

The Precise Problem Today

by P.T. Forsyth

The sermon emphasizes the importance of a scientific approach to theology, the need to understand the history of theological thought, and the nature of Christ's work as the reconciliation of humanity with God.

Scripture: Isaiah 43:18, Romans 5:8, Romans 6:4, 2 Corinthians 2:14, Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 3:10, Colossians 2:14, Hebrews 9:14, 1 Peter 2:24

Topics: "Theological Method", "Christ's Redemption"

Description

P.T. Forsyth delves into the history and development of philosophy and theology, emphasizing the importance of building upon the insights of predecessors rather than demolishing their work. He highlights the spiritual evolution recorded in both disciplines, stressing the need to interpret and carry forward the teachings of great thinkers. Forsyth underscores the disadvantage of self-taught individuals who neglect the scientific history and method of theology, advocating for a comprehensive approach that incorporates past insights. He explores the complexities of Christ's work, discussing the moral and redemptive aspects, the significance of His suffering, and the transformative power of His actions on humanity.

Transcript

There is a popular impression about both philosophy and theology that the history of their problems is very sterile; that it is not a long development, carrying the discussion on with growing insight from age to age, and passing from thinker to thinker with growing depth, but rather a scene in which each newcomer demolishes the work of his predecessor in order to put in its place some theory doomed in turn to the same fruitless fate. Truly, as Hegel says, if that were so with philosophy, its history would become one of the saddest and sorriest things, and it would have no right to go on.

And if it were so with theology, we should not only be distressed for Humanity, but we should be skeptical about the Holy Spirit in the Church. It could be the Church of no Holy Spirit if those who translated its life into thought did not offer to posterity a spectacle higher than dragons that tare each other in the slime, or lions that bit and devoured one another. As a matter of truth and fact, both philosophy and theology have not only a chronicle but a history. They register the highest spiritual evolution of the race.

The wave behind rolls on the wave before. The past is not devoured but lives on, and comes to itself in the future. The new arrivals do not consume their predecessors, and do not ignore them; they interpret them and carry them forwards. They take their fertile place in the great organic movement. They modulate what is behind upwards into what is to come. They correct the past and enrich it; and they hand on their

corrected past to be a foundation for the workers yet to be. The amateur, or the self-taught, therefore is at a great disadvantage.

He does not take up the problem where the scientific succession laid it down. He does not come in where his great co-workers left off. He must start ab ovo. He must do over again for himself what they have conspired to do better. He risks "being a fool at first hand." He wants himself criticizing what has long been dropped, and slaying the long-time slain. He throws away effort in establishing what the competent have agreed to accept. And he misses the right points to attack or to strengthen, because he has not surveyed the ground.

Every now and then one meets the capable amateur, whose misfortune it has been to have no schooling in the scientific history or method of the subject, who applied to it a shrewd mother-wit or an earnest but uninstructed conscience, and who perhaps publishes a theory of Incarnation or Atonement which, for all its hints and glimpses of truth, makes no real contribution either to the history or the merits of the case. This is the misfortune of the self-taught who goes straight to his Bible for the materials of his theology, and ignores most of the treatment the problem has received from the greatest minds in the history of the Church or the soul.

The Bible is enough for our saving faith, but it is not enough for our scientific theology. To make the most therefore of godly and able men, who would else be wasted more or less, it is well that we should teach them at the outset to take up the question where they find it, to begin where their best predecessors left off, to work upon results, and to carry forward the subject in the train of its evolution from the great and growing past. Let us couple up with the past, and repay its gifts by fructifying them for the future. Let us call in our thought, and concentrate it upon the precise question which previous thinkers have left us to solve.

There is, thus, another thing we have to do. We have to try to find a due place for those views which, however one-sided, yet do compel attention to aspects that the Church from time to time ignores. We have to meet, satisfy, and exceed such views. Much, for instance, has been done in the lifetime of most of us to correct and extend those views of Christ's work which were so rigidly objective that they became external. It has been urged that the Church long thought too much of Christ's action on God and not enough of His action on man.

