

***The Importance of the Death of Christ in Preaching and in Theology* by
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IF the series of studies which we have now completed has reproduced with any adequacy or accuracy the mind of the New Testament writers, certain conclusions of importance may fairly be deduced from it. One is that there really is such a thing as the New Testament. There is, as we were disposed to assume, a real and substantial unity of thought in the books which we call by that name. They were not written with a view to incorporation in a canon; to repeat the paradox referred to in the introduction, New Testament theology is the theology of the Church at a time when as yet it had no New Testament. But the New Testament books have a unity, nevertheless, which is not external or imposed, nor due to the accident of their being approximately contemporary, but which is inward, essential, and spiritual, and which qualifies them to be canonical. Another conclusion to which we are led is that the death of Christ is the central thing in the New Testament, and in the Christian religion as the New Testament understands it. And when we say the death of Christ, we include, of course, the significance which the New Testament ascribes to it. Apart from that significance the death of Christ has no more right to a place in religion than the death of the penitent or the impenitent thief. The Cross and the word of the Cross — the Cross and the rationale of it in relation to the love of God and the sin of Man — are for religion one thing. This being so, it is apparent that both for the propagation and for the scientific construction of the Christian religion the death of Christ is of supreme importance. Not that I should draw too abstract a distinction. The propagation of Christianity and its interpretation by intelligence — in other words, preaching and theology — should never be divorced. At the vital point they coincide. The simplest truth of the gospel and the profoundest truth of theology must be put in the same words — He bore our sins. If our gospel does not inspire thought, and if our theology does not inspire preaching, there is no Christianity in either. Yet vitally related as they are, there is a sufficiently clear distinction between them, and in considering some consequences, for preaching and theology, of New Testament teaching on Christ's death, it will be convenient to take preaching first.

It is an immediate inference, then, from all that we have seen in the New Testament, that where there is no Atonement there is no gospel. To preach the love of God out of relation to the death of Christ — or to preach the love of God in the death of Christ, but without being able to relate it to sin — or to preach the forgiveness of sins as the free gift of God's love, while the death of Christ has no special significance assigned to it — is not, if the New Testament is the rule and standard of Christianity, to preach the gospel at all. Many ministers have suffered from the charge of not preaching the gospel, and have resented it as an injustice. In any given case it may quite well have been so. There are those who are unable to separate form from substance in thinking, and who are only

too ready to believe that if the familiar form in which the truth has been expressed is varied, the substance is being injured or dissipated. But it is not saying a hard or unjust thing to say that in some cases the charge may not be groundless. It may be made not merely by the unintelligent, who fail to distinguish form from substance, but by the simple Christian spirit which has the anointing from the Holy One, and knows instinctively whether that by which it lives is present in the message it hears or not. There is such a thing as preaching in which the death of Christ has no place corresponding to that which it has in the New Testament. There is preaching in which the New Testament interpretation of Christ's death is ignored, or carped at, or exploded. We do not need to argue that no man can preach the gospel until he has absorbed into his mind and heart the whole significance of Christ's death as the New Testament reveals it; in that case, who could preach at all? But it is not unjust to say that no man will so preach as to leave the impression that he has the Word of God behind him if he is inwardly at war with the idea of atonement, constantly engaged in minimizing it, maintaining an attitude of reserve, or even of self-defense, in relation to it. We may take it or leave it, but it is idle to attempt to propagate the Christian religion on the basis and with the authority of the New Testament, unless we have welcomed it with our whole heart.

It is proper to remember in this connection that very often it is the simplest expressions, and those most open to abstract criticism, in which the profoundest truth is most tellingly expressed and most really apprehended; and that when this is the case, if we are compelled to criticize, we should be careful that we do not discredit the essential truth as well as the inadequate form. It is easy, for instance, to criticize the insufficiency of any commercial figure, like that of 'debt,' to exhibit the personal and spiritual relations subsisting between man and God; yet Christ used this figure habitually, and the whole impression which it makes upon the conscience is sound. The words of the revival hymn, 'Jesus paid it all, All to Him I owe,' have the root of the matter in them; and, however inadequate they may be to the interpretation of Christ's work and of Christian experience as a whole, they are infinitely truer than the most balanced, considerate, or subtle statement which denies them. Hence, whatever the motive which prompts criticism of such forms, we should be sensitive to the meaning they bear. Even if we think they are morally inadequate, and leave the new life unprovided for, we should remember that in the New Testament the new life is the immediate response to the very truth which such forms convey. The new life springs out of the sense of debt to Christ. The regenerating power of forgiveness depends upon its cost: it is the knowledge that we have been bought *with a price* which makes us cease to be our own, and live for Him who so dearly bought us. And we should remember also that it is not always intellectual sensitiveness, nor care for the moral interests involved, which sets the mind to criticize statements of the Atonement. There *is* such a thing as pride, the last form of which is unwillingness to become debtor even to Christ for forgiveness of sins; and it is

conceivable that in any given case it may be this which makes the words of the hymn stick in our throats. In any case, I do not hesitate to say that the sense of debt to Christ is the most profound and pervasive of all emotions in the New Testament, and that only a gospel which evokes this, as the gospel of Atonement does, is true to the primitive and normal Christian type.

Not only must Atonement by the death of Christ be preached if we would preach the New Testament gospel, but the characteristics of the Atonement must be clearly reflected in the preaching if justice is to be done to the gospel. As the finished work of Christ the Atonement is complete, and the perfection which belongs to it belongs also to the new relation to God into which we enter when the Atonement is appropriated by faith. There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. Their relation to God is not determined now in the very least by sin or law, it is determined by Christ the propitiation and by faith. The position of the believer is not that of one trembling at the judgment seat, or of one for whom everything remains somehow in a condition of suspense; it is that of one who has the assurance of a divine love which has gone deeper than all his sins, and has taken on itself the responsibility of them, and the responsibility of delivering him from them. A relation to God in which sin has nothing to say, but which is summed up in Christ and His perfect Atonement for sin — in John Wesley's words, *full salvation now* — is the burden of the gospel. If it is not easy to believe this or to preach it, it is because, as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's thoughts higher than our thoughts, and His ways than our ways. In the New Testament itself there is always something startling, something almost incredible, which breaks again and again on the soul with a sense of wonder, in the experience of reconciliation through the death of Christ. But it is this great gospel which is the gospel to win souls — this message of a sin-bearing, sin-expiating love, which pleads for acceptance, which takes the whole responsibility of the sinner unconditionally, with no preliminaries, if only he abandon himself to it. Only the preaching of full salvation now, as Wesley tells us — and who knew better from experience than he? — has any promise in it of revival.

