

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

St. Francis—His Meaning for our Day.

FRANCIS of Assisi is not well used unless we regard him as a disturbing challenge to our day. The great basilica which encloses and towers above his much loved little church of St. Damian is a symbol of the habit we have of smothering the saints in adulation, and at the same time politely removing them from the sphere of practical affairs. A real saint is to be honoured as a path-finder, not as a relic. The saints, like their Master, see not only the realities which transcend our life, they see straighter and farther into life. The saints are the practical men and women of the world. They are as sensible as they are holy. Their peculiar position arises from the fact that they never lose sight of the truth that men can never be at home in the universe until they are perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect.

We make a moral world of our own which revolves, not without jolts and jars, around a dim sun of earth-born ideals, and when someone arrives whose life owns another centre, there is collision, and the intruder is regarded as a dangerous person. These collisions are the judgment of the world. Jesus and such disciples of His as Paul and Francis, and a host of lesser stars, have all been at war with the world and hopelessly misunderstood by it, because they had adjusted their lives to the central reality—they were moved by God, not by the world. Such men are either startlingly in the right or they are, at close quarters, dangerous, and at distance but interesting freaks. People read the "Little Flowers of St. Francis" in Florence in Savonarola's time as they lounged in the afternoon, and later in the day made nonsense of all his ideals in their orgies. The chief priests and scribes did Christ the honour of taking Him seriously. This was the honour Francis paid to Christ in another fashion. He could not rest in a diluted Christianity. His life is an abiding protest not only against evil things, but also against Christian civilization, splendid as are many of its achievements. Francis was a Fundamentalist in the noblest sense, since he accepted Christ's words literally, as far as he himself was concerned.

He was far too sensible to suppose that everybody could be a Franciscan, and so he founded the Third Order composed of people with family and business obligations who took the vow of simple living and lavish giving. A numerous Order on this basis would be a great boon in our day.

Francis points to the necessity for our world of some men and

women who are, shall we say, excessive in the grace of the renunciation. Francis and his friends denounced Property, Liberty, Love, that the world might be more truly prosperous; that men might taste real liberty; that the springs of human love might well up clear and fresh once more.

This passion of renunciation is as necessary a response to modern needs as it was in the 13th century, however different its actual expression.

There is a remarkable consent over a very wide and varied field that the little poor man of Assisi has a meaning for our day. The passing of seven centuries has left him a relevant and challenging figure.

His career, so fruitful in result, began in a radical conversion. Nothing makes God so real to us as to witness a complete change of direction in a human life.

After long travail Francis broke through the veil which hides the blessed life from men. It was with him as with Fox the Quaker, no man was able to minister to his condition. He was a true mystic in that no shadow of borrowed experience interfered in his lonely struggle with his Divine antagonist and confused the issue in his soul. His experience illustrates the truth that nothing of abiding value can be wrought in action which has not been first wrought by God in a man's own soul. He had a noble dread of being a purveyor of other men's goods. An echo he could not be, he must be a voice or not be heard at all.

He realised that the world could not be saved by mere activity. His lovely deeds, his daring ventures in compassion were born in his heart as he gazed on Christ and took counsel with Him in lonely mountain caves or in the quiet of an empty church. The only property he ever possessed was a solitary mountain given him by a discerning nobleman, and it was there he received the marks of the Lord Jesus branded in his spirit, and it may be on his body too. Nothing of real moment happens in society which has not first happened in the soul of a man.

Francis can only be explained by a conversion, complete, capable of being tested at every point, an experience of the reality of Jesus constantly renewed and growing in intensity to the end of his life. Has this no meaning for our day? Our reforming zeal can rise no higher in its ultimate result than the level of its original inspiration.

We enquire: What were the values which emerged from this conversion? What did Christ say to Francis? We should approach such an enquiry with awe, since it is rarely that such clear speech from heaven is heard by men.

We would say that Christ himself was ever the supreme value for Francis. He could not have loved erring men so well had he not loved the peerless Christ more. To reproduce Jesus was an aching hunger in his heart. There was one outward feature of the Saviour's life which stood out in such high relief as almost to assume the attributes of personality.

It was the Saviour's poverty. The Lady Poverty Francis spoke of as his pure and lovely Bride. She may seem to most of us a somewhat forbidding life companion. It is not easy to speak of this ideal of Francis and his friends and not fail to be unreal. But I suggest that in that choice of Poverty and the clear gains won from it, we hold a master key for our modern troubles. Francis would call down no blessings on the poverty which in our modern world strangles the best life in so many people. He went about trying to make the poor less poor. But for himself what we dread so much he embraced as a bride. This we must remember was his choice, not his fate. From the day that he turned his back on his old life of plenty and pleasure and clothing himself in a peasant's brown tunic tied around with an odd piece of rope, went out without even the certain prospect of a meal, he became a happy man. The rich young man who had sold all his possessions went away singing with his Bride. That was a turning point in human history, as Carlyle says of that hour when George Fox made for himself a suit of leather.

