The Heart of the Christian Gospel

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P. T. Forsyth once declared that 'Our first business with the Gospel is to understand it.'[1] But what is it that is to be understood? Is there an unchanging essence of the gospel—understanding by 'essence' the whole of that by which a thing is, and is what it is? We do not stay to enquire whether that definition, with which both Cicero and Locke would have been content, applies happily to the generality of entities in the world. What is quite plain is that some are quite convinced that there can be no such thing as an isolable essence of the Christian gospel—at least if what is envisaged is a verbally formulated, constant dictum of eternal validity and adequacy. On the contrary, they have properly noted that within the New Testament itself there are various formulations of the gospel message, and they have rejoiced to think of the good news as being adaptable to each successive, changing age, and to widely differing geographical locations: 'One man's essence is another man's millstone' is their motto. They would argue that Professor H.R. Mackintosh was being no more than realistic when he averred, 'No pretence of scientific rigour can hide the plain fact that we all decide what the essence of Christianity shall mean for us by a judgement of value formed through personal insight or intuition.'[2] Out of context these words might appear to be those of a subjective relativist; but in fact Mackintosh would have been the first to agree with Forsyth that 'There must surely be in every positive religion some point where it may so change as to lose its identity and become another religion.'[3] Our provisional judgement is that what is distin-

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[1] P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (1909), London: Independent Press, 1961, p. 25.

[2] H. R. Mackintosh, *The Originality of the Christian Message*, London: Duckworth, 1920, p. 5. Cf. C.C.J. Webb, *A Study of Religious Thought in England from 1850*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933, p. 88: 'An appeal to the evidence of the intuitive moral consciousness has seldom been wholly absent from Christian apologetic, even when it has not been stressed or perhaps acknowledged.'

[3] P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority* (1913), London: Independent Press, 1952, p. 219. We make no apology for drawing so heavily upon Forsyth. Whilst we find him wanting on certain technical points—e.g. the kenotic theory—when it comes to the heart of the Christian gospel we find him pre-eminent among twentieth century theologians. See G. O. Griffith, *The Theology of P. T. Forsyth*, London: Lutterworth, 1948; H. Escott, *P. T.*

ctive of Christianity is its gospel; that it is both possible and desirable that Christians be articulate concerning the gospel; that no form of words will ever do justice to the depths of the gospel; and that in any case Christianity, though inseparable from propositional statements—even if only those we address in silence to ourselves—is more than words.

Before proceeding further we shall do well to observe that it is one thing to speak of the features of the religion Christianity, and another to enquire into the heart of the Christian gospel. Doubtless in the first and last resort Christianity depends upon its gospel; but many true—or false—statements can be made about how the faith has spread, how the churches are governed, what kind of practices Christians engage in, and so on, without even beginning to approach the question of the core of Christianity's message. It is with this last question that we are concerned, and as we probe it further we wish to take due account of two points. The first is that of Bishop John Jewel (1522-1571): 'We would seek no other foundation than the same which we knew was long ago laid by the apostles, that is to wit our Saviour Jesus Christ.'[4] But even as we take this point concerning continuity, we must take the other which draws our attention to the dynamism of the gospel and exhorts us not to externalise or to fossilise it.

The fact that it is difficult to encapsulate the message of Christianity into a form of words of eternal validity and adequacy has not prevented some from making the attempt. When we examine their attempts we find evidence to support H. R. Mackintosh's view that personal evaluations are brought to bear upon the biblical and later historical materials. Thus, Harnack's understanding of the essence of Christianity was compatible with his character as a nineteenth century liberal Protestant who wished to take proper, though not extreme, account of biblical criticism whilst retaining a vital faith. To this end he exalted a non-apocalyptic understanding of the Kingdom of God, and for his pains earned the opposition of *inter alia* his erstwhile pupil Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), whose *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906, E. T. 1910) provided a reading of the message of Jesus which would by no means tolerate the exclusion of the apocalyptic. On the contrary, according to Schweitzer, it was the very fact that the end of the world had *not* come as quickly as he had originally supposed it would

Forsyth, Director of Souls, London: Epworth, 1948; W. L. Bradley, *P. T. Forsyth the Man and His Work*, London: Independent Press, 1952; R.M. Brown, *P. T. Forsyth, Prophet For Today*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1952; J. H. Rodgers, *The Theology of P. T. Forsyth*, London: Independent Press, 1965; A. M. Hunter, *P. T. Forsyth*, London: SCM, 1974; Jessie Forsyth Andrews's memoir to her father prefaced to his *The Work of Christ*, London: Independent Press, 1965; J. K. Mozley, *The Heart of the Gospel*, London: SPCK, 1927, chap. III; Marvin W. Anderson, 'P. T. Forsyth, Prophet of the Cross,' *The Evangelical Quarterly* XLVII, 1975, pp. 146-161.

[4] J. Jewel, *An Apology of the Church of England*, ed. J. E. Booty, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1963, p. 123.

which prompted Jesus to walk the way of the Cross in order to head off the sufferings which were to come upon his followers in the last days. In the wake of such widely differing accounts C.H. Dodd wrote: 'We tried to believe that criticism could prune away from the New Testament those elements in it which seemed to us fantastic, and leave us with an original "essence of Christianity", to which modern man could say, "That is what I have always thought." But the attempt has failed.'[5]

The motive of those who have attempted to isolate the essence of the gospel has, as Dodd's words imply, frequently been that of showing the gospel's timeless relevance, and hence its modernity. In the process they have sometimes distorted the gospel to such a degree that the gospel's cutting edge has been blunted and its true note muffled —and all this in the interests of communication by way of reassuring the modern men of every age that the heart of Christianity was only what they had always thought. The words of Dean Inge come to mind: 'The Church which marries the spirit of the age in one generation will be a widow in the next.' Others have sought an understanding of the essence of the gospel which will secure immunity from adverse currents of thought. In this class some have placed the idealist philosopher T. H. Green who sought to translate the gospel into terms which would be unassailable by that empiricism which had, he thought, undermined the historical foundations of the faith. 'What Green was trying to do. . .was to provide a sort of lowest common denominator of belief for those who were looking in those days of attack upon religion for moral principles upon which to base their daily lives.'[6] It is to the eternal credit of Green's contemporary Ritschl that he declared that there could be no such shirking of the historical. We cannot regard as adequate any account of the Christian gospel which does not give due weight to the fact that in the historic Christ the holy God has graciously *acted* for man's redemption.