Further, preaching which would do justice to the Atonement must hold out in the gospel an assurance corresponding to the certainty of Christ's death and to the sin-bearing love demonstrated in it. Nothing is more characteristic of churches than their attitude to assurance, and the place they give it in their preaching and in their systems of doctrine. Speaking broadly, we may say that in the Romish church it is regarded as essentially akin to presumption; in the Protestant churches it is a privilege or a duty; but in the New Testament religion it is simply a fact. This explains the joy which, side by side with the sense of infinite obligation, is the characteristic note of apostolic Christianity. The great invincible certainty of the reconciling love of God, which even when we were enemies made peace for us, this underlies all things, embraces all things, makes all things work together for good to those who love God, makes us more than conquerors in all things;

take away the certainty of it, and the New Testament temper expires. Joy in this certainty is not presumption; on the contrary, it is joy in the Lord, and such joy is the Christian's strength. It is the impulse and the hope of sanctification; and to deprecate it, and the assurance from which it springs, is no true evangelical humility, but a failure to believe in the infinite goodness of God, who in Christ removes our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, and plants our life in this eternal reconciling love. The New Testament spirit is not meant for our despair, but for our inspiration; that assurance of sin-bearing love, that sanctifying strength and gladness, are the type of genuine Christian life.

We can understand and appreciate the motive which, both in the Romish and in the Protestant churches, has fostered in relation to assurance a temper which is not that of the New Testament, and which does not answer to the completeness and certainty of Christ's finished work. The motive is in both cases a desire to safeguard moral interests and to put a check upon self-deception. The Romish church safeguards moral interests by making justification and the new life identical: men are justified as, and only in proportion as, they are actually and morally renewed. The objection to this method is that the security is too good. An absolute justification is needed to give the sinner a start. He must have the certainty of no condemnation of being, without reserve or drawback right with God through God's gracious act in Christ, before he can begin to live the new life. As Chalmers put it with magnificent simplicity, 'What could I do if God did not justify *the ungodly*?' It is not by denying the gospel outright, from the very beginning, that we are to guard against the possible abuse of it. In the Protestant churches, on the other hand, the attempt to check presumption and to safeguard moral interests was usually made by laying stress on the proper kind of faith. The German Pietists, in opposition to a dead orthodoxy, in which faith had come to mean no more than the formal recognition of sound doctrine, spoke with emphasis of penitent faith, living faith, true faith, obedient faith, and so on. It is somewhat against qualifications like these that they are foreign to the New Testament. What they come to in practice is this: Before the mercy of God in Christ the propitiation can be available for you, O sinful man, you must have a sufficient depth of penitence, a sufficiently earnest desire for reconciliation and holiness, a sufficient moral sincerity; otherwise grace would only minister to sin. But such qualifications do infringe upon the graciousness of the gospel — I mean on its absolute freeness — as something to be explained out of the love of God and the necessity, not the merits, of men. Christ did not die for those who were sufficiently penitent. He is the propitiation for the whole world, and He bore the sins of all that all might believe and receive through Him repentance and remission. To try to take some preliminary security for the sinner's future morality before you make the gospel available for him is not only to strike at the root of assurance, it is to pay a very poor tribute to the power of the gospel. The truth is, morality is best guaranteed by Christ, and not by any precautions we can take before Christ gets a chance, or by any

virtue that is in faith except as it unites the soul to Him. Now the Christ who is the object of faith is the Christ whose death is the Atonement, and the faith which takes hold of Christ as He is held out in the gospel conducts, if we may use such a figure, the virtue of the Atonement into the heart. The mercy of God which we welcome in it, and welcome as the first and last of spiritual realities with invincible assurance, is a mercy which has deep in the heart of it God's judgment upon sin; and such a mercy, absolutely free as it is, and able to evoke in sinful men a joy unspeakable and full of glory, can never foster either immorality or presumption. But when its certainty, completeness, and freeness are so qualified or disguised that assurance becomes suspect and joy is quenched, the Christian religion has ceased to be.⁷⁴

There is one other characteristic of the Atonement which ought to be reflected in gospel preaching as determined by it, and which may for want of a better word be described as its finality. Christ died for sins once for all, and the man who believes in Christ and in His death has his relation to God once for all determined not by sin but by the Atonement. The sin for which a Christian has daily to seek forgiveness is not sin which annuls his acceptance with God, and casts him back into the position of one who has never had the assurance of the pardoning mercy of God in Christ; on the contrary, that assurance ought to be the permanent element in his life. The forgiveness of sins has to be received again and again as sin emerges into act; but when the soul closes with Christ the propitiation, the assurance of God's love is laid at the foundation of its being once for all. It is not to isolated acts it refers, but to the personality; not to sins, but to the sinner; not to the past only, in which wrong has been done, but to time and eternity. There will inevitably be in the Christian life experiences of sinning and being forgiven, of falling and being restored. But the grace which forgives and restores is not some new thing, nor is it conditioned in some new way. It is not dependent upon penitence, or works, or merit of ours; it is the same absolutely free grace which meets us at the Cross. From first to last, it is the blood of Jesus, God's Son, which cleanses from sin. The daily pardon, the daily cleansing, are but the daily virtue of that one all-embracing act of mercy in which, while we were yet sinners, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.

