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Preaching Biblical and Modern

A Review Essay of P.T. Forsyth's *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*

by Markus McDowell

Modern preaching runs the gamut of style, method and content. An examination of preaching across the country on any given Sunday would exhibit sermons that range from secular moralizing to inspired prophecy. Culture plays a large part in this, but the purpose, content and message should always remain the same across cultures and ages. There is a real danger that the biblical model of preaching can be lost in attempts to speak to a specific group of people in a specific place at a specific period in history. Therefore, it is important for preachers to find sources that remind them of what "biblical preaching" means. There have been scores of books on the subject over the centuries; many useful and others destructive. One of the classical books on preaching is P. T. Forsyth's **Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind**. Although written at the beginning of this century, it still has tremendous and applicable insights for preachers today. Forsyth's writings have influenced scores of the best preachers and theologians over the decades, and they continue to do so. In light of the impact Forsyth has had, it is beneficial to discover how **Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind** can inform biblical preaching in the late twentieth century.

The most excellent part of Forsyth's book (actually a series of lectures) is the thought-provoking and even inspiring content. Forsyth not only shows himself to be an excellent scholar, but also a practical theologian, preacher and pastor—it is not just knowledge he shares, but experience as well. This makes the content all the more helpful to those who are actually in the pulpit. He has been there, and it shows. Forsyth believes that **"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 revelation" (3). Obviously, this affects his entire view of what preaching should and should not do. This would mitigate against sermons that moralize and encourage self-assurance. Preachers should **"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 Savior"** (5, italics mine).

The most difficult part of the book is the style. This is so for two reasons. First, it was originally a series of lectures, the form of which did not change when it went to print. This has a positive and a negative side. Positive because an oral presentation often has a passion and familiarity through informality that printed material does not. But material that was intended to be given orally requires some special thinking as one reads. Sometimes the flow of thought is difficult to follow.

The second difficulty is that the lectures from which the book was written were presented in 1907. The English language has changed quite a bit since then, and thus some words, constructions and idioms may not be familiar to the modern reader. But it is well worth the effort, and subsequent readings will glean new understandings.

Forsyth's book covers the subject of preaching and the subject of the preacher as well. To understand biblical preaching and what it might mean in modern times, it is important to start with

the preacher. What is the preacher's purpose? From where does his authority derive and what manner does it take? What is the relationship between the preacher, the congregation, worship and the modern age? These are questions that modern preachers would do well to ask, and Forsyth deals with every one of them in the first half of the book. Without this foundation, a preacher cannot really answer the question concerning biblical preaching, because there are dangers in a preacher who does not understand his role. **"We need to be defended from his subjectivity, his excursions, his monotony, his limitations. We need, moreover, to protect him from the peril of preaching himself, or his age. 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"** (8). Only after examining the role of the preacher does Forsyth then go on to discuss preaching itself. The last half of the book discusses preaching to a modern age—not so much the methods as the biblical theology of preaching.

Each lecture is presented as a separate chapter, and the titles themselves show how effectively each successive chapter builds on the previous: "The Preacher and His Charter," "The Authority of the Preacher," "The Preacher and His Church; or Preaching as Worship," "The Preacher and the Age," "The Preacher and Religious Reality," "Preaching Positive and Liberal," "Preaching Positive and Modern," "The Preacher and Modern Ethic," and "The Moral Poignancy of the Cross."

The Preacher and His Charter

What is the preacher, and what is he not? This is an excellent beginning, because he discusses the difference between simply speaking or teaching, and preaching. The Bible must be the preacher's starting point. Although most preachers probably agree, it is important to note what Forsyth means. Preaching is not just using scriptures to back up what the preacher wants to say—it is the place to find "what the preacher wants to say." The Bible is the greatest sermon, and from it all others should come. And this means that a sermon should be *kerygma*—that which was proclaimed by the apostles, the Gospel, the Good News to humankind. Therefore preaching is not just the imparting of information, but a Gospel which compels **"an attitude, a choice, a line to be taken"** (31). Rightly so, Forsyth points out that even though the Bible is the source of the preacher, it is probably not so for the hearers. **"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"** (34). If this was true in 1907, it is even

