

Christianity & Liberalism

Salvation (Part I)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

It has been observed thus far that liberalism differs from Christianity with regard to the presuppositions of the gospel (the view of God and the view of man), with regard to the Book in which the gospel is contained, and with regard to the Person whose work the gospel sets forth. It is not surprising then that it differs from Christianity in its account of the gospel itself; it is not surprising that it presents an entirely different account of the way of salvation. Liberalism finds salvation (so far as it is willing to speak at all of "salvation" in man); Christianity finds it in an act of God.

The difference with regard to the way of salvation concerns, in the first place, the basis of salvation in the redeeming work of Christ. According to Christian belief, Jesus is our Saviour, not by virtue of what He said, not even by virtue of what He was, but by what He did. He is our Saviour, not because He has inspired us to live the same kind of life that He lived, but because He took upon Himself the dreadful guilt of our sins and bore it instead of us on the cross. Such is the Christian conception of the Cross of Christ. It is ridiculed as being a "subtle theory of the atonement." In reality, it is the plain teaching of the word of God; we know absolutely nothing about an atonement that is not a vicarious atonement, for that is the only atonement of which the New Testament speaks. And this Bible doctrine is not intricate or subtle. On the contrary, though it involves mysteries, it is itself so simple that a child can understand it. "We deserved eternal death, but the Lord Jesus, because He loved us, died instead of us on the cross" - surely there is nothing so very intricate about that. It is not the Bible doctrine of the atonement which is difficult to understand - what are really incomprehensible are the elaborate modern efforts to get rid of the Bible doctrine in the interests of human pride.¹

Modern liberal preachers do indeed sometimes speak of the "atonement." But they speak of it just as seldom as they possibly can, and one can see plainly that their hearts are elsewhere than at the foot of the Cross. Indeed, at this point, as at many others, one has the feeling that traditional language is being strained to become the expression of totally alien ideas. And when the traditional phraseology has been stripped away, the essence of the modern conception of the death of Christ, though that conception appears in many forms, is fairly plain.

¹ See "The Second Declaration of the Council on Organic Union," in *The Presbyterian*, for March 17, 1921, p. 8.

The essence of it is that the death of Christ had an effect not upon God but only upon man. Sometimes the effect upon man is conceived of in a very simple way, Christ's death being regarded merely as an example of self-sacrifice for us to emulate. The uniqueness of this particular example, then, can be found only in the fact that Christian sentiment, gathering around it, has made it a convenient symbol for all self-sacrifice; it puts in concrete form what would otherwise have to be expressed in colder general terms. Sometimes, again, the effect of Christ's death upon us is conceived of in subtler ways; the death of Christ, it is said, shows how much God hates sin — since sin brought even the Holy One to the dreadful Cross - and we too, therefore, ought to hate sin, as God hates it, and repent. Sometimes, still again, the death of Christ is thought of as displaying the love of God; it exhibits God's own Son as given up for us all. These modern "theories of the atonement" are not all to be placed upon the same plane; the last of them, in particular, may be joined with a high view of Jesus' Person. But they err in that they ignore the dreadful reality of guilt, and make a mere persuasion of the human will all that is needed for salvation. They do indeed all contain an element of truth: it is true that the death of Christ is an example of self-sacrifice which may inspire self-sacrifice in others; it is true that the death of Christ shows how much God hates sin; it is true that the death of Christ displays the love of God. All of these truths are found plainly in the New Testament. But they are swallowed up in a far greater truth - that Christ died instead of us to present us faultless before the throne of God. Without that central truth, all the rest is devoid of real meaning: an example of self-sacrifice is useless to those who are under both the guilt and thralldom of sin; the knowledge of God's hatred of sin can in itself bring only despair; an exhibition of the love of God is a mere display unless there was some underlying reason for the sacrifice. If the Cross is to be restored to its rightful place in Christian life, we shall have to penetrate far beneath the modern theories to Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Upon the Christian doctrine of the Cross, modern liberals are never weary of pouring out the vials of their hatred and their scorn. Even at this point, it is true, the hope of avoiding offence is not always abandoned; the words "vicarious atonement" and the like - of course in a sense totally at variance from their Christian meaning — are still sometimes used. But despite such occasional employment of traditional language the liberal preachers reveal only too clearly what is in their minds. They speak with disgust of those who believe "that the blood of our Lord, shed in a substitutionary death, placates an alienated Deity and makes possible welcome for the returning sinner."² Against the doctrine of the Cross they use every weapon of caricature and vilification. Thus they pour out their scorn upon a thing so holy and so precious that in the presence of it the Christian heart melts in gratitude too deep for words. It never seems to occur to modern liberals that in deriding the Christian doctrine of the Cross, they are trampling upon human hearts. But the modern liberal attacks upon the Christian doctrine of the Cross may at least serve the purpose of showing what that doctrine is, and from this point of view they may be examined briefly now.

