

‘HOLY LOVE’: REDISCOVERING, RECLAIMING, AND REPURPOSING P.T. FORSYTH’S HERMENEUTIC FOR THE MODERN ERA

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ABSTRACT: The theme of ‘holy love’ was utilized by P.T. Forsyth to respond to the Enlightenment-heavy theology of the German Liberal school from which he emerged. His phrase, ‘holy love’, sought to counteract the inadequate theology of Liberalism which, he argued, robbed God of His holiness in order to satisfy an earthly view of God’s love. Forsyth’s conversion from Liberalism allowed him to interact with Continental theologians when most British theologians felt unable or unwilling to do so. By reconnecting the holiness of God as an attribute of correlation with His love (‘God is love’ 1 John 4:16 and ‘Holy is He’ Psalm 99:3), Forsyth sought to reclaim his understanding of the Gospel from an increasingly popular Liberalism that veered towards humanistic utopianism (until the outbreak of WW1 when it would decline in popularity until the growth-driven aftermath of WW2). This article will introduce the theme for this month’s journal, contextualize Forsyth’s usage of the theme in relation to his contemporaries, before demonstrating how he engaged with Liberalism’s nebulous forms in his own day and translating those principles to theological aberrations in our own. Forsyth’s argument was prescient for his day as he rebutted a human-driven progressive utopianism that minimized humanity’s sinful predispositions; it continues to be a useful corrective today in light of the growth of the aberrant gospels and pseudo-Biblical spiritualism which promise access to, and control of, the Divine with little recognition of the holiness of the Divine that sets God apart as King of Kings.

KEY WORDS: Forsyth; Holiness; Love; Ritschl; Liberalism

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“The greatest human need is not only holy love, but holy love.”
(Forsyth 1908: 168)

Introduction

We live in a world that continues to misrepresent the nature and character of God.

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The glorious nature of an all-powerful, sovereign, yet benevolent, Triune God is frequently ridiculed by opponents of the gospel and often unintentionally profaned by professing believers. The dichotomy that is often foundational to this misrepresentation is grounded in a contrived conflict between 'holiness' and 'love.' By presenting holiness and love as two competing attributes of God, or by placing one above the other, theologians fall prey to a sinister confusion. When we exalt God's love above his holiness, we rob God of his judicial sovereignty. A loving God without such a moral and ethical compass will let his creatures get away with the most horrific things without punishment or judgement. The implications of such a gospel are floating along the oceans of our society: 'love is love'; 'God wants you to be happy'; 'Sin doesn't matter.' Indeed, many Christians would not profess the Prosperity Gospel or the Social Gospel and yet the *application* of their faith betrays a willingness to listen to the modern impulse of love *without responsibility*. The Christian faith becomes either antinomian or meaningless because believers fail to 'observe all that [Christ] has commanded' (Matthew 28:20).

In other circles, however, the elevation of God's holiness reduces God's love to something uncharitable and presents a God who lacks empathy. A stern, legalistic deity emerges from the clouds of holiness in which believers are meant to forsake good things, earthly pleasures and desires, to satisfy the demanding strictures of a harsh master. Rather than a father or elder brother or gracious Spirit, the Triune God is transmogrified into a powerful and inflexible schoolmaster. Love, insofar as it could be conceived of in this paradigm, is reduced to radical obedience without genuine joy. Many Christians experience the gospel in this way; God is constantly watching over them with a magnifying glass, eager to catch them in sin and punish them. The Christian faith loses its Christ-purchased freedom and instead submits believers once again to a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1), this time to a legalistic works-based soteriology.

Regardless of whichever paradigm a believer follows, the consequence is that God is maligned: His character is brought into disrepute. When we make God's love triumph over his holiness, we turn God into a cosmic genie whom we can manipulate and from whom we can get whatever we want. We will not respect God's supremacy, particularly in relation to sin, but rather treat God as a heavenly butler. Conversely, when we dethrone God's love, we cultivate an image of God that is unbending, even cruel, in how he approaches us. In response to either caricature of God, *our* love for him is limited because we will not love God so much as disregard or fear him.

Trying to remain astride this theological tightrope continues to be a challenge. The church throughout the ages has dealt with the twin dangers of antinomianism and legalism, often avoiding the one by embracing the other. Every generation has

attempted to hold this tension together in various ways. In this paper, we will explore the work of P.T. Forsyth through his motif of 'holy love.' Forsyth's consideration of God's holiness and God's love is refracted through the pinnacle expression of both holiness and love: The cross of Christ. By presenting his Christocentric demonstration of the magnitude of God's love alongside the cost for God's holiness, he provides a methodology for challenging the excesses of the Liberalism of both his own day and ours. This paper will begin by introducing this too-little-known Scottish theologian and exploring his conception of holy love before attempting to apply his framework of crucocentric holy love to a utopic Liberalism which minimizes humanity's sinful predispositions. In doing so, this paper will serve to introduce the guiding motif of this issue of *Perichoresis Journal of Theology*. Other contributors will endeavor to demonstrate Forsyth's hermeneutic from Scripture or apply Forsyth's 'holy love methodology' to ethics, human experience, and pastoral ministry.