more so today. In fact, this section is probably more relevant and applicable today than in Forsyth's time—and certainly needs to be heard more. Forsyth knows the world and knows "modern" preaching, and it is difficult to disagree with any of the criticisms he makes. Much of it strikes home in the contemporary church. **"It is a Catholic treatment of the Bible to leave it in the hands of the minister alone. And, unless there be a change, it is to that Protestantism is coming"** (35). And so we are encouraged to tune our preaching to the people's lack of interest in the Bible. Avoid preaching simply doctrine, scripture proofs, historical facts, or personal experiences. A sermon may include some of these things, but only in proper context. **"Biblical preaching preaches the Gospel and uses the Bible, it does not Preach the Bible and use the Gospel"** (37).

The Authority of the Preacher

A general discussion of the authority of "The Preacher" in abstract terms might lead one to miss a most important point of this discussion. **"It is useless to preach the Kingdom when we do not carry into the center of life the control of a King. The first duty of every soul is to find not its freedom but its Master"** (42). Many church leaders need to hear this message, for it is so easy to get caught up in the mechanics of preaching, teaching and ministering to the detriment of their own life in relation to their creator. Although this personal nature of the preacher is important, the authority which the preacher has is not personal, nor is it the authority of the office of the preacher. **"It is an external authority, but it is the authority of an inward objective, living, saving God, before whose visitation the prophet fades like an ebbing voice, and the soul of the martyr cries invisible from under the altar of the cross"** (45). What a powerful concept for preachers to remember as they step into the pulpit! And this attitude will affect one's sermons—instead of preaching modern ethics and moralism, it is a message from God that speaks to our created nature. Without this, the danger is clear: **"... if within us, we find nothing over us, we succumb to what is around us"** (47).

In addition, it is here that Forsyth also begins to discuss the importance of moral relevance in preaching, which he will continue to develop throughout the rest of the book. Preaching must not moralize, but it must be morally relevant, because **"... what ails us is not limitation but transgression, not poverty but alienation"** (56). Finally, this authority comes *through* Christ, but *to* the preacher himself. But it is not because of the person or any

virtue therein, but because of the sacramental nature of preaching. **"To accept any kind of message from a magnetic man is to lose the Gospel in mere impressionism. . . . The church does not live by its preachers, but by its Word"** (60).

The Preacher and His Church Preaching As Worship

Forsyth discusses modern practices and attitudes of the Church and worship with excellent insight and perceptive criticism. Some of the language belies the traditions from which Forsyth comes, and may leave many from Restoration and evangelical churches confused by some of the institutional phrasing and catchwords of the older denominations. He makes an excellent point, however, along these lines. He criticizes Roman Catholic practices in many places, but he makes the following observation about non-Catholic worship: **"... the Catholic form of worship will always have a vast advantage over ours so long as people come away from its central act with the sense of something done in the spirit-world, while they leave ours with the sense only of something said to the present world. In true preaching, as true sacrament, more is done than said"** (81). I can think of no better criticism of many evangelical and "back-to-the-Bible" churches, as well as many of the Restoration churches. Instead of worship being an over-rationalized human endeavor, Forsyth believes that **"Every true sermon, therefore, is a sacramental time and act. . . . We eat and drink judgment to ourselves as we hear. It is not an utterance, and not a feat, and not a treat"** (83). Without this concept of preaching, church assemblies are in danger of becoming mere social clubs with the trappings of religion. This might not diminish a congregation in terms of fellowship or even enjoyment, but it will diminish the power inherent in the gospel. Therefore, the preacher has a very specific task associated with his congregation: **"His power lies not in initiation, but in appropriation. And his work is largely to assist the church to a fresh appropriation of its own Gospel. . . . the preacher is not there to astonish people with the unheard of; he is there to revive them in what they have long heard"** (91). Preaching in this manner then becomes an act of worship—it is given to God, it is sacramental, it is confessional, it declares the eternal. Most important, its focus is on God and does not divide the people of God into speakers and listeners or place its focus on how dynamic (or drab) the preacher might be.