The question of the heart of the gospel is often confused with the question, 'What is the indispensable minimum of belief which one must hold if one is to qualify as a Christian?' The danger common to all attempts to answer this question is that by reason of our principles of selection we end by distorting rather than distilling the gospel. In employing the term 'distilling' we learn from Forsyth. He distinguished between the paring away of doctrines with a view to the convincement of modern man,[7] and the attempt to distil the essence of the

[5] C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1970, pp. 91-92.

[6] Laurence Soper, 'An English Liberal,' *The Downside Review* LXXXVIII, 1970, p. 34.

[7] Not indeed that it is an entirely modern pursuit! The Huguenot pastor, Rabant, wrote the following c. 1760: 'In this age more than in any other, it is necessary to simplify religion and to free it from all accessories. It will then be approved of by the philosophers and within reach of the people, which can neither remember nor discuss the mass of articles of which it

gospel. He was concerned that 'Too many are occupied in throwing over precious cargo; they are lightening the ship even of its fuel.'[8] Though convinced of the need to reduce the burden of belief which the older orthodoxy had unwarrantably and intolerably placed upon men's shoulders, he nevertheless felt that the task was one of refining beliefs rather than of scooping up 'a chance handful from a heap.'[9] The quantitative approach entirely misses the mark. The question is not, 'Will five doctrines suffice today where ten were needed yesterday?' What is required is a religion of grateful, obediential commitment—an experimental religion; and such a religion is one in which you have 'not a creed pruned down to the limits of our understanding, but a faith whose reach exceeds its grasp, yet which is at all times an absolute obedience to Jesus as Lord.'[10] This quotation from Dr Lovell Cocks raises questions concerning the status of Christian systems and the nature of the Christian's commitment. We shall look at the first of these questions now, and return to the second shortly.

We are not among those who believe, still less rejoice, that the days of Christian system building are over. Nor do we wish to indulge in the pastime—fashionable in some quarters—of setting up systematic Aunt Sallies, whether Roman or Calvinistic, with a view to scoring cheap victories over them. We believe that even the dreaded Calvinism can be shown to have enduring import, particularly when a sympathetic attempt is made to discover what errors were being guarded against by those who selected the terminology they did. We would go further and state our conviction that the absence of theological systematisation is one of the serious lacks of contemporary theology: so much is occasional; so much is wrongly sensational; so much is transient: 'Remember God's death!' The relativistic spirit of the age and the lack of a firm grasp upon the heart of the gospel loom large as possible culprits. The gospel, it can hardly be denied, carries implications which cry out for systematic expression. If the Cross is in any sense redemptive, who needs to die upon it for it to be so? How is the conviction that the Cross *is* redemptive come by? Thus doctrine leads into doctrine, so that we can understand why Professor Gorden Clark expostulated, 'The whole Gospel is not just a few disjointed truths. It is an ordered and logical system...God does not ramble his message to us. His thoughts are not desultory and disconnected. On the contrary, God speaks with logical consistency.'[11]

has been composed, the greater part of which are meaningless to them.' Quoted in A. J. Grant, *The Huguenots*, London: Thornton Butterworth, 1934, p. 232. See further our remarks on Baxter and Locke below.

[8] P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, p. 261.

[9] P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (1907), London: Independent Press, 1964, p. 91, and see the entire chapter.

[10] H. F. Lovell Cocks, 'Congregational Churchmanship,' *Proceedings of the International Congregational Council* (7), 1953, p. 47.

[11] G. H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965, pp. 47, 172.

We can *understand* this; nor should we wish to impugn God's logical consistency. The fact remains, however, that whilst the gospel may, and we believe does, imply a system, it is not itself a system. Systems are constructed by men who, however clearly and logically God speaks, can be notoriously hard of hearing. Systems are derived from the gospel; subordinate standards must ever remain subordinate. In one sense the gospel is more than a system; it is an undeniable claim upon the believer—upon his whole life and not only upon his intellect (which is *not* to revive the old liberal heresy that Christianity is not creed but life). In another sense the gospel is less than a system, since a system may be so full and require such experience and sophistication in both its construction and its reception that the majority of the child-like, for whom the gospel is, would choke upon it. Professor Orr was right in saying that 'Christianity is not something utterly formless and vague, but has an ascertainable, statable content, which it is the business of the Church to find out, to declare, to defend, and ever more perfectly to seek to unfold in the connection of its parts, and in relation to advancing knowledge.'[12] But to suppose that any Christian system *is* the gospel is to have failed to learn the lesson that Christianity's leanest times have been when that very view had been widely held among believers. Thus Butler lamented, 'It is come...to be taken for granted by many persons that Christianity is not so much a subject for enquiry, but that it is now at length discovered to be fictitious.'[13]

At the opposite end of the Christian scale from the system builders we find almost all the Quakers—the most prominent exception being Robert Barclay (1648-90). None have more vociferously opposed 'notions' than the Friends; and in so far as their plea has been for inwardness in the sense of an experimental as opposed to an external, formal profession of faith, all Christians may learn from them and be challenged by them. But 'inward' can also mean 'innate'—and perhaps it did mean this to Barclay, writing as he did in those heady Cartesian days. Then it is not a long step to 'private', or 'detached from the world', or 'unhistorical' or even 'anti-historical'; and along any of these paths an undifferentiated mysticism can be reached which is indistinguishable from humanism.[14] We cannot slacken our

[12] J. Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, London: J. Clarke, 1901, pp. 8-9.