To say that there is no gospel without Atonement, and that the characteristics of the Atonement must be impressed upon Christian preaching and reflected in the completeness, assurance, and joy of the Christian life which is the response to it, does not mean that the preacher is always to be expressly and formally engaged with the death of Christ, nor does it determine in what way that death in its redeeming significance is to be presented to men. It is impossible to forget the example of our Lord, though we are bound to remember that what was natural and inevitable before the Passion and the Resurrection may not be either wise or natural now. But looking to the gospels, we cannot but see that our Lord allowed His disciples every opportunity to become acquainted with Him, and to grow into confidence in Him, before He began to

teach them about His death. He allowed them to catch the impression of His Personality before He initiated them into the mystery of His Passion. As for outsiders, He seems not to have spoken to them on the subject at all. Yet it would be a mistake, as we have seen, to suppose that the death of Jesus was not present — in His mind and in His life — even where nothing was said of it. The more we study the gospels, and the more thoroughly we appreciate such incidents as the Baptism, the Temptation, and the Transfiguration, with the heavenly voices attendant on them — not to mention the occasions on which His death rises even in early days to the surface of our Lord's mind — the more we shall be convinced that the sense and the power of it pervade everything we know of Him. He lived in the same spirit in which He died, and in a true sense we are in contact with the Passion and the Atonement whenever we are in contact with the soul of Jesus. To preach the gospels, therefore, it may be said, is to preach the gospel. On the other hand we must; remember, and allow the remembrance its full weight as a directory for teaching and preaching, that a time came when Jesus set Himself deliberately, systematically, and with unwearied reiteration to bring home to His disciples the meaning of His death. Everything conspires to make us see how deeply it moved Him, and how deeply He was concerned to have it apprehended by the disciples as what it was. The very names by which He names it — My baptism, My cup; the profound virtue He ascribes to it as a ransom, and as the basis of a new covenant between God and man; the striking ordinances of baptism and the Supper which He associated with it, and which in spite of intelligible yet misconceived protests will guard its meaning while the world stands; all these separately, and still more in combination, warn us that whatever method may be prescribed in any given case by pedagogic considerations, it must not be one which leaves it optional to us to give the death of Christ a place in our gospel or not, as we please. It is as certain as anything can be that He meant us to be His debtors and to feel that we are so. He meant to represent Himself as the mediator between God and sinners, and to evoke in sinners an infinite sense of obligation to Himself as they realized that they had peace with God. And it always comes to this in the long-run. Men may come into contact with Christ at different places; they may approach Him from all quarters of the compass, under various impulses, yielding to a charm and constraint in Him as manifold as the beatitudes or as the gracious words and deeds of the gospel. But if they are in dead earnest as He is, they will come sooner or later to the strait gate; and the ultimate form the strait gate assumes — for it is a gate that goes on straitening until the demand for death is made as the price of life — is that to which Jesus leads up His disciples in His last lessons: are you willing to humble yourselves so as to owe to Me, and to My death for you, the forgiveness of sins and the life which is life indeed? There is a straight line from every point in the circumference of a circle to the center, and when we get to the quick of almost anything in the relations of men to Jesus, it leads with wonderful directness to this decisive point. *[some text left out dealing with Kierkegaard]*

The type of experience here described may be common enough in Christian lands, but what, it may be asked, is its relation to such a practice as St. Paul describes in [1 Corinthians 15:3](#): 'I delivered unto you *first of all* that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures?' Is this consistent with what has just been said, or with what we have seen of our Lord's method of teaching? Is there a rule in it for all evangelistic preaching?

St. Paul's expression, ἐν πρώτοις, is not quite so pointed as 'first of all.' It is certainly to be taken, however, in a temporal sense: among the first things the apostle transmitted to the Corinthians were the fundamental facts of the Christian religion, the death and resurrection of Jesus in the significance which belonged to them 'according to the Scriptures,' that is, in the light of the earlier revelation. And among these first things the death of Christ in its relation to sin had a foremost place. It is, I think, a fair inference from this that in preaching the gospel the main appeal is to be made to the conscience, and that it cannot be made too soon, too urgently, too desperately, or too hopefully. It is because the Atonement is at once the revelation of sin and the redemption from sin, that it must inspire everything in preaching which is to bring home to the conscience either conviction of sin or the hope and assurance of deliverance from it. 'Eternity,' Halyburton said, 'is wrapt up in every truth of religion'; the Atonement, it is not too much to say, is wrapt up in every truth of the Christian religion, and should be sensible through every word of the Christian preacher. In this sense at least it must be delivered ἐν πρώτοις.

We may begin as wisely as we please with those who have a prejudice against it, or whose conscience is asleep, or who have much to learn both about Christ and about themselves before they will consent to look at such a gospel, to say nothing of abandoning themselves to it; but if we do not begin with something which is essentially related to the Atonement, presupposing it or presupposed by it or involved in it, something which leads inevitably, though it may be by an indirect and unsuspected route, to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, we have not begun to the gospel at all. This may seem a hard saying to those who have listened to weariness to the repetition of orthodox formulae on this subject, and have realized that even under the New Covenant there are conditions which compel us to say, The letter killeth. But it is not because the formulae are orthodox that they weary, it is because they are formal; the vital interest of the great realities which they enshrine has slipped from an unbelieving grasp, and left the preacher with nothing to deliver but words. A fresh realization of the truth which they embody would bring new words or put new life into the old; and in any case the fact remains that there is nothing which is so urgently and immediately wanted by sinful men, nothing which strikes so deep into the heart, which answers so completely to its need, and binds it so irrevocably and with such a sense of

obligation to God, as the atoning death of Jesus. Implicit or explicit, it is the Alpha and Omega of Christian preaching.