Meeting P.T. Forsyth

Peter Taylor Forsyth was born in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1848 during an era of significant intellectual achievement and population growth in Scotland. During the 19th Century, Scottish businessmen and entrepreneurs capitalized on global and domestic opportunities that would turn the nation into a leader of various types of industrialized and educational output. The corollary of this culture of academic vibrancy was that Scottish pastors and theologians were nationally recognized as more than merely preachers: they were philosophers, activists, scientists, and politicians. Such inquisitiveness by men of the cloth is certainly not a novel phenomenon throughout church history, but the Scottish theologians and philosophers of that era helped shape and mold modern Protestantism even if most of us are unfamiliar with the breadth of their influence on our thinking.

The nature of the Scottish *Zeitgeist* in the 19th Century was deeply influenced by the Scottish Enlightenment of the previous century. This movement boasted such luminaries as David Hume, Adam Smith, and Dugald Stewart, whose impact continues to direct public policy and whose legacy continues to be the driving force of philosophical and economic debate today.

It was into this intellectual world that P.T. Forsyth began his own academic career at the University of Aberdeen. After graduating, he accepted a post as an assistant to the professor of Latin (Hart 2011: ix). During his tenure in this position, however, Forsyth experienced the call to ministry and travelled to Germany where he studied for a semester under the German heavyweight theologian Albrecht Ritschl. His time at Göttingen cultivated an enduring respect, even sympathy, for the German school of Liberal Protestant theology, which would often serve as a foil for his own theological principles and articulations.

Because of his studies in Germany and the affection he had developed for the German school of theology, Forsyth was uncharacteristic for British theologians of his time in that he was unafraid to interact with, and criticize, German theologians: 'Many of the greatest thinkers and artists of the nineteenth century came under his scrutiny—Hardy, Hegel, Ibsen, William James, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Wagner, and Wordsworth to mention a few' (Hart 2011, ix). Placing himself into conversations with these influential scholars provided Forsyth with a relatively unique ministry in the United Kingdom up to, during, and slightly beyond the First World War. His knowledge of Continental thought was placed alongside his assessment of historic Christianity in such a way that it produced a remarkable ability to see larger theological patterns and problems. This 'prophetic' vision is the reason why Forsyth is often labeled 'Barth before Barth': he prefigured Barth's Neoorthodoxy in his dogmatics, anticipated Machen's anti-Liberal approach (which would be published two years after Forsyth's death), and appeared able to envision future implications of theological trends current to his day with surprising accuracy. Of this prescience Miller states:

Forsyth had an uncanny capacity to analyze the trends of his time, both secular and churchly...distinguishing between the truly new and the merely novel; knowing the difference between a healthy respect for tradition and a crippling antiquarianism, between authority and authoritarianism, between genuine creativity and dilettantism, between genuine critical study of the Bible which helped to span the distance between the world of the Scriptures and the modern age, and the stultifying biblical criticism which robbed the Bible of its transcendent message and turned it into a vehicle of current humanism (Miller, 1993, ix).

With such an accolade, it may be surprising that P.T. Forsyth is not particularly well known outside of his Scottish, Congregational heritage. Despite being a pastor and academic theologian for most of his professional life, and the Principal of Hackney College for twenty years, much of his work has been largely forgotten by the academy at large, with merely a few exceptions. One reason for this unfortunate neglect is likely because his writing can be, at times, difficult to grasp. He writes in a manner that is extraordinarily uncommon today. His books contain almost no footnotes while his quotations are typically inexact and rarely precisely pinpointed in their original source material. His grammar and punctuation can be distracting.¹ Indeed, his arguments can be so dense as to appear loose, unsystematic, even unfinished (Leow 2011: 5).

¹ To this point, when quoting directly from Forsyth, I will endeavor to maintain his unusual capitalizations and punctuations wherever possible.

Such an appraisal, however, ultimately does immense disservice to Forsyth. It must be remembered that many of his writings are 'in the form of sermons or speeches, with the result that they are not written as systematic treatises but presented as oral arguments' (Dunn 2023: 43). Further, as primarily a pastor, Forsyth's apparent lack of systematized thought does not mean that he lacked a rigorous logic (Dunn 2023: 45). Rather, it is his methodology that differs; unlike modern systematic theologies that attempt to construct a series of interconnected doctrines into a superstructure, Forsyth begins with a central point and interprets and translates everything through that primary lens. An illustration that may be helpful is to think of a bicycle wheel. The central hub has numerous spokes that stretch out and connect to the tire. They are connected, not in a neatly interconnected system such as a Venn diagram, but rather *through the locus of the hub*. For Forsyth, the hub of his entire theological excursions is Christ. In his later, mature, thinking, Forsyth condensed the hub even further to the cross of Christ (Bradley 1952: 82). Every thought, idea, doctrinal position, or application derives its power and its logic through the lens of the cross of Christ (Mozley 2004: 182). Through this focus, Forsyth resists the common error in dogmatic studies of 'being contained or defined by passing fads...scaled down to capitulate to human systems, especially those which make a light thing of sin' (Goroncy 2013: 37). It is because of his unapologetically Christocentric, and specifically *crucocentric*, framework that Forsyth's theology transcends his own era, remaining persuasive, powerful, and provocative today. The primacy and centrality of Christ's cross in Forsyth's theology leads him to the phrase that is the theme for this edition: 'Holy Love.'