The Preacher and the Age

Based upon the previous discussions, Forsyth comes to the real topic of the book. He points out that at times in the past, the Church has detached itself from the world. But Forsyth says this is not proper. Jesus came to the world to save it, and the church is to continue that mission—not simply as social or political reformers, but foremost as apostles. Forsyth criticizes the historical church that took a stand against the world, that practiced detachment or even intolerance rather than accommodation—not leading the world, nor echoing it, only confronting it. And eventually it became more important as to which denomination a person belonged rather than whether one was a believer or an unbeliever. But Forsyth says that in this century the latter question is being asked again. So the church must carefully face this new challenge, and the preacher's task is to equip the church with this message. **"Christ is ours not because he represents our best but because he redeems our worst. . . . You must not tell men that the way to understand God is to understand the human heart, nor the way to be true to men is to be true to their own selves"** (123). As he first begins to discuss this in detail, it almost sounds anti-intellectual or anti-theological. But he is careful to allay that suspicion. **"When I speak of reduction of belief I do not mean an attenuation of belief"** (127). In this section Forsyth has an excellent critique of the post-Enlightenment, rationalistic mind. Therefore he can accurately take to task the modern person who examines a business proposition or conducts a scientific experiment without regard to the human condition. At the same time, Forsyth can take to task the preacher/theologian who bores his congregation with a series of detached scholarly discussions on "predestination," also without regard to the human condition. Forsyth's clarity of insight and balance in this area is impressive. He calls for an ethicizing of the reality of judgment, a moralizing of the eschatology—and bringing it home to the people where they live. Yet he does not reject the importance of theology and the importance of intellectual pursuits. **"You are there not simply to speak what people care to hear but also to make them care for what you must speak"** (137). In today's church climate it is refreshing to hear this balance and to hear both extremes justly criticized.

The Preacher and Religious Reality

Forsyth refers to three diseases of the church: triviality, uncertainty and complacency. The reader must read closely and understand what he means. By "triviality" he means that religion has become merely one "part" of people's lives. It is a hobby, one

thing among many, instead of an overriding way of life. **"You have bustle all the week and baldness all the Sunday. You have energy everywhere except in the Spirit. . . . We are more anxious to cover ground than to secure it, to evangelize the world than to convert it"** (171). The knowledge of Christ will not save a person—appropriation of him will. Expanding on this idea, Forsyth says we also suffer from "uncertainty," because we base our faith on things other than the holiness of God. **"We need fewer homilies upon 'Fret not' or 'Study to be Quiet,' fewer essays on 'the Beauty of Holiness,' or other aspects of pensive piety. And we need more sermons on 'Through Him the world is crucified to me, and I to the world,' or 'Him who was made sin for us'"** (182). The third vice is "complacency": spiritual self-satisfaction, well-to-do-ness, comfort. We need preaching that encourages **" . . . the deepening of personal religion! . . . We need experience of Christ in which we think everything about the Christ and not about the experience. We need that preachers shall not keep demanding either a faith or love that we cannot rise to, but shall preach a Christ that compels both. . . . We can never fully say 'My brother!' till we have heartily said 'My God;' and we can never heartily say 'My God' till we have humbly said 'My Guilt!'"** (195-96).

Preaching Positive and Liberal

Today, "preaching positive" may mean preaching self-help, or self-assertiveness, or refraining from any negativity or criticism. But this is not what Forsyth means by "positive." He means evangelical preaching, a preaching based on the Gospel—"the kingdom of God has come near." To Forsyth, this means avoiding the reduction of faith to mere "intellectualism with a divine charter"—a criticism that might strike home in many Restoration churches and preachers. But "Preaching Liberal" may be even more of a problem to modern ears. The first thought that springs to a modern reader's mind is that of political or divided ideologies: liberal and conservative. But Forsyth's intent is to place "liberal theology" in contrast with what he has said about "preaching positive." To him, liberal theology is **" . . . that which begins with some rational canon of life or nature . . ."** (210) instead of beginning with scripture and the Gospel. It is **"the substitution of philosophical dogma for theological. . . . Paul and Luther cannot dwell with Hegel. The one is a function of faith, the other is a school of thought"** (209). This may be the most difficult section of the book, but it is rich in thought and content and the study required to understand it is

well worth the effort. For the preacher, one of the most important thoughts might be that **"It was not Christianity that made Paul a Christian, it was no church. It was not even the story of Jesus; it was personal contact with Christ. It was his invasion by Christ"** (226). And Forsyth says that this kind of preaching must include a sense of the tragic and the need for redemption. It is this kind of preaching that is biblical and therefore "positive," as opposed to rationalized schools of thought which he calls "liberal."