Most preachers in any sympathy with this line of thought have deplored in the present or the last generation the decay of the sense of sin.⁷⁶ Now, the Atonement is addressed to the sense of sin. It presupposes the bad conscience. Where there is no such thing, it is like a lever without a fulcrum; great as its power might be, it is actually powerless, and often provokes resentment. The phenomenon is a curious one, and though it cannot be permanent, it calls for explanation. Possibly the explanation is partly to be found in the circumstance that the Atonement itself was once preached too much as though it had relation only to the past, and had no assurance or guarantee in it for man's future. It contained the forgiveness of sins, but not the new life. Where this was the case we can understand that it ceased to be interesting to those whose hearts were set on holiness. We can understand how Bushnell could speak of the forgiveness of sins as 'only a kind of formality, or verbal discharge, that carries practically no discharge at all.' But it is not easy to understand how this could be brought into any kind of relation to the New Testament. There, as we have seen, the forgiveness of sins, and the Atonement which is its ground, are no formality. They are the supreme miracle of revelation, the hardest, most incredible, most wonderful work of the God who alone does wondrous things; the whole promise and potency of the new life are to be found in them alone. The Atonement, or God's justification of the ungodly, which takes effect with the acceptance of the Atonement, regenerates, and there is no regeneration besides. But while a defective appreciation of the New Testament may have done something to discredit the Atonement, and to make men think of forgiveness, and of the sense of sin which demands it, as alike 'formalities' in contrast with actual sanctification, the deadening of conscience is probably to be traced on the whole to other causes. It is due in great part to the dominance in the mind for the last forty or fifty years of the categories of natural science, and especially of a naturalistic theory of evolution. All things have been 'naturalized,' if we may so speak; the spiritual being no longer retains, in the common consciousness, his irreducible individuality; he has lapsed to some extent into the vast continuity of the universe. Even to speak of the individual is to use language which is largely unreal, and with individuality individual responsibility has lost credit. It is the race which lives, and it is the qualities and defects of the race which are exhibited in what we call the virtues and vices of men. When we look at the lives of others, the last thing we now think of is the responsibility which attaches to each of them for being what he is; and it is apt to be the last thing also which we think of when we look at ourselves. Heredity and environment — these are the dominant realities in our minds; and so inevitable, so importunate is their pressure, that what was once known as freedom passes out of view. We are afraid to speak as the Bible speaks about personal responsibility — we are afraid to say the tremendous things it says about sin and sinful men — both because we would not be unjust to others, and because we wish to be

considerate to ourselves. For the same reason we are afraid to give that decisive importance to the atoning death of Christ which it carries in the New Testament. But of one thing we may be certain: sooner or later there will be a reaction against this mental condition. When our sense of the unity of the race in itself, and of its unity with the 'nature' which is the theater of its history, has done its work — when the social conscience has been quickened — when the feeling of corporate responsibility has attained adequate intensity, so that the duties of society to the individual shall be no longer overlooked, the responsibility of the individual will come back in new strength. The naturalistic view of the world cannot permanently suppress the moral one. Even while it has seemed to threaten it, it has been preparing for its revival in a more profound and adequate form. The sense of personal responsibility, when it does come back, will be less confined, more far-reaching and mysterious; it will be more than ever such a sense of responsibility as will make the doctrine of a divine atonement for sin necessary, credible, and welcome.

Meanwhile, surely, the preaching of the atonement has something to do with producing the very state of mind on which its reception depends. It is the highest truth of revelation; and the highest truth is like the highest poetry — it has to generate the intellectual and moral atmosphere in which alone it can be appreciated and taken to the heart. To say that there is no sense of sin, or that the sense of sin is defective, is only to say in other words that there is no repentance, or no adequate repentance; no returning of the mind upon itself deeply enough, humbly enough, tenderly and hopefully enough, to have any healing or restoring effect. But how is this spiritual condition to be altered? What is the cure for it? There are those who cannot be convinced that any cure is necessary. In spite of all Christian confession to the contrary, they cling to the idea that such a returning of the mind upon itself as would constitute repentance unto life and be the proper condition of pardon and acceptance with God, is an experience which the sinful soul can produce out of its own resources, and clothed in which it can come hopefully to meet God. But true repentance — that is, repentance which is not self-centered, but which realizes that sin is something in which God has an interest as well as we; repentance which is not merely a remorseful or apathetic or despairing regret, but a hopeful, healing, sanctifying sorrow — such repentance is born of the knowledge of God, and of what God has done for us in our sins. It is not a preliminary to the Atonement, nor a substitute for it, nor a way in which we can be reconciled to God without being indebted to it; it is its fruit. It is born at the Cross where we see sin put away, not by our own regret, however sincere and profound, but by the love of God in the Passion of His dear Son. Hence we lose the only chance of seeing it, and of seeing in its true intensity the sense of individual responsibility which is part and parcel of it, if we give the Atonement anything less than the central place in our preaching. No one is really saved from sin until he has in relation to it that mind which Christ had when He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. And no motive is potent enough to generate that mind in

sinful men but the love with which Christ loved us when He so gave Himself for us. It is true to say that the Atonement presupposes conscience and appeals to it, but it is truer still to say that of all powers in the world it is the supreme power for creating and deepening conscience. One remembers again and again the story of the first Moravian missionaries to Greenland, who, after twenty years of fruitless toil in indirect approaches to the savage mind, found it suddenly responsive to the appeal of the Cross. Probably St. Paul made no mistake when he delivered to the Corinthians ἐν πρώτοις the message of the Atonement. No one can tell how near conscience is to the surface, or how quickly in any man it may respond to the appeal. We might have thought that in Corinth much preliminary sapping and mining would have been requisite before the appeal could be made with any prospect of success; but St. Paul judged otherwise, and preached from the very outset the great hope of the gospel, by which conscience is at once evoked and redeemed. We might think that in a Christian country conscience would be nearer the surface, more susceptible, more conscious of its needs, more quickly responsive to the appeal of the atonement; and if we do not always find it so, it is only, as St. Paul himself puts it, because all men have not faith. We cannot get behind this melancholy fact, and give the rationale of what is in itself irrational. Yet all experience shows that the gospel wins by its magnitude, and that the true method for the evangelist is to put the great things in the forefront. If this is not the way to the conscience, this sublime demonstration of the love of God in Christ, in which our responsibility as sinful men is taken by Him in all its dreadful reality and made His own, what is? In what, if not in this, can we find the means of appealing to all men, and to that which is deepest in all?