[13] J. Butler's advertisement to his *Analogy*, 1st edn., 1736. It is interesting to note that during the American fundamentalist crisis the editor of the *Christian Standard* turned the tables on the fundamentalists thus: 'Fundamentalism . . .is modernism in sombre garb...(the fundamentalists) are children of the creed-making hierarchs who centuries ago sat in ecclesiastical conclave and substituted man-made articles of faith for the all sufficiency of the Scriptures given by inspiration of God.' Quoted by S. G. Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (1931), Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1971, p. 155.

[14] See further, A.P.F. Sell, 'Friends and Philosophy,' *The Friends' Quarterly* XVII, 1973, pp. 72-82 and 111-122. The Quakers were not alone in adopting an anti-notional position. To take a nineteenth century example:

grip upon the conviction that a truly experimental Christian faith is a faith in someone; and it is a faith that that someone has done the redemptively decisive deed. It may be that the foundation of the Christian *system*—or of *a* Christian system—is the doctrine of the Trinity, or of the Holy Spirit, or of the authority of Scripture. But the ranks of the redeemed include many who could not adequately formulate, or even understand these doctrines. As Erasmus put it, 'You will not be damned for not knowing whether the Spirit proceeds from one origin only, or from both the Father and the Son...'[15] It is *questionable*, however, whether any have found Christ—or, rather, been found by him—who have known nothing of sin and grace, guilt and salvation. As Dr Carnegie Simpson insisted, Christ's first question is not one concerning dogma; it is, 'What is your attitude to me?... Whatever else may be said of the building, there is the authentic site.'[16]

What, then, becomes of creeds and confessions? Clearly whilst none may deny the right of the several churches to impose tests of membership, what must be denied is the view that credal assent makes a person a Christian; and what must be utterly denounced is any suggestion that such assent is a 'work' on whose performance we merit salvation. A Christian is not made by subscription—or indeed by his performing anything; he is made by God's gracious call to him in the gospel. Hence, 'Where saving faith is identified with the believer's assent to a body of doctrine, we are at the furthest remove from anything that can be regarded as a personal encounter of the believer with his Saviour and a personal assurance of forgiveness.'[17] The truth is, as Dr Denney saw, that 'We must leave it to Christ to establish His ascendency over men in His own way...and not seek to secure it beforehand by the imposition of chains of our forging.'[18] But, to reiterate, this is not to say that there is no dogmatic content in the gospel: 'Christianity certainly is more than its truth, but there is no Christianity apart from its truth.'[19] 'The question,' said Professor Hodgson, 'is not whether we *should* have a creedless religion; it is whether or not we *can* have a creedless life.'[20]

in a letter addressed to Lady Elgin in 1833 Erskine of Linlathen wrote: 'I believe all *notions* of Religion, however true, to be absolutely useless or worse than useless.' Quoted by J. Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain during the Nineteenth Century* (1885), Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1971, p. 141 n.

[15] Erasmus, *Preface to Hilary*, London edn., 1642.

[16] P. C. Simpson, *The Fact of Christ*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924, pp. 20, 21.

[17] H. F. Lovell Cocks, *By Faith Alone*, London: J. Clarke, 1943, pp. 144-5.

[18] J. Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909, p. 383.

[19] P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (1909), London: Independent Press, 1961, p. 214.

[20] L. Hodgson, *Christian Faith and Practice*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1952, p. 5.

However, it may be for the individual Christian, it is no bad thing for the churches to set down the things most commonly held among them—whether in creeds, confessions or local covenants; it is a further question how the affirmations thus adopted are to be used. Certainly we do not wish to endorse that churlish variety of modernism which views ancient statements askance and instead of bringing out the new from the old sets out to smash the old.[21] After all, there *is* something to be conserved, and, as Forsyth observed, 'the iconoclasts do not always appear to understand that it takes a great deal of theology to revolutionise theology.'[22] Yet there are undeniable difficulties surrounding corporate Christian affirmations. There is the fact that such affirmations are inevitably and properly the products of their ages. Thus the Apostles' Creed is strong on historical matters because it was devised to counter attacks on the historicity of Jesus. But its very conditioning in this regard makes it a less than adequate statement of the heart of the gospel: 'A creed which leaves out the Cross (understand "doctrine of atonement") is not a Christian creed. One reason why the massive and noble Apostles' Creed has never won wide acceptance with simple Christian folk is because it allows us to grope among its clauses for this master truth.'[23] John Macpherson, that doughty defender of the Westminster Confession concurred;[24] but in turn *his* favoured statement was severely criticised by Robert Mackintosh: 'We have found Confessionalism barren in apologetics, wrong in its scientific inferences from Scripture, very dubious in its critical assumptions, quite mistaken in its ways of handling history.'[25]

Useful as they may be, confessional statements and the like cannot guarantee orthodoxy: 'Experience has shown that it passes man's wit to devise a form of words which can be guaranteed to exclude the possibility of unorthodoxy.'[26] What they can do—and it is, sad—is constrict: 'Where you fix a creed you flatten faith;'[27] and they can vitiate fellowship. As to the former, an unfortunately aristocratic impression can be conveyed that Christianity is a matter of the intellect alone.[28]

[21] Cf. the attitude of Robert Flint in D. Macmillan, *The Life of Robert Flint*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914, pp. 264-70.

[22] P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 264.

[23] W. M. Clow, *The Cross in Christian Experience*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908, p. 321.

[24] John Macpherson, *The Confession of Faith* (1881), Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1958, p. 6.

[25] Robert Mackintosh, *The Obsoleteness of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 53, bound with *Essays Towards a New Theology*, Glasgow: Maclehose, 1889. Cf. A.P.F. Sell, *Robert Mackintosh: Theologian of Integrity*, Bern: Pete Lang, 1977, chap. III.