Preaching Positive and Modern

If one has the proper understanding of what Forsyth means by positive and liberal, then the term "modern" makes sense and builds to Forsyth's conclusion. He does not mean that preaching succumbs to modern philosophy and social/cultural thinking, but rather preaching *meets* the culture where it finds it. But it must put Christ in the middle of the current situation so that the message may work with them where they are. Forsyth spends several pages stressing that God must be the center. We must not start with man and move to God. Rather, **" . . . the first concern of Christ was with God and not with man. It was with God's holiness, and its accentuation of man's sin. He poured out his soul unto death, not to impress man but to confess God. Therefore he impresses man infinitely, inexhaustibly"** (254). The next step is that the message must be ethicized—but only as it progresses from the cross to the cultural condition, not the other way around. (As before, Forsyth criticizes simple moralizing of the biblical narratives as well.) This is certainly a message that modern Christian preachers need to hear, for it is so often that the Church succumbs to the culture instead of bringing a message to it. Again, Forsyth's insight into the Bible and into modern culture is relevant and timeless.

The Preacher and Modern Ethic

Here is where Forsyth's passion and theological insights really shine. There are moments of inspired preaching here—written examples of what he has been saying all along. **"Men must achieve themselves, and acquire their soul, rather than think correctly. The theologian, for instance, should first not be a philosopher but a saved man, with eternal life working in him. Christian theology is the theology not of illumination but of conversion"** (305). **"He was a God of grace, but of grace that could never sacrifice His moral nature, or simply waive His moral order"** (313). **"Man's chief aim is not to make the most of himself, but to glorify a holy God by the**

holiness which alone can satisfy holiness" (319). What excellent examples of his arguments. Each one drives home what we need to be hearing today in modern churches—churches that have forgotten what the message should be. **"It is not the teaching of Jesus that interprets the Cross; it is the Cross that interprets the teaching of Jesus"** (322). And one can hear Forsyth *preaching* these things from the pulpit with passion and authority, without watering down or taking care not to offend sensibilities.

The Moral Poignancy of the Cross

Forsyth has ably and accurately determined that preaching the gospel is to bring healing to a morally bankrupt world. This is not just a world gone astray, or wandered off, it is **"a society that is sick to death. . . we have to deal with a radical evil in human nature. . . . We have not only to restore the prodigal but to reorganize the household of the elder brother"** (341). How can one disagree with these statements as we watch the evening news, examine the history of humankind's dealings with one another and even look at the modern church itself? And so the Gospel of Jesus must be ethicized if it is to *be* a healing message. A quick reading of the four gospels will show that Forsyth is on track. Jesus came healing and caring, reaching the sinful where they were, and lifting up the downtrodden, the outcasts, the sin-sick. How could this message have been lost in modern preaching? And yet, as Forsyth so aptly points out, it has been lost in many ways. **"We have churches of the nicest, kindest people, who have nothing apostolic or missionary, who never knew the soul's despair or its breathless gratitude. God becomes either a spectacular and inert God, or a**

God who acts amiably with the strictness of affection at best, and not the judgment of sanctity . . ." (355). What an accurate assessment of so many modern churches and modern Christians. **"The intellectualism of the church, and the counterintellectualism of its critics, have sucked the sap and vigor from its ethic"** (372). Biblical preaching repeats the Bible message, begins with God, puts the cross at the center, and contains the power of God to redeem us from sin. **"Christ is God forgiving. He does not help us to God, He brings God. In Him God comes . . . we must preach Christ and not merely about Christ, so Christ does not merely bring access to God, He brings God"** (353).

As stated before, Forsyth is an excellent scholar as well as an experienced preacher and pastor. He knows human nature, he knows the church, he knows its members with all their positive aspects and all their shameful aspects. And maybe here lies the real value of this book. Forsyth is not afraid to criticize preachers and church members, practices and traditions, attitudes and mindsets. His criticisms are to the point, strikingly accurate (even today!), and without malice. His concern is for a church that strives to follow her Master and for preaching that is true to the Gospel message itself. This is a book that every student of preaching and every practicing preacher should read, and periodically return and read again.

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