One other characteristic ought to distinguish evangelical preaching, as preaching determined by the Atonement, it ought to have a deep impression of the absoluteness of the issues in faith and unbelief, or let us say in the acceptance or rejection of the reconciliation. In one way, it may be said, this is always the note of religion. It is a form of the absolute consciousness, and deals not with a sliding scale but with the blank, unqualified antithesis of life or death, weal or woe, salvation or perdition, heaven or hell. This is true, yet of no religion is it more emphatically true than of that which is exhibited in the New Testament. It is a life and death matter we are concerned with when we come face to face with Christ and with what He has done for us. It is quite possible to preach with earnestness, and even with persuasiveness, from another standpoint. It is quite possible to have a very sincere admiration for goodness, and a very sincere desire to be better men than we are and to see others better; it is quite possible even to see the charm and beauty of Christ's goodness, and to commend it in the most winning way to men, and yet to want in preaching the very note which is characteristic both of Christ and the apostles. Christ knew that He was to give His life a ransom; the apostles knew that He had done it, and had made peace through the blood of His Cross; and their preaching, though it is never overbearing or unjust, though it never tries to intimidate men, or (as one may sometimes have been tempted to think in a mission service) to

bully them into faith, is as urgent and passionate as the sense of the atoning death can make it. To receive the reconciliation, or not to receive it — to be a Christian, or not to be a Christian — is not a matter of comparative indifference; it is not the case of being a somewhat better man, or a man, perhaps, not quite so good; it is a case of life or death. It is difficult to speak of this as it ought to be spoken of, and to urge it in any given situation may easily expose the preacher to the charge of intolerance, uncharitableness, or moral blindness; but difficult as it may be to preach the gospel in the spirit of the gospel, with a sense at the same time of the infinite love which is in it, and the infinite responsibility which it puts upon us, it is not a difficulty which the preacher's vocation will allow him to evade. He may easily be represented as saying that he is making the acceptance of his own theology the condition of acceptance with God, and arrogating to himself the right to judge others; but while he repudiates such charges as inconsistent with his whole relation both to God and man, he will not abandon his conviction that the apostolic sense of the infinite consequences determined by man's relation to the gospel is justified, and that it is justified because it is in harmony with all that the New Testament teaches about: the finished work of Christ. God has spoken His last word in His Son; He has done all that He can do for men; revelation and redemption are complete, and the finality on which the Epistle to the Hebrews lays such emphasis as characteristic of everything belonging to the new covenant ought to have an echo in every proclamation of it. If therefore we are conscious that this note is wanting in our preaching — that it fails in urgency and entreaty — that it is expository merely, or attractive, or hortatory — that it is interpretative or illuminative, or has the character of good advice, very good advice indeed, when we come to think of it, — it is probably time to ask what place in it is held by the Atonement. The proclamation of the finished work of Christ is not good advice, it is good news, good news that means immeasurable joy for those who welcome it, irreparable loss for those who reject it, infinite and urgent responsibility for all. The man who has this to preach has a gospel about which he ought to be in dead earnest just because there is nothing which concentrates in the same way the judgment and the mercy of God, there is nothing which has the same power to evoke seriousness and passion in the preacher.

Leaving out of account its importance to the sinner, the supreme interest of the doctrine of the Atonement is, of course, its interest for the evangelist; without a firm grasp of it he can do nothing whatever in his vocation. But what is central in religion must be central also in all reflection upon it, and the theologian no less than the evangelist must give this great truth its proper place in his mind. I have no intention of outlining a system of theology in which the atonement made in the death of Christ should be the determinative principle; but short of this, it is possible to indicate its bearing and significance in regard to some vital questions.

For example, if we have been correct in our appreciation of its place in the New Testament, it is not too much to say that as the focus of revelation it is the key to all that precedes. It may not always be historically true, but it will always be divinely true — that is, it will answer to God's mind as we can see it now, if not as it was apprehended from stage to stage in the history of revelation — if we let the light of the final revelation of the New Testament fall all along upon the Old. The nature of the unity which belongs to Scripture has always been a perplexing question — so perplexing, indeed, that the very existence of any unity at all has been denied; yet there is an answer to it. Scripture converges upon the doctrine of the Atonement; it has the unity of a consentient testimony to a love of God which bears the sin of the world. How this is done we do not see clearly until we come to Christ, or until He comes to us; but once we get this insight from Him, we get it for revelation as a whole. To Him bear all the Scriptures witness; and it is as a testimony to Him, the Bearer of sin, the Redeemer who gave His life a ransom for us, that we acknowledge them. This is the burden of the Bible, the one fundamental omnipresent truth to which the Holy Spirit bears witness by and with the word in our hearts. This, at bottom, is what we mean when we say that Scripture is inspired.....We will never know what inspiration is until Scripture has resolved itself for us into a unity. That unity, I venture to say, will be its testimony to a love in God which we do not earn, which we can never repay, but which in our sins comes to meet us with mercy, dealing, nevertheless, with our sins in all earnest, and at infinite cost doing right by God's holy law in regard to them; a love which becomes incarnate in the Lamb of God bearing the sin of the world, and putting it away by the sacrifice of Himself. It is in its testimony to this that the unity of Scripture and its inspiration consists, and whoever believes in this believes in inspiration in the only sense which can be rationally attached to the word.

The doctrine of the atonement, in the central place which Scripture secures for it, has decisive importance in another way: it is the proper evangelical foundation for a doctrine of the Person of Christ. To put it in the shortest possible form, Christ is the person who can do this work for us. This is the deepest and most decisive thing we can know about Him, and in answering the questions which it prompts we are starting from a basis in experience. There is a sense in which Christ as the Reconciler confronts us. He is doing the will of God on our behalf, and we can only look on. It is the judgment and the mercy of God in relation to our sins which we see in Him, and His Presence and work on earth are a divine gift, a divine visitation. He is the gift of God to men, not the offering of men to God, and God gives Himself to us in and with Him. We owe to Him all that we call divine life. On the other hand, this divine visitation is made, and this divine life is imparted, through a life and work which are truly human. The presence and work of Jesus in the world, even the work of bearing sin, does not prompt us to define human and divine by contrast with each other: there is no suggestion of incongruity between them. Nevertheless, they are both there, and the fact that they are both there justifies us in raising the question as to Jesus' relation to God on the one hand, and to men on

the other. We become sensible, as we contemplate this divine visitation, this achievement of a work so necessary to man yet so transcending his powers, that Jesus is not in the human race one man more to whom our relation may be as fortuitous as to any other. Rather does the whole phenomenon justify us in putting such a question as Dale's: What must Christ's relation to men be in order to make it possible that He should die for them? — a question leading to an essentially evangelical argument, that Christ must have had an original and central relation to the human race and to every member of it. Whether this is the best way to express the conclusion need not here be considered, but that this is the final way to approach the problem is not open to doubt.