Rediscovering 'Holy Love'

Forsyth's use of holy love as the principal motif of the cruciality of the cross demonstrates his innate understanding of how God's holiness and love interact. Forsyth understands that there cannot be a holy God unless he is loving; but he also understands that a loving God can only be loving if he is holy. This requires the theologian to grapple with the interconnectedness of these two essential attributes of God: love and holiness.

The Personality of Holy Love: God

Forsyth recognizes that the question of the gospel must be centered on the fact that the New Testament differs from the Old Testament in a crucial way: 'We have everything clustering round a historic personality with whom the soul is in direct and living communion to-day, everything gathered round a final and eternal act of God as the consummation of that personality' (Forsyth, 1908: 4). Because the New Testament is structured around the incarnation, perfect life, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and ascension of Christ (implying his return, also), Forsyth makes a

forceful yet vital break with Ritschlian Liberalism. The personality on display in the New Testament is Christ, not humanity. Therefore, Forsyth states: ‘That book [the New Testament] represents a grand holiness movement; but it is one which is more concerned with God’s holiness than ours, and lets ours grow of itself by dwelling on His’ (Forsyth 1908: 4-5). This bold declaration at the beginning of his work on the cruciality of the cross highlights that the work of Christ is fundamentally predicated, not upon humanity’s plight (though it is real), but upon God’s *action* towards humanity’s plight. The gospel belongs to God and therefore God is the *actor* in the gospel. Man is the *recipient* of the gospel. Thus, he elucidates: ‘The idea of God’s holiness is inseparable from the idea of judgement as the mode by which grace goes into action’ (Forsyth 1908: 5). Christ’s work on the cross is an atoning work that *first* satisfies God’s holiness once for all; only by this formula can one appreciate that the driving force of the gospel is God’s holy love:

This starting point of the supreme holiness of God’s love, rather than its pity, sympathy, or affection, is the watershed between the Gospel and the theological liberalism which makes religion no more than the crown of humanity and the metropolitan province of the world (Forsyth 1908: 6).

The gospel is the work of God in Christ to redeem humanity, but Christ’s ‘first concern and revelation was not simply the forgiving love of God, but the holiness of such love’ (Forsyth 1908: 6). As such, the gospel is not primarily grounded in our *need* so much as the Father’s *holy will* (Forsyth 1962: 11). God’s holiness must be maintained, upheld and, thus, propitiated.

The Enemy of Holy Love: Sin

To grasp Forsyth’s point, we need to recognize that God’s love is mediated through the lens of God’s holiness and God’s holiness is understood through the lens of God’s love. In application, God displays his love for humanity by providing an atonement that saves humanity from sin; but, deeper than merely sin, Christ’s atonement saves humanity from the *consequences* of sin, namely, judgement by a holy and righteous God: ‘It was the Christ who was made sin for them in the cross that became for them God reconciling the world to Himself. He was all to them in the cross, where he died for their sin, and took away the guilt of the world’ (Forsyth 1908: 22). Sin, for Forsyth, is more than a moral failure. Sin is a deeper problem than a fraternal insult. Sin is wrong committed against God (Forsyth 1908: 35) and is a personal expression of animosity towards God. But sin is *also* a collective thing whereby humanity in rebellion is *collectively* operating against God (Forsyth 1908: 35-37).

If we are to properly understand God’s holiness and God’s love, we must likewise

properly understand sin as our assault on God. But there is a deeper expression of sin that Forsyth brings out for us. Everyone can admit that they are, in some way, guilty of *bad* actions without considering those actions to be morally evil or repugnant. This is because such confessions lack an analysis of God's character as grounded in his holiness. Thus, we can say 'I'm a sinner' without accepting the Biblical context of 'sinner'. However, a correct grasp of sin is to confess 'not only "I did this," but "I am guilty before the holiness confessed in the Cross"' (Forsyth 1909: 151). This reorients our understanding of sin from simply being a 'bad action' to a condition of 'unfaith' (Forsyth 1909: 151). Unfaith is not merely in a denial of God, or a resistance to his character; in this case it is a repudiation of Christ's cross. It is to refuse to accept the real condition of my sin *as defined by God's holiness in the judgement of sin* at the cross (Forsyth 1909: 152).

Unfortunately, the nature of our sinfulness has been confused. Unfaith and a denial of God's holiness has, in some quarters, been replaced by a hyperemphasis on God's love without holiness, whilst in other quarters sin has come to simply mean a distortion of or damage to the human brotherhood. Forsyth notes that many preachers of the Christian faith have become 'engrossed with the wrong done to our brother and not to our God' (Forsyth 1908: 35) with the result that our efforts to effect change are no longer concerned with reconciliation with God but simply with our fellow man. In response, Forsyth explicitly states that in order to deal with *sin* effectively, we need the *grace* of God. But, vitally, in order to grasp what grace can achieve against sin, we need a third prong: the *holy*.