[26] B. L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent* (1939), London: Independent Press, 1953, p. 168.

[27] P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 141.

[28] See G. F. Nuttall's insufficiently well-known pamphlet, *Congregationalists and Creeds*, London: Epworth, 1966.

As to the latter, the schismatic tendency can be fostered to such a degree that instead of being a last, reluctant resort, schism becomes a badge of purity of faith and fidelity to the gospel. That we here touch upon a problem of long standing is clear from a glance at Richard Baxter's writings. None knew better than he 'how ticklish a Business the Enumeration of Fundamentals was.'[29] He therefore made 'no larger a Profession necessary than the Creed and Scriptures.'[30] His motive was, of course, the peace and unity of the Church: 'The most necessary thing to the Church's peace (is that my brethren) unite in necessary truths . . . and do not make a larger creed and more necessaries than God hath done. . .'[31] As he elsewhere said, 'All over-doing is undoing!'[32] But although Baxter thus set down his policy, he did not thereby remove the problems. Locke, for example, would have a much smaller list of fundamentals than he: a simple profession of faith in Jesus as Messiah would, thought Locke, suffice. Again, in the following century, Thomas Crosby, who had been spurned by his High Calvinist fellow Baptist John Gill[33] averred, 'It is *Christ* that must be followed, and not *Calvin* or *Arminius*. . .Are the peculiar distinguishing doctrines of *Calvin*, or *Arminius*, essential to a Christian? If not, why are they made essential to communion with one another? . . .What praise can they expect from Christ their divine master, who make the door to a profession of his religion *straiter* than he has left it?'[34] Finally, to come to our own century, it is well-known that the five fundamentals encompassed a limited range of doctrinal matters only, and that some conservatives sought agreement over a wider range of doctrine. We find it hard not to endorse Dr Carnell's jibe to the effect that, 'When there are no modernists from which (*sic*) to withdraw, fundamentalists compensate by withdrawing from one another.'[35] That, at any rate, is a not unfair description of the tactics of some fundamentalists of the far right.

The upshot is that affirmations of faith, far from being the gospel, do not necessarily give an adequate account of it; still less do they automatically guard the faith or unite Christian believers. They have their proper but subordinate place. But to what are they subordinate? The answer can only be, 'To the gospel' and at once there arises the question—yet again—'What is the gospel?' Some have suggested that the heart of the Christian gospel is Christ. Clearly,

[29] R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, ed. M. Sylvester, 1696, II 28, p. 148.

[30] *Ibid.*, III 141, p. 61.

[31] R. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, London: SCM, 1956, p. 101.

[32] R. Baxter, *Rel. Bax.* I 40, p. 27; and on the entire issue see G.F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter and Philip Doddridge*, London: Oxford University Press, 1951.

[33] See B. White, 'John Gill in London,' *The Baptist Quarterly* XXII, 1967, p. 82.

[34] Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* IV, London, 1740, pp. 15, 16 (spelling modernised).

[35] E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1961, p. 117.

by definition, there would be no Christian gospel apart from him, and it is not difficult to find examples through Christian history of those who have affirmed his centrality unequivocally. Thus, the earliest gospel opens, 'Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God;' and we may take 'gospel' here to mean not simply the message which Jesus proclaimed, but to mean 'the good news about Jesus.' Again, Calvin says, 'By the Gospel, I understand the clear manifestation of the mystery of Christ.'[36] Or, to the English Puritan Thomas Watson, 'Jesus Christ is the sum and quintessence of the gospel; the wonder of angels, the joy and triumph of saints. The name of Christ is sweet, it is as music in the ear, honey in the mouth, and a cordial at the heart.'[37] In our own century H. R. Mackintosh averred, 'Eventually the distinctive fact in Christianity is Christ.'[38]

Admittedly, we have taken these sentences out of context, but our point is that testimonies to the centrality of Christ are not by themselves immediately informative. We need to know with what kind of Christ we have to do; we need to know who he is and what he does (incarnation; person and work of Christ); we need to know why his work was necessary (sin; man);[39] we need to know how its benefits are appropriated (the Holy Spirit; regeneration, and so on); we need to know what are its results (the Church militant and triumphant; the consummation). These almost hastily random questions and the incomplete list of doctrines they immediately call to mind bear out our earlier contention that the gospel implies a system even though it is not itself a system. It is a word of redemption at whose heart is Christ: but not any kind of Christ. We believe that the Christ of some liberal Christians—the exemplar Christ, or Christ the first Christian—is less than half a Christ, and we echo Forsyth's protest against him: 'A Christ that differs from the rest of men only in saintly degree and not in redeeming kind is not the Christ of the New Testament nor of a Gospel Church.'[40] Those who construct the kind

[36] J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II ix 2.

[37] T. Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (from *A Body of Practical Divinity*, 1692), London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975, p. 161.

[38] H. R. Mackintosh, *The Originality of the Christian Message*, p. 76.

[39] Cf. S. G. Craig, *Christianity Rightly So Called*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975, p. 65: 'The object of Christian faith has never been Christ *simpliciter* but always Christ *as crucified*.'

[40] P. T. Forsyth, *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, London: Independent Press, 1962, p. 99. It is because we miss this note, and are wary of a return to the 'liberal-aesthetic' view of Christ that we find ourselves uneasy with Professor Stephen Sykes's statement that 'I wish to speak of "the character of Christ" as the essence of Christianity.' See his 'The Essence of Christianity,' *Religious Studies* VII, 1971, p. 296. There is little in his article to show the need for that character to be *redemptive*. We would also wish to draw a distinction between the character of Christ as we understand it, and what Professor Sykes says is 'identifiably continuous with it,' namely, 'the character of Christ in the cooperative activity of individuals outside the date span of

of Christ thus criticised have taken inadequate account both of the facts of man's case, and of the meaning of the historic events of Christ's life; and it is only when facts and meanings are properly conjoined that we have the gospel.