In this connection I venture to emphasize again a point referred to at the close of the first chapter. It is the doctrine of the Atonement which secures for Christ His place in the gospel, and which makes it inevitable that we should have a Christology or a doctrine of His Person. Reduced to the simplest religious expression, the doctrine of the Atonement signifies that we owe to Christ and to His finished work our whole being as Christians. We are His debtors, and it is a real debt; a debt infinite, never to be forgotten, never to be discharged. The extraordinary statement of Harnack — as extraordinary, perhaps, in its ambiguity as in its daring — that in the gospel as Jesus preached it the Son has no place but only the Father, owes whatever plausibility it has under the most favorable construction to the assumption that in the gospel as Jesus preached it there is no such thing as an atoning work of Jesus. Jesus *did* nothing in particular by which men become His debtors; He only showed in His own life what the state of the case was between God and men, quite apart from anything He did or had to do. He was 'the personal realization and the power of the gospel, and is ever again experienced as such.' One might be tempted to criticize this from Kierkegaard's point of view, and to urge that it betrays no adequate appreciation of the gulf between Christ and sinful men, and of the dreadful difficulty of bridging it; but it is sufficient to say that it departs so widely not only from the consciousness of primitive Christianity as it is reflected in the epistles, but from the mind of Christ as we have seen cause to interpret it through the gospels, that it is impossible to assent to it. Christ not only *was* something in the world, He *did* something. He did something that made an infinite difference, and that puts us under an infinite obligation: He bore our sins. That secures His place in the gospel and in the adoration of the church. That is the impulse and the justification of all Christologies. Harnack's statement, quoted above, is meant to give a religious justification for lightening the ship of the church by casting Christological controversy overboard; but the Atonement always says to us again, Consider how great this Man was! As long as it holds; its place in the preaching of the gospel, and asserts itself in the church, as it does in the New Testament, as the supreme inspiration to praise, so long will Christians find in the Person of their Lord a subject of high and reverent thought. It is a common idea that Socinianism (or Unitarianism) is specially connected with the denial of the Incarnation. It began historically with the denial of the Atonement. It is with the denial of the Atonement that

it always begins anew, and it cannot be too clearly pointed out that to begin here is to end, sooner or later, with putting Christ out of the Christian religion altogether.

It is the more necessary to insist on this point of view because there is in some quarters a strong tendency to put the Atonement out of its place, and to concentrate attention on the Incarnation as something which can be appreciated in entire independence of it. The motives for this are various. Sometimes they may not unfairly be described as speculative. 'The great aim of the Christian Platonists,' says Mr. Inge, 'was to bring the Incarnation into closest relation with the cosmic process. It need hardly be said that no Christian philosophy can have any value which does not do this.'⁷⁷ Those, therefore, whose interest is in the cosmic process, or in articulating all that is known as Christian into the framework of the universe, devote their attention to the Person of Christ, and seek in it the natural consummation, so to speak, of all that has gone before. Without that Person the universe would be without a crown or a head. It is so constituted that only He gives it unity and completeness. That its unity had been broken before He came to earth, and that He completed it by a work of reversal and not of direct evolution — a work which, however truly it may be said to have carried out the original idea of God, is yet in the strictest sense supernatural, a redemption, not a natural consummation — is practically overlooked. With others, again, the motive may be said to be ethical. To put the Atonement at the foundation of Christianity seems to them to narrow it morally in the most disastrous way. It is as though they lost the breadth and variety of interest and motive which appeal to the conscience from the life of Christ in the pages of the evangelists. But there is a misconception here. Those who make the Atonement fundamental do not turn their backs on the gospels. They are convinced, however, that the whole power of the motives which appeal to us from the life of Jesus is not felt until we see it condensed, concentrated, and transcended in the love in which He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. Others displace the Atonement for what may be called a dogmatic reason. It is a fixed point with them that so great a thing as the Incarnation could not be in any proper sense contingent; the presence of the Son of God in the world cannot be an 'after-thought' or an 'accident'; the whole intent of it cannot be given in such an expression as 'remedial.' The universe must have been constituted from the first with a view to it, and it would have taken place all the same even though there had been no sin and no need for redemption. When it did take place, indeed, it could not be exactly as had been intended; under the conditions of the fall, the Incarnation entailed a career which meant Atonement; it was Incarnation into a sinful race, and the Atonement was made when the Son of God accepted the conditions which sin had determined, and fulfilled man's destiny under them. Perhaps the truth might be put within the four corners of such a formula, but the tendency in those who adopt this point of view is to minimize all that is said in the New Testament about the death of Christ in relation to sin. The specific assertions and definitions of the apostolic writings are evaded. They are interpreted emotionally but not logically, as if the men who say the strong things on this

subject in the New Testament had said them without thinking, or would have been afraid of their own thoughts. The most distinguished representative of this tendency in our own country was Bishop Westcott. Not that what has just been said is applicable in its entirety to him; but the assumption that the Incarnation is something which we can estimate apart from the Atonement, something which has a significance and a function of its own, independent of man's redemption from sin, underlies much of his writing, and tends to keep him from doing full justice to apostolic ideas on this subject. The logic of the position becomes apparent in a writer like Archdeacon Wilson, who frankly merges the Atonement in the Incarnation, assures us that in making a distinct problem of the former we have been asking meaningless questions, getting meaningless answers, and repelling men from the gospel. 'Let us say boldly that the Incarnation, that is the life and death of the Christ, for the life and death were equally necessary — is the identification of the human and the divine life. This identification is the atonement. There is no other.'⁷⁸ One can only regret that this short and easy method was not discovered until the close of the nineteenth century; anything less like the terrible problem sin presented to the apostles, and their intense preoccupation with it, it would not be easy to conceive.