The Application of Holy Love: Atonement

If sin requires judgement on the collective humanity as well as the individual human, it can only be dealt with by grace. But because *sin is first and foremost against God*, it must be God who deals with sin according to his nature. Grace must not only *forgive* our sin; it must *satisfy* God's justice (Forsyth 1908: 37). Thus, he states: 'To bring sin home, and to bring grace home, we need that something else should come home which alone gives meaning to both—the holy' (Forsyth 1908: 38). Only by an awareness of the cross as satisfying the holiness of God can his grace be an expression of genuine love for the atoning of sin and reconciling with man: 'Love is but its [holiness] outgoing; sin is but its defiance; grace is but its action on sin; the cross is but its victory; faith is but its worship' (Forsyth 1908: 39).

The cross of Christ, therefore, is the means by which Christ has satisfied the wrath of God towards the breach of his holiness by humanity (Pannenburg 1994: 406-407). And thence, flowing from the cross, is the kingdom of God. This kingdom is not a human-driven utopia but a Christ-purchased community. Christ's cross does more than

merely reflect or represent something: it *achieves* something real, tangible, spiritual, historical, and superhistorical (Forsyth 1909: 15). Forsyth demands that we accept that the death of Christ was not merely a hero's death (Forsyth 1909: 16) because his death had to achieve more than emotion or sympathy; it had to redeem us from the judgement of sin as well as the experience of sin (Forsyth 1909: 19).

The holy love of the cross is such that, *because* of God's holiness, God, in love, confronts us with our sinful failure, breaks us in repentance, and reconciles us by redemption: 'When it comes to close quarters you have actually to be got down and broken, that the old man may be pulverized and the new man created from the dust' (Forsyth 1909: 21). And this is the crux of the paradigm. At the cross, we see both the *holiness of God being satisfied* by a sacrifice which the *love of God had provided*: 'My point...is that the Cross of Christ was Christ reconciling man. It was not heroic man dying for a beloved and honoured God; it was God in some from dying for man' (Forsyth 1909: 25). It is this fact that displays the incredible *love* of a holy God: 'He died...for enemies more bitter than anything that man can feel against man, for such haters as only holiness can produce' (Forsyth 1909:28). In love, Christ died for the very humanity whose rebellion was defined by its hatred of the holiness of his death.

The holy love of God was such that God ordained to satisfy his own holiness by providing a suitable atonement for the guilt of sinful humanity in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ *as an act of God*. God's love satisfied God's holiness while God's holiness was the lens that so profoundly displayed the love of God (Forsyth 1909: 30). It was through the cross-work of Christ that God was reconciled to humanity, and, flowing from the cross-work of Christ, the community of faith, the kingdom, was established (Forsyth 1909: 52-53). Without the cross properly understood in this way there can be *no* kingdom of God (Forsyth 1909: 54). The idea that reconciliation with God could be achieved by a mere heroic death or by a social revolutionary dying 'for the cause' or a moral example of righteous sacrifice is nonsensical to Forsyth: 'Reconciliation rests upon atonement as its ground' (Forsyth 1909: 56). The arguments of the German liberal school in his day, like the social arguments in our own day, are dilutions of the true and essential gospel: 'For God simply to have told or shown the evil world how much He loved it would have been a most ineffectual thing. Something had to be *done*...reconciliation must rest on atonement' (Forsyth 1909:57). This is why he can say that 'the death of Christ is the central point of eternity as well as of human history' (Forsyth 1909: 154) because 'death as punishment for sin was absorbed in Christ's sacrifice' (Forsyth 1909: 156). By Christ's work on the cross, God's love is manifest and his holiness is satisfied. This means that

The holiness of God becomes our salvation not by slackness of demand but by completion of judgement; not because he relaxes His demand, not because He spends less

condemnation on sin, lets us off or lets sin off, or lets Christ off...; but because in Christ judgement becomes finished and final, because none but a holy Christ could spread sin out in all its sinfulness for thorough judgement (Forsyth 1909: 160).

The Success of Holy Love: Communion

When we see God's holy love as propitiatory and effective, we are then able to grasp the ultimate implication: holy love brings communion. Because the entire schema of redemption in the New Testament is built around the historical person and work of Jesus, we recognize that the atonement achieves more than merely a blank slate to begin afresh (and likely to sully anew); rather, we are introduced to a living, operative, dynamic, and transformative communion with the atoning and redeeming God of love (Forsyth 1909: 69). Because God has satisfied his holiness by propitiating his wrath through Christ, we are able to commune with God through our spiritual adoption (Forsyth 1908b: 71). This communion is grander than merely communication: 'Since the decisive things of the Cross, the Tomb, and Pentecost, the Christian is much more than a disciple of Christ—he is a member of Christ...we are His purchased property' (Forsyth 1912: 276). To be in this communion with God is to be united to the Royal Redeemer (Forsyth 1912: 277). God is not a despot; his lordship is not tyrannical. Because God is love, he communes with us as a father to children, as a savior to the redeemed, as healer to the healing (Forsyth 1912: 277).

