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FAITH AND EXPERIENCE.

BY THE REV. P. T. FORSYTH, D.D.

I RECEIVED a letter some time ago from one of our women students in Cambridge who had gone to one of our colonies in the exercise of her profession as teacher. It was a letter which stirred in me much reflection. While she was here she was a member of the Students' Volunteer Union, and took part in their work. Yet she wrote in some distress to say that since going out she had been plunged into English circles whose habits of thought and speech were not only contemptuous of the native and of any efforts to Christianise him, but were also having an undermining effect on her own belief. The colonists, she says, are demoralised by the life there. At Homes take the place of more Christian work; and the native is not considered capable of responding to Christian influence. He is not believed to have the least spark of gratitude. "Give him blows, and he will respect you; treat him kindly, and he will refuse to move hand or foot to assist you. Every one says he would prefer for a servant a raw native to one who has been under the instruction of the missionaries." There follows some further report of current colonial talk as to the blunders and failures of missionaries, question as to the reality of Christ's mission for the lower races, and talk of its fitness only for the white peoples. "Not only are the natives not progressing, but the colonials themselves are losing faith in the power of our Christian religion, and are living only for worldly advancement and prosperity." And she ends by saying that she is herself losing faith in missionary work and ideals as pursued.

This last is the point for whose sake I quote the letter. The opinions expressed in it about the colonists are neither here

nor there; and they would be denied by many who have been longer in the country than the writer. I quote the letter as a striking illustration of the way in which faith will sometimes go down before experience. And I am led to ask whether the forms in which faith is nursed at home are always those best calculated to stand the shock of real contact with the world. This girl's experience may have been repeated in many a missionary who went out an enthusiast in piety, in a fanciful textual piety, perhaps, and had to evangelize the heathen in the midst of an interior conflict which was the real education of his faith and the real basis of future success. They have had to pass through a time when, like Wesley and many another, they preached faith with a struggle *until* they had it, and then they preached it with a will *because* they had it. Much depends in a foreign outfit upon quality. Very much depends on the quality of the stored provision of faith which goes out with the missionary. And it does not follow that the kind of faith which fed enthusiasm at home will support life equally well in the climate of foreign experience.

So I propose to say a few words about faith and experience. I would deprecate the use of experience as the test or measure of faith, whether it be experience of one's self or of the world. The supreme use and victory of faith are in the face of experience. If our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts. We cast our God-forsaken hearts on God. It is a confidence in self-despair. A new world of experience grows out of the failure of the old and faith's victory over it. The cross is the source of the Holy Ghost, and all the experience of the Holy Ghost in the Church grew out

of that crucial moment of the cross when the failure of Christ's experience of God was more than conquered by His faith in God. All faith's great conquests have made experience rather than been made by it. It is real contact with Christ that explains the world; it is not contact with the world that explains Christ. Faith may be verified by results; but it is not justified by them. The great evangelical pioneers went out to their task when the results had all to be made and that experience did not exist. They went out as sure of their own call, of Christ's gospel, and of the world's need at the beginning as at the end. Their conclusions were all from above downwards, so to say; they were not from below upwards. They deduced missions from Christ; they did not induce them from either observation or experiment. They did not say, "Here is a bad, mad world; let us try Christ on it. He has been of use to us." They did not go with the cross as an experiment; nor did they measure their Lord by their faith, or their faith even by their own experience of it. They were made what they were by an objective faith, and not a subjective. They knew their Bible in an instructed way; but they knew the gospel even better. It was the nature, the necessity, of the gospel that sent them out to conquer the world. Missions were inspired by the very nature of the cross; and if they had not been commanded by the Saviour, they would have been invented by a Church with the gospel. Their pioneers were moved in the first degree, not by pity, but by faith, not by human need, but by God's glory and the passion to establish it on the earth. Seek first the kingdom of God, and they that are saved shall be added to it. These pioneers were not watchers of their own frames of mind; nor were they optimists in their verdict upon the world. Their views of the world's experienced condition were rather gloomy, and the gospel they trusted was one that saved men desperately wicked. They arose, too, in an age which we should not select as a sample of the gospel's success

in the experience of an old Christian land and Church. They were forced on the Church rather than produced by it. Their judgments concerning the gospel's power were not empirical, not drawn from its success, but from itself and its nature. They were not men of results, not of works, but of faith—faith in the cross. Their enterprise was beyond all proportion greater even than faith's actual effect or grace's felt work in their own personal experience. What they felt was the wonder and glory of grace in the cross, not so much their own sanctity, sinlessness, ardour, or bliss in it. They saw Christ and Him crucified; they realised His power to save; and what sent them forth was the Holy One's "Go," and not the "Come" of winsome success. They were not allured by a pictorial prospect, nor kindled by evangelical romance; they obeyed the necessity and the inspiration of another and more heavenly vision.