There are three broad grounds on which the interpretation of the Atonement as a mere incident, or consequence, or modification of the Incarnation — the Incarnation being regarded as something in itself natural and intelligible on grounds which have no relation to sin, ought to be discounted by the evangelist and the theologian alike.

(1) It shifts the center of gravity in the New Testament. The Incarnation may be the thought round which everything gravitates in the Nicene Creed, and in the theology of the ancient Catholic Church which found in that creed its first dogmatic expression; but that only shows how far the first ecclesiastical apprehension of Christianity was from doing justice to New Testament conceptions. Even in the Gospel and the Epistles of St. John, as has been shown above, the Incarnation cannot be said (without serious qualification) to have the character here claimed for it, and it cannot be asserted with the faintest plausibility for the synoptic gospels or the Epistles of St. Paul. The New Testament knows nothing of an incarnation which can be defined apart from its relation to atonement; it is to put away sin, and to destroy the works of the devil, that even in the evangelist of the Incarnation the Son of God is made manifest. It is not in His being here, but in His being here as a propitiation for the sins of the world, that the love of God is revealed. Not Bethlehem, but Calvary, is the focus of revelation, and any construction of Christianity which ignores or denies this distorts Christianity by putting it out of focus.

(2) A second ground for resisting the tendency to put the Incarnation into the place which properly belongs to the Atonement is that it is concerned under these conditions with metaphysical, rather than with moral problems. Now Scripture has no interest in metaphysics except as metaphysical questions are approached through and raised by

moral ones. The Atonement comes to us in the moral world and deals with us there; it is concerned with conscience and the law of God, with sin and grace, with alienation and peace, with death to sin and life to holiness; it has its being and its efficacy in a world where we can find our footing, and be assured that we are dealing with realities. The Incarnation, when it is not defined by relation to these realities — in other words, when it is not conceived as the means to the Atonement, but as part of a speculative theory of the world quite independent of man's actual moral necessities — can never attain to a reality as vivid and profound. It can never become thoroughly credible, just because it is not essentially related to anything in human or Christian experience sufficiently great to justify it. It does not answer moral questions, especially those which bring the sinful man to despair; at best it answers metaphysical questions about the relation of the human to the divine, about the proper way to define these words in relation to each other, whether it be by contrast or by mutual affinity, about the divine as being the truth of the human and the human as being the reality of the divine, and so forth. It does not contain a gospel for lost souls, but a philosophy for speculative minds. Now the New Testament is a gospel for lost souls, or it is nothing; and whatever philosophy it may lead to or justify, we cannot see that philosophy itself in the light in which it demands to be seen, unless we keep the gospel in its New Testament place. If we start in the abstract speculative way there is no getting out of it, or getting any specifically Christian good out of it either; it is only when the Person of Christ is conceived as necessarily related to a work in which we have a life and death moral interest, that it has religious import, and can be a real subject for us. There is in truth only one religious problem in the world — the existence of sin; and one religious solution of it — the Atonement, in which the love of God bears the sin, taking it, in all its terrible reality for us, upon itself. And nothing can be central or fundamental either in Christian preaching or in Christian thinking which is not in direct and immediate relation to this problem and its solution.

(3) The third ground on which we should deprecate the obtrusion of the Incarnation at the cost of the Atonement is that in point of fact — whether it is an inevitable result or not need not be inquired — it tends to sentimentality. It is dangerous to bring into religion anything which is not vitally related to morals, and Incarnation not determined by Atonement is open to this charge. The Christmas celebrations in many churches supply all the proof that is needed: they are an appeal to anything and everything in man except that to which the gospel is designed to appeal. The New Testament is just as little sentimental as it is metaphysical, it is ethical, not metaphysical; passionate, not sentimental. And its passionate and ethical character are condensed and guaranteed in that atoning work of Christ which is in every sense of the word its vital center.

If it is a right conception of the Atonement which enables us to attain to a right conception of the Person of Christ, similarly we may say it is through a right conception of the Atonement that we come to a right conception of the nature or character of God.

In the Atonement revelation is complete, and we must have it fully in view in all affirmations we make about God as the ultimate truth and reality. The more imperfect our conceptions of God, the more certainly they tend to produce skepticism and unbelief; and nothing presents greater difficulties to faith than the idea of a God who either gives no heed to the sin and misery of man, or saves sinners, as it were, from a distance, without entering into the responsibility and tragedy of their life and making it His own. To put the same thing in other words, nothing presents greater difficulties to faith than a conception of God falling short of that which the New Testament expresses in the words, God is love. Not that this conception is self-interpreting or self-accrediting, as is often supposed. There is no proposition which is more in need both of explanation and of proof. We may say God is love, and know just as little what love means as what God means. Love is like every word of moral or spiritual import; it has no fixed meaning, like a word denoting a physical object or attribute; it stands, so to speak, upon a sliding scale, and it stands higher or lower as the experience of those who use it enables them to place it. St. John, when he placed it where he did, was only enabled to do so by the experience in which Christ was revealed to him as the propitiation for sins. It is with this in his mind that he says, *Hereby* perceive we love. The word love, especially in such a proposition as God is love, has to fill with its proper meaning before it can be said to have any meaning at all; it is used in a thousand senses which in such a proposition would only be absurd or profane. Now the person who first uttered that sublime sentence felt his words fill with meaning as he contemplated Christ sent by God a propitiation for the whole world. A God who could do that — a God who could bear the sin of the world in order to restore to man the possibility of righteousness and eternal life — such a God is love. Such love, too, is the ultimate truth about God. But apart from this the apostle would not have said that God is love, nor is it quite real or specifically Christian for any one else to say so. There is no adequate way of telling what he means. Until it is demonstrated as it is in the Atonement, love remains an indeterminate sentimental expression, with no clear moral value, and with infinite possibilities of moral misunderstanding; when it fills with meaning through the contemplation of the Atonement, the danger of mere sentimentalism and other moral dangers are provided against, for love in the Atonement is inseparable from law. The universal moral elements in the relations of God and man are unreservedly acknowledged, and it is in the cost at which justice is done to them in the work of redemption that the love of God is revealed and assured. We see then its reality and its scale. We see what it is willing to do, or rather what it has done. We see something of the breadth and length and depth and height which pass knowledge. We believe and know the love which God has in our case, and can say God is love. And it is from the vantage-ground of this assurance that we look out henceforth on all the perplexities of the world and of our own life in it. We are certain that it is in God to take the burden and responsibility of it upon Himself. We are certain that it is in the divine nature not to be indifferent to the tragedy or human life,