The implication of this communion is that we will experience relationship with God through which the power of Christ works in us to transform us and conform us into his likeness. Sanctification is an act of God's love that enables us to be holy as God is holy by cultivating 'the New Testament Christ, the interpretation of Christ in His cross, by His Spirit, which cannot but produce holiness, and holiness of a far profounder order than anything we make' (Forsyth 1909: 71). Communion with God, not merely the avoidance of ill or evil, is the end goal of the cross: 'To deliver us from evil is not simply to take us out of hell, it is to take us into heaven' (Forsyth 1909: 202). The holy love of God deals with our sin, reconciles us to the Triune God, and thus 'delivers us into the hand of God' who 'makes us not simply innocent but holy' (Forsyth 1909: 202).

This communion operates on a deeper understanding of love that, Forsyth contends, liberalism (and we might add the social gospels of our own day) misrepresents and misunderstands. He notes that true love desires more than reciprocity: 'What love wants is not simply love in response, but respect and confidence' and therefore 'God's holy law is His own holy nature. His love is under the condition of eternal respect' (Forsyth 1909: 13). For us to be in relationship with God, through atoning reconciliation, we must reject the sin that required atonement in the first place and

love God *as he is* and *as he demands*. That means that we must respect God's own presentation of his holiness.

To reinterpret God's revelation of his holiness and his love at the cross in order to suit our own preferences or desires or ideologies is to actively reject the nature of God and the necessity of the atonement in the first place. To demand God meets us on *our* terms as we reinvent him in our own image is the cardinal failure of Eden: it's to make *God* in *our* image. But when we consider the matter through Forsyth's lens, we understand that Christ did not come to 'make a society God could live in, but to bring a God that society could live in, to make God the real King, shaping His own society from within' (Forsyth 1908b: 48-49). Such sanctifying communion is founded on the cross of Christ, grounded in the reconciliation of Christ, and bound together by the holy love of Christ. Such a Christianity 'does not make man's happiness its first concern, but God's glory, in which alone man finds himself and his joy' (Forsyth 1908b: 57).

Forsyth's dynamic articulation was an earthquake across a continent that had been adrift in the philosophical and theological liberalism of the German school since Kant and Schleiermacher. His initial support for the German school was eventually ruptured when he had his dramatic '*volte-face* in the late 1880s' (Leow 2010: ix). Despite that rupture, however, he maintained a civility and even a sympathy towards the German theologians and philosophers throughout his career. His ongoing interest in the thought of the Liberal school explains his incredible foresight into its direction, impetus, and influence well beyond his own lifetime. That being said, however, his sympathies and interest never compromised his willingness to challenge or disagree with the ideas or theories or dogmas of those on the Continent. Indeed, the reason why Forsyth's work was so profound was that he was one of the few British theologians who refused to be intimidated by the Liberal wing of Protestantism; rather, he faced it as one who had been on the inside and who could find the good amidst the bad, without confusing the two. His interaction with Liberalism certainly was not the driving reason for his crucocentricity (that was the gospel itself), but it served as the catalyst for, and the foil against, which his theological articulation was tried, tested, and presented.

'Holy Love' in Forsyth's Context²

Forsyth trained under the enormously influential Albrecht Ritschl at Göttingen. It is evident that Ritschl was an important thinker for Forsyth's early theological expression; nevertheless, the German school (of which Ritschl was a vital figure) comprised earlier figures such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Georg Hegel, and Adolf von Har-

2 I have drawn upon my previously published article, "The Holy Love of P.T. Forsyth's Christological Dispute with Liberalism and its Implications" for this section.

nack. However, there was no monolithic unified Protestant Liberalism in Germany just as there is none today in America; there were nuances, divisions, and distinctions within the movement. That being noted, however, there are governing principles which most adherents in the 18th and 19th centuries tended to respect such as methodology, modernism, and the fraternal impulse of humanity to move together towards the telos of the kingdom of God through unified efforts at scientific, social, and cultural progressivism.

In a stimulating essay, Gerald Parsons has helpfully explained that there has been an ongoing campaign to malign Liberal Protestantism as a cultural movement enslaved by Enlightenment ideals and that rejected Reformational principles (Parsons 1979: 109). His reappraisal owed a significant debt to James Richmond's study on Albrecht Ritschl (Parson 1979: 110). There is certainly some merit to the point; Ritschl would certainly have considered himself as following in Luther's footsteps, helping the church to reform in light of the hostility of the Enlightenment. Richmond's reappraisal of Ritschl provides us with a more complex theological system than has often been caricatured by opponents (Richmond 1978). Nevertheless, the idea that Liberalism's theology was broadly acceptable until its captivity and reinterpretation by Barth and Brunner (Parsons 1979: 109) is undermined by the work of P.T. Forsyth who was at his theological zenith when Barth was starting upon his journey.