The Christian is one who by grace (a term to be unpacked shortly) has responded to good news, and this good news is a narration and explanation of an act accomplished by God-in-Christ. By 'explanation' we do not, of course, mean that the preacher explains the mechanics of the resurrection (though, truth to tell, some preachers have sullied Easter Sunday with their disastrous efforts in that direction!). We mean simply that an explanation of the significance of the event accompanies the relation of the event: 'The essence of Christianity is not in the bare fact, but in the fact and its interpretation.'[41] Undeniably, evaluation enters into exposition; Ritschl and H. R. Mackintosh were right on this point. J. G. Machen's work likewise was clearly dependent upon his evaluations—though sometimes conservatives are reluctant to admit such a fact lest their biblical positivism be eroded. It is only fair to add, however, that this reluctance may also be due to a proper fear of that subjectivising liberalism which would so underplay, or even deny, the historical as to leave us with an aesthetic appreciation of the Christ idea rather than with news of transformed life in him. It must never be forgotten that 'We find our charter in

Jesus' historical existence' (p. 300). The words of Forsyth once more ring in our ears: 'Christ is more precious to us by what distinguishes Him from us than by what identifies Him with us.' See his 'The Distinctive Thing in Christian Experience,' *The Hibbert Journal* VI, 1908, p. 486. Above all, Jesus did not need to repent. See *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 52; and cf. J. K. Mozley's criticism of R. C. Moberly's position in the latter's *Atonement and Personality*, London: John Murray, 1901: 'The difficulty of the idea of vicarious repentance in the case of one personally sinless is too stubborn to be overcome,' *op. cit.*, p. 24. We do not say that Professor Sykes would gainsay our point; only that he does not make it clear that he does not. Nor should we, for our part, wish to do other than agree with Forsyth when he writes, 'The Christian fact... is a superhistoric fact living on in the new experience which it creates:' *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 3.

[41] P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, p. 168. Elsewhere he endorses the saying, 'The fact without the word is dumb; the word without the fact is empty,' *The Work of Christ*, p. 47. Cf. John 'Rabbi' Duncan: 'The Gospel doctrine is a historic doctrine. It rests on a historic basis,' in ed. W. Knight, *Colloquia Peripatetica*, Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1907, p. 170; and more recently H. E. Root: 'The objective core (of the gospel) cannot be *just* historical events. It must include a definite interpretation of the *meaning* of those events: namely, that somehow or other a transcendent God made himself known in those events.' See his 'What is the Gospel?,' *Theology* LXVI, 1963, p. 222; and L. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11. For evidence that a contemporary preacher is alive to the fact-interpretation relationship see D. H. C. Read, 'What is the Gospel? III,' *The Expository Times* LXXXI, 1970, pp. 359-60.

history, and not in human nature; in the Word, and not in the world. The seat of revelation is in the cross and not in the heart.'[42] Or, as John Newton more succinctly put it, 'Warm affections, without knowledge, can rise no higher than superstition.'[43]

But what are these facts which require interpretation? Some would reply, 'The primary fact to be expounded is that of the Incarnation of Christ.' We question this reply for the same reason that Forsyth questioned it: 'Only the Atonement gives the Incarnation its base and value in any moral and religious sense.'[44] It was not enough that the Christ should come; everything turns upon what he did when he came. We have earlier noted the way in which many nineteenth century Anglicans were profoundly moved by the doctrine of the Incarnation, coming to them as it did along the line of Alexandrian theology. Yet many of them, although they began there, really found the heart of the gospel in the Cross—even if they did not say so in so many words. Thus W. M. Clow observed that although R. C. Moberly in his *Lux Mundi* essay on 'The Incarnation as the Basis of Dogma' began by dwelling upon the Incarnation, that doctrine 'soon sinks before the horizon, and the passion of his believing heart rises into flood as he speaks of the Cross.'[45] Dr A. M. Ramsey has made our point, in connection with the incarnational theology of J. R. Illingworth: 'Bent upon the recovery of the Incarnation as the central principle in theology, he wrote in deprecation of those who gave centrality to the Atonement...This was incautious, inasmuch as the formulation of the doctrine of the Incarnation had sprung, alike in the apostolic age and in the patristic period, from out of the experience of Redemption: the saving act had been the key to the Church's faith in the divine Christ.'[46] Finally, and very recently, Canon A. J. Baker begins an interesting article on 'The Essence of Christianity' by claiming that, 'Part at least of the essence of Christianity as such...must be whatever central tenet it does not share with any other faith; and that is one thing only, the classical doctrine of the Incarnation.'[47] Maurice, Gore, Moberly and Illingworth say 'Amen'. Significantly, however, when Canon Baker wishes to counter those Christians who prefer a God who is 'like' Jesus to the classical doctrine of the Incarnation, he comes to our very point: 'The thing which gave Christianity its wide-ranging appeal was that it offered not a revelation of what God was like but a salvation through what God had done...'[48] *Then*, we agree, it is appropriate to face up to the Christological implication: 'If indeed

[42] P. T. Forsyth, 'The Distinctive Thing in Christian Experience,' p. 486

[43] *Letters of John Newton*, London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965, p. 17.

[44] P. T. Forsyth, *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, p. 120. Cf. his *The Cruciality of the Cross* (1909), London: Independent Press, 1957, p.50 n.

[45] W. M. Clow, *op. cit.*, p. 319.

[46] A. M. Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple*, London: Longmans, 1960., p. 40.

[47] A. J. Baker, 'The Essence of Christianity, I,' *The Expository Times* LXXXVII, 1975, p. 36.

[48] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself," then God must be so intimately involved with Jesus that what was done had really been done by God in person.'[49] To this is properly added the clinching affirmation that the truth hidden in the crucified Jesus 'would have remained hidden but for one thing: that the crucified Jesus is also the Risen Lord.'[50] Here indeed we approach the heart of the gospel; here we begin where Paul began; here we come face to face with the facts of God's holy, sovereign, victorious love, and man's sinful impotence and dire need—facts which are so vulnerable in the hands of 'Pelagian' and immanentist alike.

