

ARTICLE IV.

THE ATONEMENT AND THE TIME-SPIRIT.

BY THE REVEREND STEPHEN G. BARNES, D.D.

ST. JOHNSBURY, VERMONT.

WHO can tell the spirit of his time? It is a wonderfully complex thing, with many survivals from the past and many anticipations of the future. There are countless currents, flowing in all directions; and no one man is competent to measure and estimate them all. Yet every man must do his best to understand himself and his own age; how else can he with any intelligence serve his generation according to the will of God? This article is simply the attempt of the writer to declare what he sees, and he has taken the subject of the Atonement because as a central and dominant doctrine it furnishes an admirable touchstone — there is none better.

We know things by contrast, and we discover the characteristics of our own age by seeing how it differs from preceding times. How do we differ from our grandfathers and their teachers? The Christian thinker is pledged to optimism, for he believes that the leaven is leavening the whole lump. Speaking optimistically, we may describe the movement of these years as one towards more truth and more grace. Our forefathers made much of justification, of a righteousness imputed to us. Our age demands something more genuine than this appears to us; it is content to have nothing short of actual righteousness, actually received from Christ. We no longer think of the Atonement as chiefly a method of forgiveness; with us it stands rather for a result of spiritual

harmony with God. Again, our forefathers made much of God's justice, to which love played quite a secondary part; they were largely satisfied with a limited atonement; their definition of a "fair chance" in probation seems something short of fair to us. Our God is surely much more gracious than theirs, one who overcomes evil with good, by love, to an extent far beyond the ordinary ken of three generations ago.

But just where are we now? and where are we going? and where ought we to be going? One method of answering these questions would be the discussion of specific theories of the Atonement, the collation of authorities, the way of the theological professor. Another method is that of personal experience and human intercourse, the way of the pastor. The latter is the present writer's point of view. If he judges aright his brethren in the ministry, and the Christian laymen who give serious thought to the problem of salvation, the answer of these questions is not to be found so much in this or that explanation of the Atonement, not so much in definite intellectual agreements, as in a certain practical, teachable, brotherly spirit which is coming to general self-consciousness in our day. The reader of these pages will probably not be able to tell what the writer's "theory" of the Atonement is, for he finds comfort and help in them all. If the said reader desires only a larger satisfaction in some one theory of the Atonement, to the exclusion or depreciation of others, he had better graze in other fields, for it is the spirit of approach which is here considered.

One great outstanding fact promptly faces us — that this age cares very much more for religion than it does for theology. Every method of human activity must have its day, must be allowed to attempt all tasks, must be given a chance at all problems. Then men find its limitations, and assign

it to its own limited sphere. Speculative theology most distinctly has had its day, and has been retired from the foreground of our religious life. If doctrine means mere opinion, theological ideas carefully labeled and laid up on the shelf, having nothing practical to do with character, what difference does it make whether we adopt this doctrine of the Atonement, or that? Our creed is of no moment, save as it means the ordered statement of those convictions which direct and inspire our lives. Orthodoxy is now held secondary to vital power; it is not so much what we believe, our opinions, as what we vitally believe in, our spiritual efficiency. The need that men feel now, and recognize as the supreme need, is not for correct theories about the Atonement, but for a true vision of Christ. We are saved, not by theories about Christ, but by the Atoning Christ himself. That teaching of the Atonement will be honored which shows the power of the gospel in practical life; they alone gain our respect as men of real "light and leading" whose words about salvation convince us that they speak from actual experience, that they are among those who are being saved. This principle at once puts into the category of secondary values much that seemed of the utmost importance to our ancestors.

