

## CURRENT ISSUES.

### THE ATONEMENT: A LETTER TO A FRIEND.

DEAR X.,—

I do not suppose that any statements of mine upon the Atonement can command your assent or prove to you a light amid darkness. If what I have already written in the closing chapter of my *Historic Theories* and again in my *Interpreter* article has gone for nothing, it is unlikely that a letter can be useful now. Yet it lies very heavily upon my heart that you should have spoken almost despairingly of the attitude of so many modern Evangelicals towards the grand truth that Christ died for our sins. Let me at least try to show that one member of our little group, who talked together on this bafflingly mysterious theme, seems to himself not only to believe in the atoning death but to be able to state some kind of reason—however pathetically incomplete—for his glorying in the Cross of Christ.

I find in the New Testament two purposes associated with the death of our Lord. That death procures or conveys forgiveness of sins (Romans iii.—v.); and it procures or conveys the new life (Romans vi.—viii.). Historically, the main emphasis has been laid upon the first of these. The penal theory is the clearest reading of the theology which grows out of this way of approach to a doctrine of atonement. Clearness, however, is not our supreme need. Possibly the theory in question is all too clear; possibly it possesses clearness of the wrong sort—at least, when taken as a scientific gnosis; acceptable it must be, whether in or out of the Bible, as a symbol or parable of truths which in their completeness elude our grasp. Upon the penal theory, the punishment of an innocent substitute is held to afford warrant—in the moral sphere; the sphere of conscience—for the forgiveness of the guilty. A strange type of morality, surely! Dale for one, resolutely as he maintains the doctrine of retributive

justice, and loyally as he proclaims the great "fact" of salvation through Christ's death, is conscious of extreme difficulty in justifying the traditional morality and theology of penal substitution. And, among four reasons which he advances for holding that the penal theory, though precarious, may still be defended, is the other Bible teaching already noted—the truth that the sufferings of Christ are the greatest of all factors in the regeneration of human character.

This second aspect of the saving work of Christ is regarded as fundamental by very many modern thinkers. They treat it not indeed or not necessarily as the whole truth, but as—for us—the inevitable starting-point when we seek to construe in terms of doctrine the great saving fact. I confess that I feel a certain painful misgiving whether, after all, it is warrantable to regard forgiveness as secondary and the new life as primary. Yet, provisionally at least, I also must seek to begin at this point and to advance along the line which it opens to us.

In our study of the New Testament we might connect the teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews, that Christ, having been tempted without sinning, is able to succour those who now are tempted—that He learned obedience by suffering, and being made perfect became the Author of eternal salvation to His people—with the doctrine of Romans vi.—viii., that the culmination of this great moral process was the death on the Cross. We thus perceive that our God did not propose to rescue man by an exercise of mere power, nor yet by pronouncing an amnesty in bland indifference to the evil of past sin, but by calling us to the fellowship of One who was in perfect communion with Himself, and who has done the divinest of all God's works in breaking the chains of our sin, and in bestowing upon those who were most unworthy the very peace of God. He who had lived His way into communion with us finally *died* His way into saving and lifegiving fellowship with His helpless human brethren. He forgives, I have ventured to write, because He has made provision for the renewal of our character, but never, never, never in the proportion in which our character is actually renewed, and—so to say—raised from the dead. Nay, rather this is God's gospel, that *when we are worst we need forgiveness most, and He grants it freely.*

There is more in the theology which I am seeking to outline

than a recognition of Divine love in the Cross—which too often thins away in so-called “moral” theories into a belief that God is indifferent to moral distinctions or is immorally indulgent towards unrepentant sinners. This Christ whom we seek to preach is the very power of God unto salvation—“a lever to raise us” (if it is desired to use that form of words) from hell itself to the topmost heights of heaven.

It must be confessed that our theory has its obscurities; e.g. (1) Christ is sinless, but the new life which He imparts to His people is not, here and now, a complete or sinless victory; (2) Christ is the fountain-head of human purity, yet we dare not write off the virtues of worldly or pagan men as “vices in fancy dress.”

But may we not recognize, and proclaim with all boldness, that the perfect loyalty of Christ, under trial to the uttermost, is the only power which can promise rescue and victory to the very worst of mankind? And that a salvation which does not reach to the blackest sinner could be of no avail whatever even for the whitest—or, to speak more accurately, the grayest—among all the flock of lost sheep? No soul of man can cut loose from the world of which he is a part, that world which still lies in wickedness and misery. Therefore Christ is not the Saviour of any unless He be the Saviour and rightful Lord of all. The virtuous pagan needs Christ, and the innocent child needs Christ. Inheritors of the world’s dark lot, we escape only as joint-heirs with Jesus Christ of God, His Father and ours. And our new and better inheritance comes to us by God’s boundless mercy, which must ultimately triumph with a completeness to which we dare put no limit, inasmuch as the price was paid, the battle fought, the victory gained long ages ago. For, although the Kingdom of God will not come without our loyal service—and woe be to us, if we are disloyally slack!—the exceeding greatness of the power is of God and not of us, and Christ is in very deed the Saviour of mankind. He has done for us that which utterly needed to be done by us or for us, and which we never could do for ourselves. And so man is redeemed, and God is glorified, and grace reigns, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Yours ever very truly,

ROBERT MACKINTOSH.