In a grand phrase Luther spoke of God as 'a glowing furnace full of love.'[51] But if Luther was anxious to guard against what he took to be Erasmus's coldness in speaking of the love of God, we may surmise that he would have liked even less the sentimentality with which some nineteenth century liberals shrouded it. It fell to Forsyth to emphasise as few others have done the *holiness* of God's love. Far from being a genial, amoral benignity, 'there is everything in the love of God to be afraid of. Love is not holy without judgement. It is the love of holy God that is the consuming fire.'[52] Indeed, apart from this holy love sin would not be guilt, and atonement would be unnecessary.[53] The grace of the holy God is his overflowing love not simply to those who do not and could not deserve it, but to those who merit its opposite: 'At the very time when we were still powerless, then Christ died for the wicked. . .Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and that is God's own proof of his love towards us.'[54] The Puritan Thomas Willcox (1621-87) was quick to see the novelty in all this as he reflected upon the very different gospel which human nature might have designed: 'Let nature but make a gospel and it would be quite contrary to Christ: it would be to the just, the innocent and the holy; Christ made the gospel for you; that is, for needy sinners, the ungodly, the unrighteous, the accursed. Nature cannot endure to think the gospel is only for sinners; it will rather choose to despair than to go to Christ on such terrible terms.'[55] Given God's holy love; given man's plight, all pelagianising must evaporate before Paul's affirmation, 'By grace

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[51] G. Ebeling quoting Luther's *Works* (Weimar edn. 1883 ff.) in his *Luther*, London: Collins, Fontana, 1975, p. 267.

[52] P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 85.

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[54] Romans 5:6, 8.

[55] R. Willcox, *Honey out of the Rock* (Psalm 81:16) reprinted by Zoar Publications, Sheffield c. 1975, p. 9. Cf. C. G. Montefiore's comment much used by preachers: 'The Rabbis welcomed the sinner in his repentance. But to *seek out* the sinner, and, instead of avoiding the bad companion, to choose him as your friend in order to work his moral redemption, this was, I fancy, something new in the moral history of Israel,' *The Religious Teaching of Jesus*, London: Macmillan, 1910, p. 57.

you are saved, through trusting him, it is not your own doing.'[56] This saving grace is 'the forgiving, redeeming act of holy love to human sin, an act ultimate and inexplicable. It is not mercy to our failure, or pity for our pain, but it is pardon for our sins!'[57] Small wonder that Robert Traill (1642-1716) prophesied, 'As long as God hath a mind to give mercy and grace, as long as any of the children of men are sensibly needy of grace and mercy, and askers and receivers thereof from the Lord, (and that will be till the heavens be no more), this throne of grace will be plied and praised.'[58] Philip Doddridge (1702-51) could not help himself:

> Grace, 'tis a charming sound,
> Harmonious to my ear;
> Heaven with the echo shall resound,
> And all the earth shall hear.

H. R. Mackintosh was simply translating such sentiments into language more apt for theological construction when he declared that 'Christianity stands and falls with the message of free Divine grace. . .Salvation as God's work is grace and nothing else.'[59]

What has this divine grace accomplished? With commendable reticence the Church has never formally defined the doctrine of the atonement, and we cannot here dwell upon the many formulations of it which individuals have presented. Our main concern is to suggest that any satisfactory account of God's saving work must take due account of that constellation of ideas which surround such concepts as law, sin, wrath, mercy, pardon; and, above all, it must insist upon the fact that God has *done* something in Christ and not merely *shown* something. As we have said elsewhere, 'The scriptural testimony is that the Cross is not only a visual aid—even a divine one.'[60] Again, the gospel is not simply that God has in Christ taught us something of which we would otherwise have been ignorant: 'The gospel is no mere proclamation of "eternal truths", but the discovery of a saving purpose of God for mankind, executed in time.'[61] Thus it is that, 'The Fatherhood of God in Christian teaching is and becomes a fact to men only through the Cross. The Fatherhood without the Atone-

[56] Ephesians 2:8.

[57] P. T. Forsyth, 'The Church's One Foundation,' *London Quarterly Review*, 1906, p. 197, quoted by M. W. Anderson, *art. cit.*, p. 155.

[58] R. Traill, *Works* I, p. 14, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1975.

[59] H. R. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[60] A. P. F. Sell, '*Agape*, Atonement and Christian Ethics,' *The Downside Review* XCI, 1973, p. 86.

[61] James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World*, Edinburgh: Elliot, 1897, p. 22. Cf. J. G. Machen, *What is Faith?*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1925, p. 113: 'The Lord Jesus, then, came into this world not primarily to say something, not even to be something, but to do something.'

ment is the incredible doctrine. It speaks of a God who has done little to restore His lost.'[62] What God in Christ does at the Cross is to heal a mortal disease and to give new life. His condescending grace makes and receives Christ's offering, and thus the God-man relation is restored; 'by his stripes we are healed.'[63] Thus any merely aesthetic appreciation of Christ's life and work misses the point. It overlooks man's flouting of the holy God's law, which required a radical atonement for its satisfaction. We recall our uneasiness with the Platonist tendency, and with that represented recently by Professor R.P.C. Hanson, to skirt the concept of law and thereby to minimise that of wrath. 'Rabbi' Duncan's verdict is just: 'The want of the legal is a fatal blot in theology, and a practical danger in religion. It will lead to a crude philanthropy, to moonlight views of God's government of the world. It has often led to a hazy latitudinarianism, or, to what is even worse, an exaggerated Antinomian evangelism.[64]' Precisely because of the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the awful holiness of God, 'Christ did not die simply to affect men but to effect salvation, not simply to move man's heart but to accomplish God's will'[65]. Again, 'The love of God is not more real than the wrath of God. For He can be really angry only with those He loves. And how can Absolute Love love without acting to save ?'[66] It must be underlined that all the time it is *God* in Christ making and receiving the offering. This is the mystery of grace—but better a mystery than the unsatisfactory doctrine that there exists a wedge between Father and Son, or the immoral view that the atonement *procures* grace. To assent to this last view is to turn the gospel on its head. The atonement is the work of grace. To confess to mystery at this point is not to retreat from the effort of thought; it is to confess thought's limit. We can but testify with Paul that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.'[67]