Emphasizing Experience

Ritschlian theology, like that of Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, is grounded in the empirical method of theological studies. Theological empiricism can be defined in such a way that 'truth is not given to man by revelation, but man finds the ultimate truth by examining the various religious experiences of mankind' (Mayer 1944: 10). The shift may appear small, but it is significant. Schleiermacher continued a move towards the experiential that has always had a visible, if limited, presence in the history of the Christian community. Like Schleiermacher, Ritschl's theology is a 'theology of experience' rather than revelation and therefore, caricaturing notwithstanding, his theology did provide the seed for the Social Gospel which has now, through Rauschenbusch and Mathews, blossomed (Mayer 1944: 146; cf. Rauschenbusch 1916, Rauschenbusch 1917, and Mathews 1910).

What is theology's unifying principle for Ritschl? Meyer suggests that 'the central thought of Ritschl's theology is the kingdom of God as "the moral unification of the human race through action prompted by universal love to our neighbor," as "God's activity towards the establishment of an ethical community of mankind," as "the moral union of all the peoples of the world"' (Mayer 1944: 147; cf. Ritschl 1900: 30, 270ff, 288ff). In his footnote, Mayer then consolidates these three principles into

one umbrella: 'The material principle may also be stated as the love of God' (Mayer 1944: 147n9). For the Ritschlian school of thought, the locus of theological truth and knowledge is in the singular person of the historical Jesus (Mayer 1944: 148; Pannenburg 1994:409).

Locating the nexus of theology in the person of Jesus (or, perhaps, the Jesus community) is certainly narrower and more external than Schleiermacher's locus of the individual's experience of Jesus, but both are insufficient because they 'make experience the determining factor in theology' (Mayer 1944: 149; cf. Mueller 1970: 366). To be fair to Ritschl, *experience* for him is not emotionalism or subjective feeling; nor is it something divorced from revelation in an important sense (Mayer 1944: 149). Nevertheless, his use of pain and pleasure as providing the tools to make 'value judgments' on activities that either hinder or help the kingdom of God's expansion is not the priority of the New Testament's witness to the Christian life or purpose (Mayer 1944: 149). What this ultimately means is that theology, the task of doing theology, is *ultimately* about the outworking of 'those religious experiences which lead man to the end-purpose, his full dominion over the world in the Kingdom of God' (Mayer 1944: 150).

The implication, though unspoken, is that Ritschl's theology is in many ways divorced from God because it is reliant on humanity, our collective experience of the historical Jesus. The impact or effect of an activity or idea or proposition is not grounded in how it relates to, or from, God's holiness, but primarily in how it aids us in the advancement of furthering God's kingdom. In other words, by reorienting theology around *humanity*, Ritschl's focus is on the telos, not the crucis, of God's plan (Mueller 1970: 357; Mueller 1970: 357). In Forsyth's language, we might say that Ritschl considers holiness to be defined by the kingdom of God (i.e., God's love) rather than Christ's cross. God, Ritschl believes, 'is either conceived as love, or simply not at all' (Mueller 1970: 157). Further, God's love is reduced to an empire rather than the holy love that reconciles the world to himself through the cross of Christ. Ultimately, Ritschl 'makes Christianity truly anthropocentric and entirely this-worldly' (Mayer 1944: 150).

If the kingdom of God is ultimately a 'moral union of men' (Mayer 1944: 150), and is ultimately advanced by the ethical efforts of humanity, then the kingdom is reduced to man-made society, albeit grounded in the historical Jesus as the 'founder of the Kingdom' (Mueller 1970: 357). The logical consequence of this is that the kingdom is defined by human society and holiness is defined by that horizontal axis rather than by God's standard: 'This is the heart of Ritschl's theology. His material principle is the theory that man is destined to find salvation in ethical society' (Mayer 1944: 151; cf. Nelson 2009: 137). If we find our salvation in our *filial* community

through our *filial* relationship, then *sin* must be defined as an action that damages our *filial* community rather than, firstly and primarily, an assault against God's holiness as manifested at the cross. As was demonstrated above, this view is untenable for Forsyth.

Shifting Sin

The German wing of Protestant theology redefined God's holiness in such a way that it minimized the true weight and impact of humanity's sin. Sell writes of Ritschl's doctrine of sin thus: 'The essence of sin [for Ritschl] lies in the opposition which the kingdom of sin offers to the kingdom of God' (Sell 1979: 39). What this means is that sin is not an assault against God and his holiness but rather is an opposition to God's purposes in the development of his kingdom on earth (Mueller 1970: 359). As such, sin is defined by a horizontal axis: my behavior towards my neighbor is indicative of whether I am in right relationship with God or otherwise. To 'sin' is to hurt my neighbor and limit the kingdom's presence (and expansion) on earth. To 'obey' is to honor my neighbor and expand the kingdom's presence on earth.