There can be no doubt that this voluntary poverty gave to Francis a pure happiness, a release of higher powers, a cleansing of the senses and a mighty leverage for service. His choice of poverty was a piece of inspired policy though, probably, not consciously conceived as such.

The world he and his friends were to serve must have nothing by which it could hold them. The servant must be free. Wealth and influence has its glories of service, as Francis recognised, but poverty has greater glories. We could not bear to think of Jesus as a man of property. He became poor and died poor. The happiness and usefulness of these inspired paupers shames the meagre returns of our money-bought joys.

Can we hope to solve the problems of our time while rich and poor alike hold it as their real working faith that well-being can be bought with money? No raising of the level here or depressing it there can bring peace while this faith holds the field.

Another new value Francis gained by his conversion was a passionate interest in the most hopeless and worthless of men. His pity had no boundaries. He extended the borders of compassion to a point that may appear dangerous. And yet his was

no weak pity. Within his own family of brothers he could be terribly severe. Against malice in speech, against the slightest hint of sensual desire; against any breach in the vow of poverty his anger was terrifying. But for the lost sheep he had nothing but compassion. He was not a denouncer of abuses—a very easy and often quite secure occupation. He lived too deep to attack symptoms and results, he was concerned with the roots of conduct. He is singularly free from the critical temper. The Church of his day offered a wide target to the critic, but he was very loyal to it. He was not, it is true, a great Churchman, he was too great a Christian to win that title, honourable as it may be. He never became a priest, and one feels no order of ministry to-day could contain him.

He made no attack on the rich as such. It was not in him to lead a campaign against any body of people. He was too humble for the denouncer's trade.

He had a peculiar fondness for lepers and robbers. Francis felt that nice people would not lack spiritual guides. The people who were not nice might not fare so well. One wonders what he would say about the retreat of our Baptist Churches to the suburbs. The most serious charge made against "Protestants" by our Anglo-Catholic friends is that they have deserted the poor. The new Francis gravitated toward the broken and wayward.

And then, Francis emerged from his conversion a real democrat, a rare type away from platforms and books. He was free from envy and scorn, and was entirely delivered from any sense of status. He discovered in Christ the secret of good manners, a most precious secret, since, as Mr. Chesterton points out, Christian democracy implies an equal civility to all. Francis respected everybody. He was courteous not only to men, but to all things, animate and inanimate. He had such a fine sense of the value of the individual that he could not think of people in crowds and would not lead a crowd. He gave up the leadership of the Brothers Minor in obedience to this instinct.

More of the trouble of our day than we know arises, one feels, from the lack of this sense of the value of the individual and the consequent lack of that respect and courtesy each man owes to his fellows.

Francis achieved democracy in his heart when he saw every man involved in a common tragedy and the heir of a common possibility.

There is much of which we can speak but in a word. His fear of learning, for example. He was afraid lest his men might become scholars. A strange fear, but not groundless. The world

has suffered much from its clever men as well as from its strong men.

He was anxious that the little Brothers should not win praise and honour by merely reciting the deeds and wisdom of other men. This daring prohibition was made in the interests of originality and humility.

His fear of a popular reputation was not less strong. He recoiled from the possibility of gaining a name for holiness or eloquence. He felt that no servant of Christ was quite safe who depended upon the approval of the public, even the Christian public. And so his friends were forbidden to build great churches or even to preach to great gatherings of the elect. They might sweep out these churches very usefully for the comfort of others, he suggested, but they must deny themselves the thrill of the preacher as he witnesses the throng of eager people hanging on his words. Let them preach to the unwilling, there would be no lack of men to preach to the willing. The Brothers Minor were forbidden to have a career, as we understand it. They must not present even a thread by which the world could hold them and say, "You are mine." The desire for influence, even holy influence, would present more than a thread, he felt.

These prohibitions of Francis should be earnestly considered by those of us who have adopted the most spiritually perilous of all callings.

To sum up and conclude. It seems that Francis thought of his life as a palimpsest, or a canvas upon which one portrait had been painted over another. Francis was the inferior manuscript, Francis was the upper portrait of slight worth, Christ was the perfect Truth, the perfect Beauty men needed so much to see and understand.

Until the inferior writing, the poor human form was removed, the Word and the Form of the Master was hidden from men.

"He that loseth his life shall save it," and many others with him.

HAROLD W. BATSTONE.

To defend London against Charles I. in the spring of 1643, a moat was run through the marshes from Lambeth to Deptford, and on the north "by digging very deepe Trenches and Ditches to be filled with waters from the New River and the River of Lee which runs by Bow, wherein the new Elect rebaptize themselves, and call it by the name of Jordan."

Mercurius Aulicus, 10 March, 1642/3.