Now this grace of God does not work in a void. The gospel is not a general pronouncement which affects nobody in particular. Through no deserts of his own the sinner is drawn to Christ. In the quaint but true words of Thomas Goodwin, '*God in his love pitcheth upon persons*. God doth not pitch upon propositions only; as to say, I will love him who believeth, and save him, as those of the Arminian

[62] W. M. Clow, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-8; cf. P. T. Forsyth, *The Church, The Gospel and Society*, p. 99.

[63] Isaiah 53:5.

[64] J. Duncan in ed. W. Knight, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-121. For our reflections upon Platonism and Professor Hanson see 'Platonists (Ancient and Modern) and the Gospel,' *The Irish Theological Quarterly* XLIV, 1977, pp. 153-174.

[65] P. T. Forsyth, *The Cruciality of the Cross*, pp. 18-19. Again, 'The death of Christ had to do with our sin and not with our sluggishness,' *The Work of Christ*, p. 19.

[66] P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, pp. 242-3.

[67] 2 Corinthians 5:19. 'It was not human nature offering its very best to man,' P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 24; cf. pp. 93, 99, 103.

position hold; no, he pitcheth upon persons.'[68] Whenever God's prevenient work of regeneration is overlooked the door is open to a gospel-denying religion of works. The truth is that 'The Lord builds a house of mercy, that a company of sinners may dwell in, with him, for ever. What laid the corner-stone of this throne, but grace? What brings in the inhabitants, preserves them, and perfects them, but grace?...The utter impotence of nature and omnipotence of grace, in the business of man's salvation, are stumbling-blocks to all the ungodly, but are foundations in Christian doctrine.'[69] As Jonathan Edwards has it, 'Saving grace in the heart can't be produced in man by mere exercise of what perfections he has in him already...Grace must be the immediate work of God, and properly a production of His almighty power on the soul.'[70] Few brought out the implications of this truth more clearly than Forsyth: '"Believe, believe," is the whole tone of many a fruitless preacher...It is ignoring the fact that both faith and repentance and all Christian experiences are supernatural things, are the gifts of God...Let us offer men not appeals but gifts... Look to the Gospel and it will see to the experiences.'[71] Although the initiative throughout is with God, we do not wish to minimise the importance of the individual's grateful response. For this response, whichever way it goes, the individual is responsible; but if he responds *to* Christ he will be the first to confess that, though his, his response was something which by grace he was *enabled* to make. What may not be overlooked is the fact that 'Christ's was a death on behalf of people within whom the power of responding had to be created.'[72]

It is clear by now what a long way we have moved from any idea that the complete definition of a Christian is that he is one who has

[68] T. Goodwin, *Works*, 1861, II, p. 151. Cf. *Westminster Confession* IX x.

[69] R. Traill, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 40; cf. John Flavel, *Works* II, pp. 67-9, reprinted by The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968.

[70] Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace*, ed. Paul Helm, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971, p. 39. Cf. R. W. Dale, *Fellowship with Christ*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890, p. 94; S. G. Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 64. From Calvin onwards a distinction has been drawn between common and special, or saving, grace. The former stands for God's providential love and care for all men, and by virtue of it they accomplish the good they do, and are restrained from the worst to which their depraved hearts would naturally lead them. Common grace, unlike saving grace, does not suffice for salvation. For two classical discussions see R. Traill, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-9 and Thomas Boston (1676-1732), *Human Nature in its Fourfold State* (1720), London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964, pp. 203-252.

[71] P. T. Forsyth, *Revelation Old and New*, London: Independent Press, 1962, p. 71.

[72] P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 15. This is not to say that God's grace comes into view only because man sinned; or that man is dependent upon God only because he is 'dead in sin'. Some varieties of covenant theology came near to saying this, and perhaps some of them actually said it. See R. Mackintosh, *Essays Towards a New Theology*, p. 409.

verbally assented to a creed, or added his signature to a confession or covenant. However desirable such formulae may be, a Christian is one who has been claimed by Christ as his own. Moreover, the Christian's understanding of what has been done for him, and of what he has done, may be very unsophisticated. Babes in Christ must not be made to feel insecure. If a believer regards Christ as Master only, he may learn more later; but if a Church's official pronouncements were to acknowledge Christ as Master only, we might well wonder what had become of the gospel affirmation. Again, many may wish to testify with Ignatius and with their contemporary brethren that 'Our charter is Jesus Christ; our infallible charter is His cross, His death and His passion, and faith through Him;' and they may honourably do this before they are able, and even if they are never able, to give a rounded account of what is meant. They have been claimed; by grace they have responded; they are *in via*; and that is enough: 'A Christian is one who is responding to whatever meanings of Christ are, through God's Spirit, being brought home to his intellectual or moral conscience. This is a definition at once exhaustive of the profoundest Christianity and admissive of the simplest.'[73] Thus the question 'What is Christianity?' is one question; 'What is the heart of the gospel?' is another; 'What is a Christian?' is yet another; and 'Is X a Christian?' is a question which can finally be answered only by X's Maker—though in the meantime ecclesiastical disciplinarians may, with, it is to be hoped, the proper mixture of regret and compassion, need to answer the question, 'May X continue in membership of this Church?'

