Faith, Freedom And The Future

Forsyth Peter Taylor
FAITH, FREEDOM, AND THE FUTURE
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FAITH, FREEDOM, AND THE FUTURE

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PREFACE

The dispute between the spirit and the letter is one that has now burned itself out. As the area of spiritual culture spreads, the worship of the letter retires; and everywhere now, it may be said, the letter is recognised as the servant of the spirit—to an extent even which often makes it its victim. Not only is the letter made to yield the spirit’s larger interpretation, but it may even be erased as an interpolation when it comes into collision with the dogmatism of a ruling idea. Spirit has so conquered all along the line that it is in danger of losing some of the caution and consideration which the victor can never safely discard. While the letter stood in honour there seemed to be something fixed, something in control of spiritual vagrancy. But with its defeat the plea of spirituality may be made to cover anything from inspiration to eccentricity; and even those who groaned under the tyranny of the letter begin to wonder if it was really worse than to be the sport of stray
lights and chance desires. The very ‘spirit of Christ’ may be used to dissolve His historic existence, and the rich development of revelation to rob it of all finality.

So that the issue which now confronts us, if we are not to keep slaying the slain, is not that of the letter and the spirit; but it is the question where, in the victory of spirit, room is to be found for any control at all, or place for any norm of the spiritual life. Where is our last resort—to Authority or Subjectivity? For the hour civilisation is the victim of subjectivity. Some one said lately that the present age is the most conceited of all ages. At least it is the most full of its own subjectivity. It is true that social trouble or social omen is rousing some fear, and leading people to ask if our subjective liberty and sufficiency is really able to carry itself. But it will take a long time for the misgivings to get as deep as the confidence. And meantime it is an evil time for the seers who face the crowd with a real claim for a veritable and royal Word of the Lord.

To take the familiar case which is suggested by such a phrase—the case of the Bible. What is its place still in Christianity? We certainly cannot
treat it as the Reformers did; nor is the warfare round it parallel to that which raged between them and the critics of their day. It cannot be, since the result of the conflict to which I have alluded between the letter and the spirit. The religion of the Reformation can never more be staked on the integrity of the letter of Scripture. Critical science has changed all that. But the question remains all the same. If the letter of Scripture is not final, is there anything in Scripture that is? Is there anything authoritative in the Bible? Is all its interpretation at the mercy of subjective impression? If we have settled the issue between letter and spirit, have we not still to face the question between Word and Spirit? Is there a Word in the Bible for ever to which all the rest of the book is but an aura? Is there in the Bible, still and for ever, a Gospel which is the one guarantee of both certainty and freedom, which is the creator of all freedom and the liberty in all certainty? Has the Bible a finality in it, or is the finality the light which lighteth every man in the world? Is the core of the Bible something definitive and normative for ever, or has the book only a function instrumental and suggestive? Does the soul there
find a new creation; or is the Bible but the means of stimulating and evoking the native resources of the soul at its best? Is the Christ of the Bible the Redeemer or the Symbol of Humanity?

It is not a new issue. It is one that is most keenly felt indeed in the Churches that are known as the Free Churches; but just because they are Churches it is not confined to them, but it is active wherever there is real life in any Church. It ought to be viewed in that great context of a whole Church facing the whole world. Its historic bearings ought to be taken. And the Free Churches especially ought to realise that it is an old legacy for them, and indeed an original entail. For English Dissent did not arise out of the Reformation directly or alone. It arose equally out of the dissenters of the Reformation—the Anabaptists, or however they may be called. And the great issue between the Reformers and the Anabaptists was that which rages so keenly now. It was the issue between a final Word and a free Spirit.

It is the object of these pages, published in the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the creation of Nonconformity by the Act of Uniformity, to trace this issue through this parentage and legacy in the