And what is called the moral theory of the Atonement has therefore been pressed upon us, to replace the ultra-objective and satisfactionary view. And the pressure has often been so hard that an objective theory has been entirely denied as immoral, and denied sometimes with a scorn unjustified by either the mental acumen or moral dignity of the critic. But in spite of this over-pressure, and the occasional insolence that goes with ignorance, it remains our duty to find a proper place in our view of the whole great subject for that effect of Christ upon men which has meant so much of the sanctity of the Church.

We have to meet, satisfy, and transcend those pleas which have been called into existence to redress the balance of theological neglect, and to fill out that which was behind in our grasp of the manifold work. Especially we have to adjust our theology of Christ's work to those who observe that the repentance of the guilty is an essential condition of forgiveness, and who go on to ask how we can speak of a finished reconciliation or atonement by a sinless Christ, who could not possibly present before God a repentance of that kind.

There are certain results which, it may be said, we have definitely reached in correction of what has long been known as the popular view of Christ's death and work. They are modern, and they owe much to Schleiermacher, Ritschl, McLeod Campbell, Maurice and others; but they have also been shown to be scriptural, by a new, objective and scientific investigation of what the Bible has to say on the subject. When we have brought the long history of the question up to date, balanced the books, and taken account of the general agreement on the modern side, we can then go on to ask where exactly the question now stands.

The modifications on which the best authorities are substantially at one we have seen to be such as these:

- 1. Reconciliation is not the result of a change in God from wrath to love. It flows from the changeless will of a loving God. No other view could make the reconciliation sure. If God changed to it, He might change from it. And the sheet-anchor of the soul for Eternity would then have gone by the board. Forgiveness arose at no point in time. Grace was there before even creation.

It abounded before sin did. The holiness which makes sin sin, is one with the necessity to destroy sin in gracious love. 2. Reconciliation rests on Christ's person, and it is effected by His entire work, doing, and suffering. This work does three things. (1) It reveals and puts into historic action the changeless grace of God. (2) It reveals and establishes His holiness, and therein also the sinfulness of sin. And (3) it exhibits a Humanity in perfect tune with that will of God.

And it does more than exhibit these things - it sets them up, grace, holiness, and the new Humanity in its Head. 3. This reconciling and redeeming work of Christ culminates in His suffering unto death, which is indeed more of an act than an experience. Here, in the Cross, is the summit of His revelation of grace, of sin, and of Humanity. And the central feature of this threefold revelation in the Cross is the holiness of God's love. It is this holiness that deepens error into sin, sin into guilt, and guilt into repentance; without which any sense of forgiveness would be but an anodyne and not a grace, a self-flattering unction to the soul and not the peace of God. 4.

In this relation to God's holiness and its satisfaction, nobody now thinks of the transfer of our punishment to Christ in its entirety - including the worst pains of hell in a sense of guilt. Christ experienced the world's hate, and the curse of the Law in the sense of the suffering entailed on man by sin; but a direct infliction of men's total deserts upon Him by God is unthinkable. His penalty was not punishment, because it was dissociated from the sense of desert. Whatever we mean by atonement must be interpreted in that sense.

And judgment is a much better word than either penalty or punishment. 5. What we have in Christ's work is not the mere pre-requisite or condition of reconciliation, but the actual and final effecting of it in principle. He was not making it possible, He was doing it. We are spiritually in a reconciled world, we are not merely in a world in process of empirical reconciliation. Our experience of religion is experience of a thing done once for all, for ever, and for the world. That is, it is more than even experience, it is a faith.

The same act as put God's forgiveness on a moral foundation also revolutionized Humanity. Hence we are not disposed to speak of substitution ** so much as of representation. But it is representation by One who creates by His act the Humanity He represents, and does not merely sponsor it. The same act as disburdens us of guilt commits us to a new life. Our Savior in His salvation is not only our comfort but our power; not merely our rescuer but our new life. His work is in the same act reclamation as well as rescue. 6.