What this last question underlines is the fact that normally the Christian will be a church member; for as Christ founded a community

[73] P. C. Simpson, *The Fact of Christ*, p. 175. The phrase 'through God's Spirit' obviates an unduly wide 'whatever'! We prefer this definition to that of Professor Sykes, *art. cit.* p. 295: 'The term "Christian" stands for a position in which a positive response is offered to the truth claims of the gospel of Jesus Christ.' This is somewhat over-intellectualist, and reads a little like a 'work'. J. Bowden's *Who is a Christian?*, London: SCM, 1970, also troubles us a little by its tendency to erect unduly sharp dichotomies. Thus, for example, Mr Bowden explains (p. 111) that whilst the substance of traditional Christianity is not 'plain wrong' many of its affirmations are 'for me no longer live options' because he cannot share the traditional world view. We note the qualification 'many', but we feel that inadequate emphasis is laid upon those perennial features of the God-man relation which have ever been, and must ever be part of Christianity's world view. Bernard Manning wisely wrote: 'It is mainly our own ignorance of our fathers in the faith which makes us fancy them and their problems so very unlike ourselves and our problems,' *op. cit.*, p. 110. Again: 'I am sure that, if we had a theology brought entirely up to date in regard to current thought, we should not then have the great condition for the Kingdom of God. It is the wills of men, and not their views, that are the great obstacle to the Gospel, and the things most intractable': P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching*, p. 197.

(and, incidentally, charged it with a missionary responsibility which it would be arrogant for isolated individuals to suppose that they could discharge unaided), so he calls men into fellowship with himself and with each other. We cannot but feel uneasy, therefore, when we hear such remarks as, 'One can be a good Christian without going to church,' which, according to Mr Bowden, is 'probably true of more people now than it has ever been .'[74] We do not deny the truth that many say this. We question whether their proposition is true. Again, Mr Bowden writes, 'The label does not always guarantee the product.' Sadly, this is true; there have ever been hypocrites, but for all that we endorse Bernard Manning's remark to the effect that 'The visible organised local church is for us the earthen vessel which carries the real presence of the Saviour.'[75] Mr Bowden next avers, 'Nor does the product always bear the label.' This raises the thorny question of unconscious faith, and we would simply counter pragmatically, 'You cannot have for ever or for long the Christian experience of God without the Divine Society that is the result, the assurance, and the vehicle of that experience.'[76] From many traditions come testimonies to the inescapability of fellowship. Said Calvin, 'If they are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common Head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings to each other.'[77] The Anglican Leonard Hodgson claims that 'Normally the individual Christian is a Christian through his membership in the Church, the body of Christ on earth which is the object and instrument of God's redemptive activity.'[78] To the early Quakers 'truth' was 'a comprehensive term that embraced publishing truth, receiving truth and being gathered into a fellowship of Friends in the truth.'[79] In the opinion of the Presbyterian H. R. Mackintosh, 'The Christian life is nothing

[74] J. Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 116. The phrases immediately to be quoted are from the same page.

[75] B. L. Manning, *op. cit.*, p. 117. Elsewhere, in a more popular book, Manning made the same point in the following charming way: 'You say you love Christ's Church. Well, here it is: Tom, Dick, Harry, and the rest; a funny lot of lame ducks...They are not very good. They are not very nice. But they have all, in their own odd ways, heard Christ's call. They have made a covenant with God, and so joined themselves in the sacred society with him. It is little use your feeling mystical sympathy with St Francis, who is dead ...with men of good will all over the world whom you are quite safe from meeting. If you do not love your brothers whom you have seen...you cannot, in fact, love those brothers (whom you call the Church) whom you have not seen': *Why Not Abandon the Church?* (1939), London: Independent Press 1958, pp. 37-8.

[76] B. L. Manning, *Essays in Orthodox Dissent*, p. 25.

[77] J. Calvin, *Institutes* IV i 3.

[78] L. Hodgson, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[79] Lewis Benson, *Friends and the Truth*, published by the author, 1965, p. 12.

without the mutual giving and receiving of the brethren;'[80] and the Congregationalist P. T. Forsyth was his usual, pungent self: 'Salvation is personal, but it is not individual.'[81]

Nor is the Christian life of love limited to a love of the brethren. The gospel, though not life in preference to creed, is most certainly life flowing from creed—or, more strictly, from that *agape* which has first been received.[82] Christian ethics are inescapable, and they are inescapably theological. Whilst the slogan 'actions speak louder than words' should not be resorted to by Christians as an excuse for failing to testify verbally to God's love, there can be no doubt that ideally the Christian's actions and words will be all of a piece. Richard Baxter's exhortation is soundly based: 'Let Thankfulness to God thy Creator, Redeemer and Regenerator, be the very temperament of thy soul, and faithfully expressed by thy tongue and life.'[83] As we have elsewhere asked, 'What is the reason for, and ground of, our gratitude? Atoning *agape*. And what is the model and the inspiration and the motive force of our Christian ethical thought and behaviour? Atoning *agape*.'[84] In a word, it is all of grace; it is all a product of the gospel. So too is the Christian's eschatological hope. Jesus said, 'Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world;'[85] concerning which text Forsyth roundly declared, 'The thing is done, it is not to do.'[86] That, blunt as it is, is one way of verbalising the distillation of the gospel.

[80] H. R. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[81] P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. 119.

[82] Cf. Lightfoot's succinct statement: 'Christianity, it is said, is a life, not a creed. It could more truly be called "a life in a creed".' Quoted by L. E. Elliott-Binns, *The Development of English Theology in the Later Nineteenth Century*, London: Longmans, 1952, p. 111.

[83] R. Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (1673) I iii, quoted by S. Cave, *The Christian Way*, London: Nisbet, 1949, p. 157.

[84] A. P. F. Sell, '*Agape*, Atonement and Christian Ethics,' *The Downside Review* XCI, 1973, p. 100. This article represents a fuller attempt to defend the notion of Christian ethics as being theological ethics.

[85] John 16:33.

[86] P. T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (1917), London: Independent Press, 1957, pp. 166-7.