open his dark sayings,’ like the Psalmist, ‘upon an harp,’ but to meet the infirmity of his critics he sometimes cut up his sentences into short and stertorous predictions—only to be told that he was too epigrammatic, antithetical or paradoxical. But he wrote as a confessor, not as a literary scribe, and his books made their own way . . . One has the feeling that every word he wrote had first been passed through the fire.²³⁷

Just a few days after Forsyth’s death, W. B. Selbie, who succeeded Forsyth at Cambridge but whose acquaintance with Forsyth and his preaching went back to days at Cheetham Hill, remembered the “real power” of Forsyth’s ministry. He spoke not only of being “attracted, as many other younger men were, by the note of originality and reality that marked [Forsyth’s] preaching,” but also of the fact that Forsyth “left a mark [at Cambridge] that will not be easily effaced. Men and women of all kinds found help and comfort in his teaching. His caustic and epigrammatic style appealed to the more intellectual, but he had also a spiritual depth and insight which waked a response in some of the humblest of his hearers, and I have heard these speak of him in terms which any minister might envy.”²³⁸ And during the centenary of Forsyth’s birth, Hugh Stafford, a retired Quaker schoolmaster from Hitchin, wrote of Forsyth:

He was my minister for nine years, six while I was a school-boy in Leicester, and three at Cambridge. Later I often stayed at

236. Forsyth, “The Way of Life,” 86.

237. Griffith, “Peter Taylor Forsyth,” 1.

238. Selbie, “Tributes to the Late Rev. Principal Forsyth,” 153.

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Hackney College where he was Principal. I do not suppose that in those early years I ever fully understood his sermons. It was no easy discipline to listen. He seldom preached for less than 40 minutes, and one's mind was kept at full strength all the time. Nevertheless it was profoundly impressive. Every sentence, one felt, came white-hot from the furnace of his spirit . . . One emerged, rather battered perhaps, but humbled, strengthened, and above all filled with the sense of the tremendous import of religion . . . That sense has never left me since.²³⁹

And, reflecting on a photograph of Forsyth, the President of the Literary and Philosophical Society further fills in the picture in an article published in *The Wyvern*:

Ministers achieve success in their labours by the soundness of the doctrine they set forth, by their energy and earnestness, and by the attractiveness of their manner and style. And any one of these is often sufficient to make a popular teacher of religion: the pastor of the Clarendon Park Church has them all. He is very broad in his beliefs, but he never gets away from the foundation facts of religion . . . Of Mr. Forsyth's energy and enthusiasm in the good cause there can be no doubt. It is impossible to listen to him without catching the seriousness of his themes, and realising that the preacher is pouring out his inmost feelings. Then again, the rev. gentleman has a most happy style. His sermons are not only literary, but even poetical. He is apt indeed in his phrases, and uses exceedingly forceful and elegant English.²⁴⁰

Forsyth, of course, would have been horrified at any suggestion that his "elegant English"—forged as it was amidst the "grey skies, great silences, and stubborn glebes"²⁴¹ of the Aberdonian soil of his parents—might have placed some obstacle to his hearers hearing the Word of God. As we have already noted, those privileged to hear Forsyth preach on a regular basis, and who wrote about such, testified not only of their awareness of being in the presence of a great personality but, and more importantly, of being in the presence of a personality that had been taken captive by the very reality of which St Paul said that he was not ashamed; namely, Jesus Christ and him crucified.

239. Stafford, "Letter," 8. This letter was Stafford's response to an article on Forsyth by R. L. Child, "P T Forsyth: Some Aspects of his Thoughts," 9. Child's piece was the first in a series of three articles on Forsyth published in the *Baptist Times* in 1948—on May 27 (p. 7) and June 3 (p. 9).

240. Anonymous, "Our Photograph," 67. *The Wyvern* was a Leicester-based "topical, critical, and humorous journal" which ran from 1891 to 1899.

241. Escott, *Director of Souls*, 6

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Regardless of the text or topic at hand, it was near impossible not to know what drove and overcame this prophet of the cross and what reality he sought to bear witness to, above all else. Furthermore, not only was his assault on the mind concerned to underscore the moral gravity of the human situation *co-ram deo*, but he also ministered out of that Reformed conviction that it is not only minds or ears that are the barrier to hearing the good news, but wills—“the very centre of our life”²⁴²—wills, not of a merely battered and bruised human spirit but those of a Lancelot race, a race with weapons in its hands and ever ready to strike against any who would challenge their thrones. It is the recalcitrant human will—“our dearest life, the thing we cling to most and give up last . . . our ownest own”²⁴³—which is the target of Forsyth’s preaching, precisely because it is the target of the God who would be Lord. Forsyth would certainly have agreed with Helmut Thielicke’s judgment on preaching: “The aim of the sermon, after all, is to *create* something living and set it in motion. Consequently, it should be directed not only at the intellect, but must at the same time also be aimed at the conscience, will, and imagination. It is addressed to the *whole* person!”²⁴⁴ So understood, it is little wonder then that every time Forsyth stood up to preach he felt that he was “fighting for the very life of the Faith,”²⁴⁵ and that consequently no blow could be too hard.