This characteristic discussion of sin robs God of his holiness; specifically, it redefines holiness along similar lines as the redefinition of sin. By turning the kingdom of God into a 'union of mankind' and an 'empire of ethics,' Ritschl has reduced our conception of holiness to obedience to '*man's* ethical standard' (Dunn 2023: 4). Mueller defines Ritschl's view of sin thus:

Sin obtains when man exists in a state of mistrust rather than in trust towards God. This involves essentially a broken spiritual relationship with God. As a consequence, the sinner's actions contrast the highest good, or the Kingdom of God, manifest in Jesus (Mueller 1970: 359).

This mistrust is reminiscent of Forsyth's 'unfaith' mentioned in the previous section. Where it differs, however, is that Ritschl's mistrust is understood as 'the shadow side of redemption' (Nelson 2009: 151) and can only be understood in contrasts: 'In light of its opposites, namely the Kingdom of God, the good, forgiveness, and the Christian ideal of life manifested supremely in Jesus Christ' (Mueller 1969: 70). Thus, even though Ritschl can say that sin is the 'perverted attitude which the sinner adopts towards God' (Ritschl 1872: 3:334), what he means is that sin is 'the opposite of reverence and trust towards God, as also the opposite of the Kingdom of God – in the latter respect forming the kingdom of sin....[which] unites all men with one another by means of the countless relations of sinful conduct' (Ritschl 1872: 3:383-4). Whereas Forsyth presented sin as unfaith in Christ's cross and a rejection of the holiness of God manifested in Christ's sacrifice, Ritschl's 'mistrust' presents sin as, functionally,

an ethical problem concerning society. Sin is not warfare against God so much as it is acting 'contrary to God's will of establishing the God's Kingdom on earth' (Nelson 2009: 153). The kingdom of sin is contrasted with the kingdom of God. However, because the kingdom of God is defined as the ethical impulse to produce 'the moral organization of mankind, and in the filial relation to God as well as in the kingdom of God which lays the foundation of blessedness' (Ritschl 1872: 3:13), sin is defined as opposition to this moral organization. Sin, therefore, is not so much resistance to God as the human-driven *kingdom* of God, which is defined as the 'love' of God. This is why Ritschl's theology has often been considered anthropocentric; it reorients us ultimately away from God, from Christ and his cross, and towards ourselves and our efforts to build the kingdom of God on the basis of ethical effort rather than crucocentric holiness.

Love Enthroned and Holiness Dethroned

As it pertains to God, therefore, *holiness* becomes less about God's nature and standard of goodness, righteousness, and morality, and more about our *experience* of God (Mueller phrases this poetically: '[Ritschl] speaks more convincingly of Jesus as the Revealer of God than as the Redeemer' by which he means that 'he is more convincing when speaking about the earthly ministry of Jesus [the ethics of the kingdom] than when speaking of the cross' [the establishment of the kingdom] (Mueller 1970: 367)). In this experience, God's holiness is refracted through our appropriation of God's *love*. I have argued elsewhere that 'in place of God's holiness, Ritschl has enthroned God's love' (Dunn 2023: 5). A consequence of this distortion of God's love is that it goes further than simple redefinitions; it ultimately reduces God's attribute of holiness to something that *supports* God's love rather than *defines* it. God's love becomes horizontal and fraternal; the cross, we might say, becomes a beautiful, poignant *expression* rather than a bountiful, powerful *expiation*. As such, the love of God becomes 'anthropocentric' rather than 'theocentric.' God's work becomes about *us* and our efforts rather than our behavior as believers reflecting God. Instead of 'be holy as I am holy' our mandate becomes 'love one another so as to love me.' The forcefulness of God's directive is grounded not in God himself but in our reception of ethical experiences amongst the fraternity of humanity (Mayer 1944: 151).

By drawing everything through the Christ-act of sacrifice and judgement, Forsyth repudiates the German school's Liberal presentation of a humanmade, or human-cultivated, or even human-driven, kingdom of God. The cross is the central event in all of human history and it is through the cross that God's *love* is demonstrated in that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8); but it is also through the cross that God's *holiness* is upheld because Christ bore the curse for sinfulness on our behalf and healed us from its claims (1 Peter 2:24-25). Humanity is

not the driving force of true spiritual change; God is. And the means by which God has triumphed over human rebellion and the wickedness of evil is the cross of Christ. Flowing from the centrality of the cross, therefore, is God's 'holy love' which must be understood as two sides of a singular coin: God's 'holiness is qualified by his love just as his love is understood by his holiness' (Dunn 2022: 7).

'Holy Love' Briefly Applied

Dane C. Ortlund provides a brief historical review of the 'recent' trend in Evangelicalism to be 'Christocentric' (Ortlund 2009: 309-313). His presentation is specifically on whether Christianity should be Christ-centered or not; alternatives have been proposed by von Harnack, for example, who suggested Christianity's center was the Father, not the Son (Ortlund 2009: 312; cf. von Harnack 1957: 144); Clark Pinnock suggested that we should view Christ as a function of the Spirit's ministry rather than the other way around (Ortlund 2009: 313; cf. Pinnock 1996: 80); Knitter would have us think of the Christian religion as being primarily '*theocentric*, focusing on the unity of the Godhead and thereby keeping each person equally in view' (Ortlund 2009: 313; cf. Knitter 1985: 145-204). (Indeed, Dispensationalism argues that the primary focus of the Christian faith is God's own glory (Ryrie 1965); unintentionally, this reduces the cross of Christ as fundamental to God's overarching purposes for humanity in the expression of his glory.) Despite these alternative views, Ortlund concludes:

While cheerfully affirming the co-equality, co-eternality, co-divinity and soteriological co-necessity of Father, Son, and Spirit, a Christ-centered approach to the Bible, history, and Christian living is not only illuminating for us but incumbent upon us in light of God's own self-revelation in Scripture (Ortlund 2009: 321).