Another thing may perhaps be taken as recognized in some form by the main line of judicious advance in our subject. The work of Christ was moral and not official. It was the energy and victory of His own moral personality, and not simply the filling of a position, the discharge of an office He held. His victory was not due to His rank, but to His will and conscience. It lay in His faithfulness to the uttermost amid temptations morally real and psychologically relevant to what He was.

It was a work that drew on His whole personality, and was built into the nature of that personality as a moral necessity of it. What He did He did not do simply in the room and stead of others, He did it as a necessity of His own person also - though its effect for them was not what it was for Him. He fulfilled an obligation under which His own personality lay; He did not simply pay the debts of other people. He fulfilled a personal vocation. And His faithfulness was not only to a vocation.

It was to a special vocation, that of a Redeemer, not merely a saint. The immediate source of His suffering was not the sight of human sin, and it was not a general holiness in Him. It was not the quivering of the saint's purity at the touch of evil. But it was the suffering of One who touched sin as the Redeemer. He would not have suffered for sin as He did, had He not faced it as its destroyer. Not only was this His vocation as a moral hero, but His special vocation as Savior.

It was the work of a moral personality at the heart of the race, of One who concentrated on a special yet universal task - that of Redemption. His perfection was not that of a paragon, one who could do better what every soul and genius of the race could do well. He was not all the powers and excellencies of mankind rolled into one superman. But His perfection was that of the race's Redeemer. It was interior to all other powers and achievements. It was central both for God and man.

He made man's center and God's coincide. He took mankind at its center and laid it on the center of God. His identification with man was not extensive but intensive, it was not discursive and parallel, so to say. It was morally central and creative. He was not Humanity on its divine side; He was its new life from the inside. The problem He had to solve was the supreme and central moral problem of guilt; and the work could only be done by the native action of a personality moral in its nature and methods, moral to the pitch of the Holy.

It is an immense gain thus to construe Christ's work as that of a moral personality instead of a heavenly functionary. It brings it into line with the modern mind and into organic union with the moral problem of the race. It enables us to realize that every step of the moral victory in His life was a step also in the Redemption of the whole human conscience. And we grasp with new power the idea that His crowning victory of the Cross was the victory in principle of the whole race in Him - that Justification is really one with Reconciliation, and what He did before God contained all He was to do on man.

It makes possible for us what my last lecture will attempt to indicate - a unitary view of His whole work and person. 7. After these great modifications and gains, we have cleared the ground to ask with some exactness just where the question at the moment stands. What was the divinest thing, the atoning, satisfying thing, the thing offered to God, in Christ; the thing, therefore, final and precious in what He did? The permanent thing in Christianity must be that which gives it its chief value to God.

We are now beyond the crude alternative that so easily besets us, "Did Christ's work bear upon God or on man?" Neither alone would be true Reconciliation. Neither Orthodoxy nor Socinianism has it. But we have to ask this: "Can we combine the truth in each alternative? Can we reach the value of Christ's saving work to God (i.e. its true and final value) if we exclude its effect within man? Must we not take that in? Nihil in

effectu quod non prius in causa. Must we not include the effect to get the full value of the cause, and give a full account of it?"

Now, let us own at the outset that the first things we must be sure about are the objective reality of our religion, its finality, and its initiative in God's free grace independent of act or desert of ours. But if we start there, it looks as if we were shut up to the first of the crude alternatives, as if the idea of Christ's work as acting on God only gave the best effect to these conditions. It looks as if the old theory alone guaranteed a salvation finished on the Cross, one wholly God's in His grace, one that ensures a full and objective release of the conscience.

These things are not secured by what we do, but by Christ's work on the Cross. Moreover, that work was done for the whole of mankind, and was complete even for those who as yet make no response. And, besides, that first alternative is a view that seems to have the letter of Scripture with it. It does look as if we could not have full security except by trust of an objective something, done over our heads, and complete without any reference to our response or our despoise. But the difficulties begin when we ask what the objective something was.

How describe it? For that purpose the old doctrine used juridical forms. But these are not large enough for the dimensions of a modern world, or for its deepened ethical insight. How exactly could the obedience of Christ stand for the obedience of all? It was the fulfilment of His own personal vocation; how does it stand for the obedience of every other person? Or how does the suffering of Christ restore the moral order, especially one He never broke? If you treat it as punishment, that punishment alone does not restore the moral order.