² Fosdick, *Shall the Fundamentalists Win?*, stenographically reported by Margaret Renton, 1922, P. 5.

In the first place, then, the Christian way of salvation through the Cross of Christ is criticized because it is dependent upon history. This criticism is sometimes evaded; it is sometimes said that as Christians we may attend to what Christ does now for every Christian rather than to what He did long ago in Palestine. But the evasion involves a total abandonment of the Christian faith. If the saving work of Christ were confined to what He does now for every Christian, there would be no such thing as a Christian gospel — an account of an event which put a new face on life. What we should have left would be simply mysticism, and mysticism is quite different from Christianity. It is the connection of the present experience of the believer with an actual historic appearance of Jesus in the world which prevents our religion from being mysticism and causes it to be Christianity.

It must certainly be admitted, then, that Christianity does depend upon something that happened; our religion must be abandoned altogether unless at a definite point in history Jesus died as a propitiation for the sins of men. Christianity is certainly dependent upon history.

But if so, the objection lies very near. Must we really depend for the welfare of our souls upon what happened long ago? Must we really wait until historians have finished disputing about the value of sources and the like before we can have peace with God? Would it not be better to have a salvation which is with us here and now, and which depends only upon what we can see or feel? With regard to this objection it should be observed that if religion be made independent of history there is no such thing as a gospel. For "gospel" means "good news," tidings, information about something that has happened. A gospel independent of history is a contradiction in terms. The Christian gospel means, not a presentation of what always has been true, but a report of something new — something that imparts a totally different aspect to the situation of mankind. The situation of mankind was desperate because of sin; but God has changed the situation by the atoning death of Christ — that is no mere reflection upon the old, but an account of something new. We are shut up in this world as in a beleaguered camp. To maintain our courage, the liberal preacher offers us exhortation. Make the best of the situation, he says, look on the bright side of life. But unfortunately, such exhortation cannot change the facts. In particular it cannot remove the dreadful fact of sin. Very different is the message of the Christian evangelist. He offers not reflection on the old but tidings of something new, not exhortation but a gospel.³

It is true that the Christian gospel is an account, not of something that happened yesterday, but of something that happened long ago; but the important thing is that it really happened. If it really happened, then it makes little difference when it happened. No matter when it happened, whether yesterday or in the first century, it remains a real gospel, a real piece of news.

³ Compare *History and Faith*, 1915, pp. 1-3.

The happening of long ago, moreover, is in this case confirmed by present experience. The Christian man receives first the account which the New Testament gives of the atoning death of Christ. That account is history. But if true it has effects in the present, and it can be tested by its effects. The Christian man makes trial of the Christian message, and making trial of it he finds it to be true. Experience does not provide a substitute for the documentary evidence, but it does confirm that evidence. The word of the Cross no longer seems to the Christian to be merely a far-off thing, merely a matter to be disputed about by trained theologians. On the contrary, it is received into the Christian's inmost soul, and every day and hour of the Christian's life brings new confirmation of its truth.

In the second place, the Christian doctrine of salvation through the death of Christ is criticized on the ground that it is narrow. It binds salvation to the name of Jesus, and there are many men in the world who have never in any effective way heard of the name of Jesus. What is really needed, we are told, is a salvation which will save all men everywhere, whether they have heard of Jesus or not, and whatever may be the type of life to which they have been reared. Not a new creed, it is said, will meet the universal need of the world, but some means of making effective in right living whatever creed men may chance to have.