Another conviction is growing in the hearts of men, that there is no such thing as a final doctrine of the Atonement. If the time should ever come when the human soul had nothing more to learn on this theme, either because its powers of development were exhausted, or because there was no more to know about God in Christ, then and there it would be possible to construct a final philosophy of salvation. But that time is never coming. God is inexhaustible; God in Christ is inexhaustible; the endless powers of development latent in the human soul, made in the image of God, are likewise never

to be exhausted. It is a good Congregational idea that a church ought to rewrite its creed every generation. And every man ought to be as open to the truth as he expects the church to be, keeping his creed plastic, always ready for the readjustment of emphasis that comes with changing needs, for the correction which comes with enlargement. The idea of truth as a definite deposit in charge of the church, to be kept unchangeable from age to age; the search for the form of sound words about what salvation is and how men are saved which can rightfully be made authoritative upon all who would see the truth as it is in Jesus,— this conception and this quest are largely and increasingly discredited in our times. As the growing child needs new clothes, so the growing soul needs new garments of faith, and expects to need them, and rejoices in the assurance that they will be provided.

Again, it is increasingly recognized that the Atonement is too large a fact to be included in any one "theory." The whole of God is in it — all his qualities, all his powers; in all our future knowledge of God we shall never find anything in him that is not in some most vital way represented in the Atonement. All of man is there: all of his present weakness and perversion has been considered; all "the promise and potency" of a being made for sonship in God's family. Never in the development of eternity will man reach the place where he shall outgrow the revelation of God made in Christ, and shall find Christ no longer unto him the Way, the Truth, and the Life. The great mystery of sin is here; the greater mystery of holiness; the supreme mystery of the love that can conquer sin, and can transform the sinner into the saint. Here are length and breadth and depth and height utterly impossible for any one man to compass, for any school of thought to tie up in neat bundles of logical propositions.

Hence it comes to pass that every theory of the Atonement may be assumed to have some truth in it; it is certainly a fact that every vision of the saving God which actually sustains a saved life has something of truth in it, has hold in some fashion of the Truth. All theories are partial, and ought to confess themselves as such. Any theory of the Atonement becomes vicious when it assumes to be the whole truth and nothing but the truth, when it undertakes not only to assert itself but to deny all others. It is only "with all saints" that we can know the infinite wealth and variety of God's salvation. Instead of confining ourselves to those who see Christ exactly as we do, and have precisely our notion of salvation, it ought to be our joy to find men who can show us new workings of God's saving spirit, new aspects of this multiform life of God in us which we call salvation.

Amid all this boundless variety, how shall each man "gain Christ, and be found in him"? Intellectualism says: "Use your logic; first get your statements into a *Scala Sancta*, and then go up on your knees." Conservatism says: "Be loyal to your church creed, for that is the first duty of man." Life says: "See Christ for yourself, win him for yourself, and tell the world what you have found." The Jew did that. He needed a messiah, and he found him in Christ; he needed a "propitiation," a sacrifice for his guilt, and he found it in Christ. And so the Jew was saved, in Hebrew fashion. The Greek did that. He needed a redeemer that would rouse and fill every power of his mind; and what a field for thought he found in the Eternal Son of God! He needed to see beauty, perfection; and how noble his vision of the beauty of the Divine Sacrifice, of the perfection that comes through sacrificial service! And so the Greek was saved, Hellenically. The Roman did that. He needed a power that would conquer

the world, and he found it in the Divine Imperator. He needed an infinite judge that would magnify the law and make it honorable, and he found that judge in Christ. And so he too was saved, discovering in Christ what a Roman needed; how else could he be saved? Every nation, every generation, needing to be saved in its own way, has found its own way to God in Christ, and has had its own vision of the saving God.

But from all this it follows that for each generation the most valid theory of the Atonement has been its own. As evolutionists we are prone to emphasize the fact that we are the heirs of the ages, the supreme product of time; of course we see more truth, and see it more truly, than any preceding age. But the next generation is going to be as superior to us as we are to the preceding generation. Their needs are going to be different from ours; and they will have to forge out for themselves their own doctrine of salvation, which will fit them but would not now fit us. And the thinking of our grandfathers' generation was as valid and vital for them as ours is for us, the real thinking, the thoughts by which they lived the saved life. A century from now the thinkers of that time will have just as much and just as little cause to look with contempt upon our theories, as we have now to look with superior patronage on our grandfathers. Every one who believes that the Spirit of Truth is guiding us into all truth, must have respect for his past guidance as well as for his present work in us, and must believe that the world's growing thought about Christ will always prove true those great words of trustful optimism, "The best is yet to be."