And, if we say He did not do that, He did not restore a moral order, so much as acknowledge and confess the holiness of God in His judgment, is not the value of that recognition still greatly impaired by the fact that it is not made by the guilty but the Guiltless, who is not directly affected by the connection between sin and suffering. A finished religion would then be set up without the main thing - the acknowledgment by the guilty. That acknowledgment, that repentance, would then be outside the complete act, and would be at best but a sequel of it; whereas we ought to give a real place in a complete work of Reconciliation to our repentance (which some extremists say is all that is required), or to Christ's moral action on us.

Do we not need to include in some way the effect in the cause, in order to give the cause its full and final value, i.e., its value to God. The thing of price done by Christ for God, must it not already include the thing done upon men? Does not Christ's confession of God's holiness include man's confession of his sin? Let us return to that idea of the moral order which is at the bottom of this objective theory. We ask whether the moral order is what the Bible means by the idea of the righteousness of God.

The righteousness of God is not only holy but gracious, not only regulative and retributory, but also forgiving and restoring. It seems, indeed, in the Gospels to need no other condition of forgiveness than repentance. This is so; and it is all very well, we have seen, for individual cases. But we have to deal, as Christ at last had to deal, with the forgiveness of a world, the pardon of solidary sin. And we need to be sure, as Christ alone with His insight could be sure, that the repentance is true and deep.

There it is that we are carried into questions which the Cross alone can answer. How shall I know how much repentance is deep enough? Where find a repentance wide enough to cover the sin of a guilty world? Could Christ offer that? No; directly, He could not. He could not offer it as a pathos, a personal experience, for He had no guilt. But, then, guilt is much more than a sense of guilt. And the essence of

repentance is not its intensity or passion but the thing confessed. It is therefore the holiness more even than the sin that holiness makes so sinful.

It is the due and understanding acknowledgment of the holiness offended. And this only a sinless Christ could really do, who was also sympathetic enough with men to do it from their side. And only the sinless could realize what sin meant for God. Farther, this acknowledgment is not simply verbal, nor simply a matter of profound moral conviction and admission, but it must be a practical confession, as practical as the sin. It must place itself as if it were active sin under the reaction of the Divine holiness; it must be made sin.

That is, it must accept judgment as the only adequate acknowledgment of the holy God in a sinful world; it must allow His holy law to assert itself in the Savior's person in the form forced on the sinner's Friend. He bore this curse as God's judgment, praised it, hallowed it, absorbed it; and His resurrection showed that He exhausted it. But would His acceptance of judgment for us be possible, would it stand to our good, would it be of value in God's sight for us, if He were not in moral solidarity with us?

How could it? What God sought was nothing so pagan as a mere victim outside our conscience and over our heads. It was a Confessor, a Priest, one taken from among men. But then this moral solidarity is the very thing that also gives, and must give, Him His mighty and revolutionary power on us. What makes it possible for Him to be a Divine victim or a Divine priest for us also makes Him a new Creator in us His offering of a holy obedience to God's judgment is therefore valuable to God for us which also makes Him such a moral power upon us and in us.

His creative regenerative action on us is a part of that same moral solidarity which also makes His acceptance of judgment stand to our good, and His confession of God's holiness to be the ground of ours. The same stroke on the one Christ went upward to God's heart and downward to ours. Is this not clear? Christ could make no due confession of holiness for us in judgment if He were outside Humanity, if He were a third party satisfying God over our head. The acknowledgment would not be really from the side of the culprit, certainly not from his interior, his conscience.

The judgment would not really be the judgment of our sin, which would therefore be still due. To be of final value the atoning judgment must be also within the conscience of the guilty. But how is the judgment, the self-condemnation, the confession within our guilty conscience to be offered to God as an ingredient of Christ's reconciling work and not its mere sequel? It is not yet there. Or else it is nothing worth offering by way of atonement when it is there. Is there any way of offering our self-condemnation as a meritorious contribution to forgiveness?