This second objection, as well as the first, is sometimes evaded. It is sometimes said that although one way of salvation is by means of acceptance of the gospel there may be other ways. But this method of meeting the objection relinquishes one of the things that are most obviously characteristic of the Christian message - namely, its exclusiveness. What struck the early observers of Christianity most forcibly was not merely that salvation was offered by means of the Christian gospel, but that all other means were resolutely rejected. The early Christian missionaries demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion to Christ. Such exclusiveness ran directly counter to the prevailing syncretism of the Hellenistic age. In that day, many saviours were offered by many religions to the attention of men, but the various pagan religions could live together in perfect harmony; when a man became a devotee of one god, he did not have to give up the others. But Christianity would have nothing to do with these "courtly polygamies of the soul";⁴ it demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion; all other Saviours, it insisted, must be deserted for the one Lord. Salvation, in other words, was not merely through Christ, but it was only through Christ. In that little word "only" lay all the offence. Without that word there would have been no persecutions; the cultured men of the day would probably have been willing to give Jesus a place, and an honorable place, among the saviours of mankind. Without its exclusiveness, the Christian message would have seemed perfectly inoffensive to the men of that day. So modern liberalism, placing Jesus alongside other benefactors of man-kind, is perfectly inoffensive in the modern world. All men

⁴ Phillimore, in the Introduction to his translation of Philostratus, *In Honour of Apollonius of Tyana*, 1912, vol. 1, p. iii.

speak well of it. It is entirely inoffensive. But it is also entirely futile. The offence of the Cross is done away, but so is the glory and the power.

Thus it must fairly be admitted that Christianity does bind salvation to the name of Christ. The question need not here be discussed whether the benefits of Christ's death are ever applied to those who, though they have come to years of discretion, have not heard or accepted the gospel message. Certainly the New Testament holds out with regard to this matter no clear hope. At the very basis of the work of the apostolic Church is the consciousness of a terrible responsibility. The sole message of life and salvation had been committed to men; that message was at all hazards to be proclaimed while yet there was time. The objection as to the exclusiveness of the Christian way of salvation, therefore, cannot be evaded, but must be met.

In answer to the objection, it may be said simply that the Christian way of salvation is narrow only so long as the Church chooses to let it remain narrow. The name of Jesus is discovered to be strangely adapted to men of every race and of every kind of previous education. And the Church has ample means, with promise of God's Spirit, to bring the name of Jesus to all. If, therefore, this way of salvation is not offered to all, it is not the fault of the way of salvation itself, but the fault of those who fail to use the means that God has placed in their hands.

But, it may be said, is that not a stupendous responsibility to be placed in the hands of weak and sinful men; is it not more natural that God should offer salvation to all without requiring them to accept a new message and thus to be dependent upon the faithfulness of the messengers? The answer to this objection is plain. It is certainly true that the Christian way of salvation places a stupendous responsibility upon men. But that responsibility is like the responsibility which, as ordinary observation shows, God does, as a matter of fact, commit to men. It is like the responsibility, for example, of the parent for the child. The parent has full power to mar the soul as well as the body of the child. The responsibility is terrible; but it is a responsibility which unquestionably exists. Similar is the responsibility of the Church for making the name of Jesus known to all mankind. It is a terrible responsibility; but it exists, and it is just like the other known dealings of God.

But modern liberalism has still more specific objections to the Christian doctrine of the Cross. How can one person, it is asked, suffer for the sins of another? The thing, we are told, is ab-surd. Guilt, it is said, is personal; if I allow another man to suffer for my fault, my guilt is not thereby one whit diminished.

An answer to this objection is sometimes found in the plain instances in ordinary human life where one person does suffer for another person's sin. In the war, for example, many men died freely for the welfare of others. Here, it is said, we have something analogous to the sacrifice of Christ.

It must be confessed, however, that the analogy is very faint; for it does not touch the specific point at issue. The death of a volunteer soldier in the war was like the death of Christ in that it was a supreme example of self-sacrifice. But the thing to be accomplished by the self-sacrifice was entirely different from the thing which was accomplished on Calvary. The death of those who sacrificed themselves in the war brought peace and protection to the loved ones at home, but it could never avail to wipe out the guilt of sin.