I anticipate one question, "Is not faith an experience?" I do not like the description. The word is too passive; for faith is a most active thing. It is a word too fugitive; for faith is the anchor of the soul. Faith is the whole soul in energy, the whole man committing himself to Christ. It is a lifelong act of will which runs through various experiences, happy or unhappy, cheery or gray; only it goes on; it trusts, and acts, and serves; it feels, when God pleases; and it casts final responsibility on the Saviour.

It is faith in the power of Christ that creates our experience; it is not our experience that creates faith in His power. When John said, "Whosoever abideth in Him sinneth not," he was not speaking from the experience of his own moral state, but from a depth of his faith in Christ which made him cease to think of his own moral state. It is not well to think too much about the new life; it is better to think about the new Creator. The Redeemer is a greater power than our experience of redemption, or the Church's either. It is not the experience either of the soul or of

the Church that is the critic of the gospel ; it is the gospel that judges the experience of both. And missions, like every great exercise of faith or energy of grace, stand upon Christ's faith more than even on ours. We take refuge in what He believed when we are not sure about what we can. We trust His faith in men when experience shakes our own. We rest on His knowledge of the world, on His belief in divine power and human possibility, on His confidence in what He and His work did for men. We trust His experience and His judgment more than our own. When we cannot trust our wishes, hopes, or forecasts of human destiny, we can rest on His faith in it who secured it. If all the facts were against us, He is the fact that outweighs them all. And we both recover and complete our faith by being compelled to trust His.

It is the same principle that sustains our faith in prayer whatever the answer be, whether there be any answer in the experienced sense or not. It does faith more harm than good to dwell much on what *are called* answers to prayer. It not only ties faith too closely to experience, but it deepens the doubt that arises where answer cannot be traced. We need only be sure that prayer is received, that it goes home, and is dealt with. Our tears are in His bottle. He has old prayers of ours by Him maturing still. That is what is of faith in respect of prayer. Not that it must be sensibly granted,—that were sight, and not faith. Prayer least of all lives upon such results, such experience. If we saw all, experienced all, possessed all, where would room be left for the exercise of faith? Faith is there to protect us both from the verdict of experience and from the absence of it. It saves us both from our knowledge of the world and our want of that knowledge. It makes a man

That awful independent of to-morrow
Whose yesterdays look backward with a smile.

It even gives us little of Christ's experience,

—these meagre gospels carry us but a little way there,—but it gives us Jesus Christ Himself, “the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever.”

Did Jesus say, “Disciple all the world”? (Matt. xxviii. 19). Did these words fall on certain disciples' ears as a matter of their experience? Suppose by some accident the last inch had been detached from the roll of the original manuscript of the first gospel before any copies were made. Faith would still smile and go on if it had to give up the injunction, being sure of it as an inspiration and a spiritual necessity. What is of first moment *to us* is, not whether the crucified and risen Christ *said* these words, but that He now says that thing. That Jesus said these words to others is matter of evidence ; but that Christ says that thing to His Church is matter of faith, a matter of living contact with the cross—which is a higher certainty and a higher impulse: Missions stand not on the words of Christ, but on the cross of Christ. And a Church's interest in missions will always be in proportion to its faith in the cross. You can take the one as a Christian gauge of the other. If the cross be minimised, missions decay ; when missions decay, the cross retires behind the preacher's mere interest and charm.

Do not ask, What are the missionaries doing? but, How are they believing? Not, How many have they baptized? but, How does their faith in Christ make them love, help, wait for, and believe in these dark souls?

It is not the heathens that are the greatest tax on faith, but the Christians. And no experience of pagan ingratitude so strains faith as the poor results of Christian centuries on Christ's people. There are people in most Churches who raise as great a problem for faith as India.

But, then, it is not by Christians any more than by heathens that faith stands or falls ; it is by Christ. “Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord.”