

FAILURE OF THE CHURCH AS INTERNATIONAL

Study 6

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CHURCH FAILURE

(readings: Mark 7:14–23; 2 Thess. 2:7)

It is, unfortunately, simple enough to recall our own failures. Small wholly geriatric congregations and the selling off of stacks of local church buildings - shout or whisper to us of congregational failure. In the New Testament local churches (Rev. 2-3), where failure was rife, Jesus gave severe warnings concerning their future. Many of the distinctive public failures of denominational or national churches have been well documented and evaluated; however, as far as I can see, it is *not* customary for church leaders to speak of the *Failure of the Church International*. However, P.T. Forsyth drew attention to this fact. The historical context of international relations was of course unique, and unrepeatable. During World War One he noted:

That the greatest and cruellest war in the world should take place between the two nations for which evangelical Christianity has done the most, and to which its history owes most...¹

A general reading of history will show that prior to WW1 the British Empire and Germany had both been greatly influenced for good, by the gospel.² But, how did people of the day grasp and interpret what was happening across Europe? Forsyth observed:

It is a staggering blow to a faith that grew up in a long peace, a high culture, a shallow notion of history, society, or morality, and a view of religion as but a divine blessing upon life instead of a fundamental judgment and regeneration of it. It is fatal to the piety of pony carriage, shaven lawn, or aesthetic tea.³

In the light of this, Forsyth raised the question as to whether the church had anything substantial to give to the wider world as it contemplated the significance of this war. What could it offer to the many perplexed people looked for understanding?

Can the Church give the ravaged and bewildered world a theodicy equal in power to the challenge? Or is its own faith but staggering on to its goal, with many falling out to die by world, which He has allowed to get unto such a state? Has He gone deeper than its the way? Is its God justified in expecting the trust and the control of a tragedy? Is the Cross He bore really a greater tragedy and monstrosity than war?⁴

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*, NCPI, 1988, p. 99

² German Composers: Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Strauss, Wagner;

English Composers: Purcell, S. Wesley, Handel, etc. – all indicative of cultural achievement and success .

³ Forsyth, p. 99

⁴ Ibid.

Statistics for World War 1 reveal that there were some 37.5 million casualties, consisting of 8.5 million people killed, 21.2 million wounded, and some 7.75 million taken as prisoners or missing in action.⁵ While Forsyth would not have had these grim statistics to hand when he wrote, he was nevertheless a fellow sufferer, together with all members of his own nation during these days. He writes as a preacher of the cross of Christ:

The war is a greater misery and curse than we know, greater than we have imagination to realise – even if we had more facts for imagination to work on. Are we quite sure that it is a greater cross to God than to us, that it is but a part of the tragic and bloody course of history whose sword pierced through His own heart also, and that His Redemption still is in command of all, and His Kingdom sure? His insight misses nothing of all the facts and His holiness none of the horror;

Forsyth earnestly wants people to consider, and then rediscover the power of the cross for the healing of the nations of the world. Of the horror and global grief brought about by the war, he asks, regarding the power of Christ:

does it unhinge Him? Or is the Word of His Cross a vaster salvation than we dream, who are blinded by fears and tears, and whose conscience is not equal to conceiving either the enormity or the salvation?

GRATUITOUS OPTIMISM

To be realistic as a person secure in Jesus Christ is to be neither unduly pessimistic, nor superficially optimistic. It has been said that someone who is unduly optimistic has a *misty* optic. Forsyth addressed the light and easy optimism of his day, which seemed to stubbornly persist - even during the war - within the church:

One reads appeals made *sans gêne*⁶ by some whose measure of the situation is not equal to their good intention, and who even give the impression of meeting the Atlantic with a mop. We come across machine-made appeals to the Church to be getting ready to handle the situation when the war is over. As if a Church which could not prevent its coming about would have much effect on the awful situation when it is done! If the Churches so little gauged the civilization, which they had allowed to grow up, and which carried the war in its womb, are they more likely to grasp the case when the moral confusion is worse. If they were so impotent before, how are they going to be more powerful now? What new source of strength have they tapped?⁷

Clearly Forsyth believed the Church, globally had some more work to do in order to grasp the true authority and power which lies at the heart of their message and mission:

⁵ <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWdeaths.htm>

⁶ *Sans gêne*: without embarrassment or constraint

⁷ Forsyth, p. 100

The Church reared the nations but it is not able to control them for the Kingdom of God. Why? What is missing in its message for adult peoples?⁸

He believed that the matter of *real international power* lay in *integrating the peoples* with moral and not merely political force.⁹ The source of this moral force is ever the cross of Christ, where sinful humanity is crucified with Christ, and raised to a new dignity and vision for the world in him. Even national parochialism gives way to the larger vision of the purity of, and service to, the human race, and the present will and desire to speak *to one's own nation* of such things, believing that a fresh hearing of the gospel is possible. Forsyth said somewhere in his writings, 'that which goes deepest to the conscience goes widest to the world'. So he was keen to speak with global vision, about the matter of salvation, *holy love*, and its – at certain times in history – amazing effects.