The real answer to the objection is to be found not in the similarity between the death of Christ and other examples of self-sacrifice, but in the profound difference.⁵ Why is it that men are no longer willing to trust for their own salvation and for the hope of the world to one act that was done by one Man of long ago? Why is it that they prefer to trust to millions of acts of self-sacrifice wrought by millions of men all through the centuries and in our own day? The answer is plain. It is because men have lost sight of the majesty of Jesus' Person. They think of Him as a man like themselves; and if He was a man like themselves, His death becomes simply an example of self-sacrifice. But there have been millions of examples of self-sacrifice. Why then should we pay such exclusive attention to this one Palestinian example of long ago? Men used to say with reference to Jesus, "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin." They say so now no longer. On the contrary, every man is now regarded as plenty good enough to pay the price of sin if, whether in peace or in war, he will only go bravely over the top in some noble Cause.

It is perfectly true that no mere man can pay the penalty of another man's sin. But it does not follow that Jesus could not do it; for Jesus was no mere man but the eternal Son of God. Jesus is master of the innermost secrets of the moral world. He has done what none other could possibly do; He has borne our sin.

The Christian doctrine of the atonement, therefore, is altogether rooted in the Christian doctrine of the deity of Christ. The reality of an atonement for sin depends altogether upon the New Testament presentation of the Person of Christ. And even the hymns dealing with the Cross which we sing in Church can be placed in an ascending scale, according as they are based upon a lower or a higher view of Jesus' Person. At the very bottom of the scale is that familiar hymn:

Nearer, my God, to thee,
Nearer to thee!
E'en though it be a cross
That raiseth me.

That is a perfectly good hymn. It means that our trials may be a discipline to bring us nearer to God. The thought is not opposed to Christianity; it is found in the

⁵ For what follows, compare "The Church in the War," in *The Presbyterian*, for May 29, 1919, Pp. 10f.

New Testament. But many persons have the impression, because the word "cross" is found in the hymn, that there is something specifically Christian about it, and that it has something to do with the gospel. This impression is entirely false. In reality, the cross that is spoken of is not the Cross of Christ, but our own cross; the verse simply means that our own crosses or trials may be a means to bring us nearer to God. It is a perfectly good thought, but certainly it is not the gospel. One can only be sorry that the people on the Titanic could not find a better hymn to use in the last solemn hour of their lives. But there is another hymn in the hymn-book:

In the cross of Christ I glory,
Towering o'er the wrecks of time;
All the light of sacred story
Gathers round its head sublime.

That is certainly better. It is here not our own crosses but the Cross of Christ, the actual event that took place on Calvary, that is spoken of, and that event is celebrated as the centre of all his-story. Certainly the Christian man can sing that hymn. But one misses even there the full Christian sense of the meaning of the Cross; the Cross is celebrated, but it is not understood.

It is well, therefore, that there is another hymn in our hymn book:

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

There at length are heard the accents of true Christian feeling - "the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died." When we come to see that it was no mere man who suffered on Calvary but the Lord of Glory, then we shall be willing to say that one drop of the precious blood of Jesus is of more value, for our own salvation and for the hope of society, than all the rivers of blood that have flowed upon the battlefields of history.

Thus the objection to the vicarious sacrifice of Christ disappears altogether before the tremendous Christian sense of the majesty of Jesus' Person. It is perfectly true that the Christ of modern naturalistic reconstruction never could have suffered for the sins of others; but it is very different in the case of the Lord of Glory. And if the notion of vicarious atonement be so absurd as modern opposition would lead us to believe, what shall be said of the Christian experience that has been based upon it? The modern liberal Church is fond of appealing to experience. But where shall true Christian experience be found if not in the blessed peace which comes from Calvary? That peace comes only when a man recognizes that all his striving to be right with God, all his feverish endeavor to keep the Law before he can be saved, is unnecessary, and that the

Lord Jesus has wiped out the handwriting that was against him by dying instead of him on the Cross. Who can measure the depth of the peace and joy that comes from this blessed knowledge? Is it a "theory of the atonement," a delusion of man's fancy? Or is it the very truth of God?

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was an American Presbyterian New Testament scholar, who led a revolt against modernist theology at Princeton, and founded Westminster Theological Seminary as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He wrote Christianity & Liberalism in 1923 as an answer to the controversies of his day.

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