This point is vital; perhaps unbeknownst to Ortlund, he stands in the lineage of Forsyth himself who holds together the will of the Father, the work of the Son, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit *by* directing our attention to the cross of Christ (cf. Barth 1957:101-105). As discussed above, the holy love of God finds its most revelatory manifestation in the cross-event where God's love satisfies God's holiness through the atoning death of Christ. This is the will of the Triune God, but it is the work of the enfleshed-Son. Any Christianity that moves away from a crucocentric interpretation of the gospel (and therefore is not Christocentric) is fundamentally resisting the desire of the Godhead, for the Persons ordained the cross to be the means of our salvation and the mechanism for God's reconciliation with man.

With this view in place, therefore, we can briefly attempt to bring Forsyth's crucocentric conception of holy love to bear on modern movements within Christianity. Since the 1960s, the Prosperity Gospel has taken the world by storm. Fueled in large

part by a direct association with the American Dream, men like Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin produced a theology that is more reminiscent of ancient Roman paganism than the gospel. Using the idea of 'seed-faith,' Roberts taught that God *wants* us to be happy, healthy, and wealthy. The fact that we lack wealth or health is not because God is *teaching* us anything, nor is it that God *cannot* provide what we yearn for; the root of the problem is that we do not ask with genuine faith that God *will* provide what we want: 'Use your believing in the right way and as you believe it, it will be done unto you,' he writes (Roberts 1954: 47). Kenneth Hagin went further when he argued that Christ has given his divine authority to the individual Christian and the church; for something to happen in this world, therefore, it must come through the authority of the Christian (Hagin 1967: 36-39). From this teaching, we begin to trace the Word of Faith movement, which claims that we can proclaim our own mastery over the universe such that we replicate God's creative power in our own declarations (Copeland 1980: 42-44). Recent proponents of this movement include Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, and Joyce Meyer.

The Prosperity Gospel and the Word of Faith movement, alongside the Social Gospel, all present an anthropocentric interpretation of the New Testament. Like Ritschl's utopic presentation of the kingdom of God as being God's love and man's ultimate end, these modern movements reduce God's holiness from the gospel to the position of a supporting character. All may talk about 'being saved,' but they mean very different things by that phrase; it can refer to poverty, sickness, oppression, even sin. But the antidote is defined by the problem: if I am impoverished, I need a God who will enrich me; if I am ill, I need a God who will heal me; if I am oppressed, I need a God who will deliver me; if evil has befallen me, I need a God who will rescue me. In each of these articulations, the answer to my problem is defined by *my* experience of *my* problem rather than by God, his holiness, or his will. Forsyth rebukes this formula by reminding us that, 'the first thing is not how I feel, but it is, How does God feel, and what has God said or done for my soul?' (Forsyth 1909: 41). The earthly expressions that we reasonably wish to be delivered from must be brought through the lens of the cross: if God did not remove Christ from the cross, then we ought not be surprised that spiritual blessings can come to us *through* our trials.

The hope that we have is that *in* God's love, we see his holiness, and therefore we are restored to *communion* with him, rather than attempting to exploit his power for our own ends (see Keith Goad's pastoral reflection on Augustine's loves in this edition for an explanation of how this type of 'Christian' love is actually pagan). When we reside in this theological headspace, our souls are truly comforted by the holy love of God:

Even a loving God is really God not because He loves, but because He has power to

subdue all things to the holiness of His love, and even sin itself to His love as redeeming grace. A sympathetic God is really God because He is a holy, saving, redeeming God; because in Him already the great world-transaction is done, and the kingdom of His holy love already set up on His forgone conquest of all evil (Forsyth 1908: 60-61)

Conclusion

P.T. Forsyth's theological expression 'holy love' was a sharp rebuke to a German liberalism that had upended the New Testament's presentation of Christ's cross. Liberalism had enthroned God's love at the expense of his holiness and, in so doing, had re-defined sin along a horizontal axis, reducing it to an ethical misdemeanor rather than cosmic treachery and insult. Forsyth's challenge to Ritschlian theology was to remind us that God's holiness is how we understand God's love; by seeing God as he truly is and understanding sin as an assault on God's very essence, Forsyth was attempting to turn our gaze away from ourselves. Only by being captivated by God's holy love can humanity truly be able to work in and for Christ's kingdom. Forsyth rebuked Ritschl's Liberalism and he rebukes our modern aberrations of the gospel by declaring that God's holy love as revealed by the cross of Christ is our eternal salvation.

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