A CALL TO REDISCOVER THE RADICAL METHOD

If the Church left such a war possible, what encourages us to think that it will discover the radical method by which 'a recurrence of these experiences may be rendered impossible'? Democratic control! Who or what is controlling or instructing the democracy? The ideologues? A parliament of blue birds! If 'it has been shown how inadequate the influence of the Churches has been to restrain the forces of international strife,' it is not because the Churches have been inactive. They have been active even to bustle, not to say fuss. Is there something wrong or inept in the rear of their activity, in the matter of it, in their mental purview, spiritual message, and moral power? And is it more than fumbling with the subject to indulge in platform platitudes about 'wielding a universal influence over the actions not only of individuals but of the whole community of nations'. This kind of speech does something to depreciate the value of language, and to lighten the moral coinage.

The Gospel is not primarily and offhand a message of peace among men, but among peace of men of goodwill. If the amateur advisers of the Church will realise that its first work, which carries all else with it, is not to lubricate friction but to create among men that goodwill, to revise and brace the belief which has failed to do it, to think less of uniting the Church and more of piercing to a deep Gospel that will; if they will distrust the bustling forms of activity, the harder beating of the old drums, the provision of ever more buns and beverages;¹⁰

Today there is much talk in churches of the importance of food and table fellowship. But it is still crucial that we open, and are opened time and again to the content of the gospel – Christ himself, and him crucified, bearing our evil away. A person I knew well, often said of potluck suppers, with little content of the Word: 'The church is stuffing itself again'. We so quickly depart, and desert the one who called us in the grace of Christ, and turn to a different gospel (Galatians 1:6). Of Jesus, we must rediscover as nations, and as individuals: "He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords", and King and Lord of the race!

⁸ Forsyth, p. 101

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE – AND PATRIOTIC PRAYER

It might be valuable to take in some of Forsyth's historical reflections from our text book; and at the same time to bear in mind what has happened in the British Empire in recent years, particularly the advance of Islam into the very heart of British Society.

“February 8, 2008; LONDON — The archbishop of Canterbury called Thursday for Britain to adopt aspects of Islamic Shariah law alongside the existing legal system. His speech set off a storm of opposition among politicians, lawyers and others, including some Muslims. The archbishop, the Most Rev. Rowan Williams, spiritual leader of the world's Anglicans, said in his speech and a BBC radio interview that the introduction of Shariah in family law was “unavoidable.”¹¹

One wonders how Forsyth, Wesley, and Churchill, to name but a few, would view this nation, Britain, today. We might ask, and observe again, with Forsyth:

1. We of this country have indeed much to answer for. Some of our greatest leaders and policies have been but pagan. Much of our conduct is still. But we remember that twice we have saved the liberty of the world – in the Armada, and at Waterloo. Have we become unworthy to do it again?
2. We sent forth the great free people of the West.
3. There are those who think that Britain's record in such things as Slave Emancipation, Catholic Emancipation, the emancipation of the workman, the woman, and the child; [...show a growing repentance]
4. In the self-denying ordinance taking effect in the government of India by way of atonement for its acquisition;
5. In the treatment of South Africa since the Boer War, and especially of our enemies there (a treatment of which no other country than England was capable).
6. – I say there are those who think that such and other like things show a growing repentance which only prigs could call Pharisaism, and a moral power which only pagans would call quixotic [i.e. idealistic].
7. These things place us in another class, so far as God's Kingdom goes, from a nationalism which is ostentatiously outside moral or humane regards, and is abetted by its Church in their neglect
8. We have at least begun to reverse our engines. The cause of the weaker nations has often owed us much....¹²
9. If there be a kingdom coming with all God's might to rule the earth, then, as nations go, Britain, by God's grace, has done more for it than most. We are at least on the way to serve God's Kingdom rather than extend our own.

He went on to encourage patriotic prayer, in so far as victory in the war, would be “a means to continue a service to that Kingdom which other nations have not yet given”...

“And yet, and yet. The present judgment is one upon a whole egoist and godless civilisation, of which we also are a part, and whose end is public madness.”¹³

¹¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/08/world/europe/08canterbury.html?_r=1&ref=world&oref=slogin

¹² Forsyth, p. 77

¹³ Forsyth p. 103