Can it be included in the Divine ground of forgiveness in a guiltless Christ? Repentance is certainly a condition of forgiveness. But Christ could not repent. How then could He perfectly meet the conditions of salvation? The answer is that our repentance was latent in that holiness of His which alone could and must create it, as the effect is really part of the cause - that part of the cause which is prolonged in a polar unity into the sequential conditions of time. Not only, generally, is there an organic moral connection and a spiritual solidarity between Christ and us, but also more particularly, there is such a moral effect on Humanity included in the work of Christ, who causes it, that that antedated action on us, judging, melting, changing us, is also part of His offering to God.

He comes bringing His sheaves with Him. In presenting Himself He offers implicitly and proleptically the new Humanity His holy work creates. The judgment we brought on Him becomes our worst judgment

when we arraign ourselves; and it makes it so impossible for us to forgive ourselves that we are driven to accept forgiveness from the hands of the very love which our sins doomed to a curse. What Christ offers to God is, therefore, not simply an objective satisfaction outside His revolutionary effect on the soul of man in the way of faith, repentance, and our whole sanctification.

As the very judgment He bore for us is relevant to our sin by His moral solidarity with us, so the value of His work to God includes also that value which it has in acting on us through that same solidarity, and in presenting us to God as the men it makes us to be. He represents before God not a natural Humanity that produces Him as its spiritual classic, but the new penitent Humanity that His influence creates. He calls things that are not yet as though they were. In Him a goodness of ours that is not yet rising from its antenatal spring, brings to naught the sin that is.

There was presented to God, in Christ's holiness, also that repentance in us which it alone has power to create. He stretches a hand through time and seizes the far-off interest of our tears. The faith which He alone has power to wake is already offered to God in the offering of all His powers and of His finished work. That obedience of ours which Christ alone is able to create, is already set out in Him before God, implicit in that mighty and subduing holiness of His in which God is always well-pleased.

All His obedience and holiness is not only fair and beloved of God, but it is also great with the penitent holiness of the race He sanctifies. Our faith is already present in His oblation. Our sanctification is already presented in our justification. Our repentance is already acting in His confession. The effect of His Cross is to draw us into a repentance which is a dying with Him, and therefore a part of the offering in His death; and then it raises us in newness of life to a fellowship of His resurrection.

He is thus not only the pledge to us of God's love but the pledge to God of our sure response to it in a total change of will and life. We see now how organic, how central to Christ's gospel of Atonement is Paul's idea of dying and rising with Him, how vital to His work is this effect of it, this function of it. For such a process, such an experience, is not a mere moral sequel or echo of ours to the story of the Cross, it is no mere imitation or repetition of its moral greatness; nor is it a sensitive impression of its touching splendor.

To die and rise with Christ does not belong to Christian ethic, to the method of Jesus, but it has a far deeper and more religious meaning. It is to be taken into His secret life. It is a mystic incorporation into Christ's death and resurrection as the standing act of spiritual existence. We are baptized into His death, and not merely into dying like Him. We do not echo His resurrection, we share it. As His trophies we become part of Christ's offering to God; just as the captives in his procession were part of the victor's self-presentation to the divinity of Rome.

God leadeth us in triumph in Christ (2 Cor. 2:14). It is, indeed, for Christ's sake we are forgiven, but for the sake of a Christ who is the Creator of our repentance and not only the Proxy of our curse. And it is to our faith, which is no more perfect than our repentance. It is to nothing so poor as our faith or our repentance that new life is given, but only to Christ on His Cross, and to us for His sake who is the Creator and Fashioner of both. Our justification rests on this atoning creative Christ alone.

And when the matter is so viewed, the objection some have to the phrase "for Christ's sake" should disappear. No martyrdom could do what the death of Christ does for faith. No martyrdom could offer God in advance the souls of a changed race. For no martyr as such is sure of the future. It is easier to forget all the martyrs that the Savior; and their power fades with time, while His grows with the ages. With the martyr's death we can link many admirable reflections, exhortations, and even inspirations. What it does

not give us is the new and Eternal Life. It is not the consummation of God's saving purpose for the world.

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