We have seen already that Forsyth never constrained himself to only reading, learning and engaging with “theologians,” and that no arena of human activity was off limits. He made every thought an agent of a redeemed personality bearing faithful witness to a waxing world reconquered for God. And it is clear that Forsyth knew that such witness is ultimately beyond human speech (*ineffabili quodam modo*),²⁴⁶ and ought to be felt more than analysed (as with Kierkegaard), even as the outworking of the atonement itself calls for language. Thus Forsyth strained and tortured language itself, utilizing every human discipline available to him in order to shed light—or rather expunge the light that is there—on one or other facet, vista and panorama of the cross. Forsyth wrote fugue-like, developing endless variations on the one great theme of exhaustless grace. Certainly, as Alan Sell notes, “a reader would have to work very hard to exit from a Forsyth text in absolute ignorance of the author’s intention.”²⁴⁷

242. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, 194.

243. *Ibid.*, 192.

244. Thielicke, *Notes from a Wayfarer*, 291–92.

245. Andrews, “Memoir,” xxviii.

246. See Calvin, *Inst.*, 2.17.2.

247. Sell, “P T Forsyth: Theologian for a New Millennium?” 238.

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In the tradition of Bernard, Dante, Donne, Herbert, Milton, Eliot, Auden and R. S. Thomas, Forsyth was a poet's theologian: he believed that theologians, like "first rate poets, must deal with human life. They may not deal with bloodless abstractions or scientific systems whether of anthropology, cosmology, or theology; they must deal with life."²⁴⁸ This also meant that he continually employed the grammar of "gospel," "religion," "moral," "revelation," "cross" and "redemption," for example, to encompass a broad possibility of meanings. This does make reading Forsyth unnecessarily onerous at times, but it is also part of the joy. It seems that he was not destined to simply repeat the conclusions reached in the past, or the language so employed to do so, even while he greatly appreciated the efforts of his forebears. Donald MacKinnon was fully aware of such when he wrote: "Forsyth explicitly preferred a theology that could flirt with the mythological in its insistence on the primacy of narrative, to one tainted by what he called 'Chalcedonianism,' which seemed to subordinate the concrete reality of Christ's agony in Gethsemane and Calvary to a 'bloodless ballet of impalpable categories.'"²⁴⁹

To be sure, this way of doing theology infuriates some, and Forsyth might have done well to concede some ground to his otherwise-sympathetic critics at this point. But the charge that such a style represents some kind of fear of closure or even dogmatic fluffiness around first-order questions simply will not stick. Moreover, it is entirely proper that Forsyth resisted those kinds of analysis all too common in academic attempts to, in Dietrich Ritschl's words, "make God the prisoner of our thoughts or theologies," seeking a "Word with which we could operate, a Word we could 'use,' a Word we could judge."²⁵⁰ The upshot of such an approach is that the real questions posed by the Word of God remain live ones, each time new, which resist, even as they invite, our attempts to forge responses by way of "objective" principles and statements, and which ever and at every moment call for our faithful response. Yes, "the Church sees through a glass darkly; but it sees none the less,"²⁵¹ and so it is incumbent upon her to declare what she has seen and heard (1 John 1:1-3), and to embrace a faithful silence about that of which she is ignorant.

248. Forsyth, "The Argument for Immortality Drawn from the Nature of Love," 360; reprinted in this volume, 119-30.

249. MacKinnon, "Aspects of Kant's Influence on British Theology," 356.

250. Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation*, 68.

251. Shortt, *Rowan Williams*, 5: "The Church sees through a glass darkly; but it sees none the less. These are the two components that Catholic Christianity seeks to hold in tension. Say too little, and you may betray the costly demands of the gospel. Say too much, and you risk sounding fanciful or authoritarian."

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To this end, Forsyth continues to be a preacher's theologian—a fertile and faithful mentor to those called to kerygmatic ministry. At a time when belief that God's audacious and reconciling speech still arrives though "the foolishness of our proclamation" (1 Cor 1:21) is running thin, Forsyth reminds us that ecclesial pursuits that do not correspond to the Church's cruciform foundation are a vanity, that the task laid upon the preacher is to help the people of God recognize the voice of the Lord—this means, among other things, resisting the temptation to speak for God, recognizing that every sermon tells an unfinished story and is offered in the hope that God has so much more to tell us, and so engaging in a mode of speech that leaves space for the One who alone can finally speak for himself—and that regardless of what others may propose, in the divine freedom and wisdom, preaching is a first-order and not a second-order activity for the Church. It may well be that Forsyth was right after all when he boldly intoned that it is with its preaching that Christianity stands or falls.

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Notes from the Pulpit Ministry of P. T. Forsyth

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Foreword by
David Fergusson

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