not to help it from afar off, not to treat as unreal in it the very thing which makes it real to us — the eternal difference of right and wrong — but to bear its sin, and to establish the law in the very act and method of justifying the ungodly. It is a subordinate remark in this connection, but not for that reason an insignificant one, that this final revelation of love in God is at the same time the final revelation of sin: for sin, too, needs to be revealed, and there is a theological doctrine of it as well as an experience antecedent to all doctrines. Love is that which is willing to take the responsibility of sin upon it for the sinner's sake, and which does so; and sin, in the last resort — sin as that which cuts man finally off from God — is that which is proof against the appeal of such love.

There is another great department of Christian science to which the Atonement is of fundamental importance — the department of Christian ethics, the scientific interpretation of the new life. It has undoubtedly been a fault in much systematic theology, that in dealing with the work which Christ finished in His death it has shown no relation, or no adequate and satisfactory relation, between that death and the Christian life which is born of faith in it. There must be such a relation, or there would be no such thing in the world as Christian life or the Christian religion. The only difficulty, indeed, in formulating it is that the connection is so close and immediate that it might be supposed to be impossible to hold apart, even in imagination, the two things which we wish to define by relation to each other. But it may be put thus. The death of Christ, interpreted as the New Testament interprets it, constitutes a great appeal to sinful men. It appeals for faith. To yield to its appeal, to abandon oneself in faith to the love of God which is manifested in it, is to enter into life. It is the only way in which a sinful man can enter into life at all. The new life is constituted in the soul by the response of faith to the appeal of Christ's death, or by Christ's death evoking the response of faith. It does not matter which way we put it. We may say that we have received the Atonement, and that the Atonement regenerates; or that we have been justified by faith, and that justification regenerates; or that we have received an assurance of God's love which is deeper than our sin, and extends to all our life past, present, and to come; and that such an assurance, which is the gift of the Spirit shed abroad in our hearts, regenerates: it is all one. It is the same experience which is described, and truly described, in every case. But both the power and the law of the new life, the initiation of which can be so variously expressed, are to be found in the atoning death of Christ, by which faith is evoked, and there only; and the Atonement, therefore, is the presupposition of Christian ethics as it is the inspiring and controlling force in Christian life. Nothing can beget in the soul that life of which we speak except the appeal of the Cross, and what the appeal of the Cross does beget is a life which, in its moral quality, corresponds to the death of Christ itself. It is a life, as it has been put already, which has that death in it, and which only lives upon this condition. It is a life to which sin is all that sin was to Christ — law, and holiness, and God, all that law and holiness and God were to Christ as He hung upon the tree; a life which is complete and self-sufficing, because it is sustained at every moment by the

inspiration of the Atonement. This is why St. Paul is not afraid to trust the new life to its own resources, and why he objects equally to supplementing it by legal regulations afterwards, or by what are supposed to be ethical securities beforehand. It does not need them, and is bound to repel them as dishonoring to Christ. To demand moral guarantees from a sinner before you give him the benefit of the Atonement, or to impose legal restrictions on him after he has yielded to its appeal, and received it through faith, is to make the Atonement itself of no effect. St. Paul, taught by his own experience, scorned such devices. The Son of God, made sin for men, so held his eyes and heart, entered into His being with such annihilative, such creative power, that all he was and all he meant by life were due to Him alone. He does not look anywhere but to the Cross for the ideals and motives of the Christian, they are all there. And the more one dwells in the New Testament, and tries to find the point of view from which to reduce it to unity, the more is he convinced that the Atonement is the key to Christianity as a whole. 'The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many.' 'Christ died for the ungodly.' 'He bore our sins in His own body on the tree.' 'He is the propitiation for the whole world.' 'I beheld, and lo, a lamb as it had been slain.' It is in words like these that we discover the open secret of the new creation.

⁷⁴I venture to quote two sentences in illustration of this paragraph. Dr. Dale (Life, p. 666), who read Pusey's life 'with a deep impression of the nobleness and massiveness of his nature, and feeling more than ever that the power of God was with him,' had nevertheless to add: 'The absence of joy in his religious life was only the inevitable effect of his conception of God's method of saving men; in parting with the Lutheran truth concerning justification (it might equally well be said with the New Testament truth of Christ's finished work) he parted with the springs of gladness.' It is in the same line that Dr. Fairbairn has said of Pusey, that the sense of sin was 'more a matter for himself to bear than for grace to remove' (Philosophy of the Christian Religion, p. 333). The other sentence is from Chalmers, a great nature who had an original experience of the New Testament religion and often found original utterance for it: 'Regaled myself with the solidity of the objective part of religion, and long to enter a field of enlargement in preaching on the essential truths of the gospel' (Life, by Hanna, vol. 2. p. 417).

⁷⁵Aus den Tiefen der Reflexion: aus Soren Kierkegaards Tagebuchen, 1833-1855: aus dem Danischen ubersetzt von F. Venator.

⁷⁶For a typical illustration, see Dale's Christian Doctrine, pp. 251 ff.

⁷⁷Contentio Veritatis, p. 74.

⁷⁸The Gospel of the Atonement, p. 89.