Bearing in mind these facts, that no theory of the Atonement can be final, none can be complete; that each generation works out for itself and in its own way what is valid for itself, but what is nevertheless only a partial statement of truth, only

a step in man's eternal progress towards the thought of God in Christ,— what shall we say of our thinking to-day upon salvation? By this time the answer is obvious, and a few examples will suffice. Find the aspects of our life which are most creditable to us, and the corresponding aspects of God's saving work will be the ones which we see most worthily. Is the age strong in its sense of God in natural law? It is also strong in its sense of the justice of God which is revealed in the inexorableness of law. We understand more generally than ever before that "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap"; that even grace has laws of its own, and is nowhere arbitrary. Is this age one that has "discovered man," that believes in his powers and future as never before? Naturally the human side of salvation is emphasized — what man can do, what man must do, his indefeasible opportunity, his inescapable responsibility. Is this a philanthropic age, a benevolent age? Is there everywhere a readiness to help? It will surely see these same qualities in God as never before, and God's love, his pure fatherly love in salvation, will receive an emphasis new in the history of Christian thought.

The reverse of all this is equally true. This democratic age, making its own laws and changing them readily, is largely deficient in its recognition of God's government as a necessary and unchangeable expression of God's character. The sense of personal responsibility for the past (if only that past is definitely renounced), the sense of guilt as distinct from the liability to natural consequences, is wholly absent from much of our thinking. The Kentucky mountaineer does not more radically need instruction in the law by which government abides, than do many of our parents and teachers and thinkers upon the Atonement to-day. Again, we have been discovering man and have temporarily turned from God save

as he is visible in humanity. But man needs more of God than he can find in humanity; there must be more done for his salvation than the furnishing of some supreme human appeal to his powers. Before long we shall have to rediscover salvation in terms of God's superhuman powers, and see again in Christ not only the God everywhere immanent, but the transcendent God, all whose transcendent powers are needed for the salvation of man. Again, we love love in our time, but we do not characteristically love holiness, and our sense of sin is strangely deficient; we do not realize its deceitfulness, or its hatefulness, or its desperate strength. This knowledge must be recovered, and it must come through a new vision of God as eternally opposed to sin, in all the forces of his nature, and as expressing in Calvary not only the God who is love but the God who is a consuming fire.

All this has a most practical personal application. Each man will see God in Christ according to that man's style of life, according to his actual experience of salvation. Where his life is strong and effective, where it is Christlike, he may be sure his doctrine of salvation is correspondingly truthful. But are there ways in which the gospel must save the world, if it is to be saved, in which he is not interested, in which he is not efficient? By so much is the true doctrine of salvation hidden from him. Are there great portions of the Bible, great sections of its teaching, which make no appeal to him, which he leaves unread or unregarded? By so much is the true doctrine of salvation hidden from him; for the Bible is simply the record of a wonderfully varied process of salvation applied to outstanding and permanent needs of the human soul. Are there many true and good souls in the world to-day who have found God in Christ, and in whom the spirit of Christ surely abides, with whom he has no sympathy, and

towards whom he has no brotherly drawings of heart? By so much is the true doctrine of salvation hidden from him. For it must never be forgotten that the doctrine of salvation is the doctrine of God's life in the souls of redeemed men, and that doctrine must include everything that God is actually doing in the world through Christ.

Statements as to the time-spirit and the Atonement will of necessity differ widely; but surely we can all come to agreement when we ask in what spirit this great fact of salvation should be studied. The only spirit that fits the theme is the spirit of Christ himself; thus only can Christ be understood. And we may well remind ourselves that his spirit was one of great hopefulness, of triumphant expectation. A full comprehension of salvation is forever impossible; thank God for that. But we can apprehend, and apprehend increasingly. Despite all human weakness and blindness, we were created to this end, that we should see God in Christ. "Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, world without end. Amen."