

Christianity & Liberalism

Salvation (Part II)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

But still another objection remains against the Christian doctrine of the Cross. The objection concerns the character of God. What a degraded view of God it is, the modern liberal ex-claims, when God is represented as being "alienated" from man, and as waiting coldly until a price be paid before He grants salva-tion! In reality, we are told, God is more willing to forgive sin than we are willing to be forgiven; reconciliation, therefore, can have to do only with man; it all depends upon us; God will receive us any time we choose.

The objection depends of course upon the liberal view of sin. If sin is so trifling a matter as the liberal Church supposes, then indeed the curse of God's law can be taken very lightly, and God can easily let by-gones be by-gones.

This business of letting by-gones be by-gones has a pleasant sound. But in reality it is the most heartless thing in the world. It will not do at all even in the case of sins committed against our fellow-men. To say nothing of sin against God, what shall be done about the harm that we have wrought to our neighbor? Sometimes, no doubt, the harm can be repaired. If we have defrauded our neighbor of a sum of money, we can pay the sum back with interest. But in the case of the more serious wrongs such repayment is usually quite impossible. The more serious wrongs are those that are done, not to the bodies, but to the souls of men. And who can think with complacency of wrongs of that kind which he has committed? Who can bear to think, for example, of the harm that he has done to those younger than himself by a bad example? And what of those sad words, spoken to those we love, that have left scars never to be obliterated by the hand of time? In the presence of such memories, we are told by the modern preacher simply to repent and to let by-gones be by-gones. But what a heartless thing is such repentance! We escape into some higher, happier, respectable life. But what of those whom we by our example and by our words have helped to drag down to the brink of hell? We forget them and let by-gones be by-gones!

Such repentance will never wipe out the guilt of sin - not even sin committed against our fellow-men, to say nothing of sin against our God. The truly penitent man longs to wipe out the effects of sin, not merely to forget sin. But who can wipe out the effects of sin? Others are suffering because of our past sins; and we can attain no real peace until we suffer in their stead. We long to go back into the tangle of our life, and make right the things that are wrong-- at least to suffer

where we have caused others to suffer. And something like that Christ did for us when He died instead of us on the cross; He atoned for all our sins.

The sorrow for sins committed against one's fellowmen does indeed remain in the Christian's heart. And he will seek by every means that is within his power to repair the damage that he has done. But atonement at least has been made — made as truly as if the sinner himself had suffered with and for those whom he has wronged. And the sinner himself, by a mystery of grace, becomes right with God. All sin at bottom is a sin against God. "Against thee, thee only have I sinned" is the cry of a true penitent. How terrible is the sin against God! Who can recall the wasted moments and years? Gone they are, never to return; gone the little allotted span of life; gone the little day in which a man must work. Who can measure the irrevocable guilt of a wasted life? Yet even for such guilt God has provided a fountain of cleansing in the precious blood of Christ. God has clothed us with Christ's righteousness as with a garment; in Christ we stand spotless before the judgment throne.

Thus to deny the necessity of atonement is to deny the existence of a real moral order. And it is strange how those who venture upon such denial can regard themselves as disciples of Jesus; for if one thing is clear in the record of Jesus' life it is that Jesus recognized the justice, as distinguished from the love, of God. God is love, according to Jesus, but He is not only love; Jesus spoke, in terrible words, of the sin that shall never be forgiven either in this world or in that which is to come. Clearly Jesus recognized the existence of retributive justice; Jesus was far from accepting the light modern view of sin.

But what, then, it will be objected, becomes of God's love? Even if it be admitted that justice demands punishment for sin, the modern liberal theologian will say, what becomes of the Christian doctrine that justice is swallowed up by grace? If God is represented as waiting for a price to be paid before sin shall be forgiven, perhaps His justice may be rescued, but what becomes of His love?

Modern liberal teachers are never tired of ringing the changes upon this objection. They speak with horror of the doctrine of an "alienated" or an "angry" God. In answer, of course it would be easy to point to the New Testament. The New Testament clearly speaks of the wrath of God and the wrath of Jesus Himself; and all the teaching of Jesus presupposes a divine indignation against sin. With what possible right, then, can those who reject this vital element in Jesus' teaching and example regard themselves as true disciples of His? The truth is that the modern rejection of the doctrine of God's wrath proceeds from a light view of sin which is totally at variance with the teaching of the whole New Testament and of Jesus Himself. If a man has once come under a true conviction of sin, he will have little difficulty with the doctrine of the Cross.

But as a matter of fact the modern objection to the doctrine of the atonement on the ground that that doctrine is contrary to the love of God, is based upon the

most abysmal misunderstanding of the doctrine itself. The modern liberal teachers persist in speaking of the sacrifice of Christ as though it were a sacrifice made by someone other than God. They speak of it as though it meant that God waits coldly until a price is paid to Him before He forgives sin. As a matter of fact, it means nothing of the kind; the objection ignores that which is absolutely fundamental in the Christian doctrine of the Cross. The fundamental thing is that God Himself, and not another, makes the sacrifice for sin — God Himself in the person of the Son who assumed our nature and died for us, God Himself in the Person of the Father who spared not His own Son but offered Him up for us all. Salvation is as free for us as the air we breathe; God's the dreadful cost, ours the gain. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." Such love is very different from the complacency found in the God of modern preaching; this love is love that did not count the cost; it is love that is love indeed.

This love and this love alone brings true joy to men. Joy is indeed being sought by the modern liberal Church. But it is being sought in ways that are false. How may communion with God be made joyful? Obviously, we are told, by emphasizing the comforting attributes of God - His long-suffering, His love. Let us, it is urged, regard Him not as a moody Despot, not as a sternly righteous Judge, but simply as a loving Father. Away with the horrors of the old theology! Let us worship a God in whom we can rejoice.

Two questions arise with regard to this method of making religion joyful — in the first place, Does it work? and in the second place, Is it true?

Does it work? It certainly ought to work. How can anyone be unhappy when the ruler of the universe is declared to be the loving Father of all men who will never permanently inflict pain upon His children? Where is the sting of remorse if all sin will necessarily be forgiven? Yet men are strangely ungrateful. After the modern preacher has done his part with all diligence - after everything unpleasant has carefully been eliminated from the conception of God, after His unlimited love has been celebrated with the eloquence that it deserves — the congregation somehow persistently refuses to burst into the old ecstasies of joy. The truth is, the God of modern preaching, though He may perhaps be very good, is rather uninteresting. Nothing is so insipid as indiscriminate good humor. Is that really love that costs so little? If God will necessarily forgive, no matter what we do, why trouble ourselves about Him at all? Such a God may deliver us from the fear of hell. But His heaven, if He has any, is full of sin.

The other objection to the modern encouraging idea of God is that it is not true. How do you know that God is all love and kindness? Surely not through nature, for it is full of horrors. Human suffering may be unpleasant, but it is real, and God must have something to do with it. Just as surely not through the Bible. For it was from the Bible that the old theologians derived that conception of God which you would reject as gloomy. "The Lord thy God," the Bible says, "is a consuming fire." Or is Jesus alone your authority? You are no better off. For it was Jesus

who spoke of the outer darkness and the everlasting fire, of the sin that shall not be forgiven either in this age or in that which is to come. Or do you appeal, for your comforting idea of God, to a twentieth-century revelation granted immediately to you? It is to be feared that you will convince no one but yourself.

Religion cannot be made joyful simply by looking on the bright side of God. For a one-sided God is not a real God, and it is the real God alone who can satisfy the longing of our soul. God is love, but is He only love? God is love, but is love God? Seek joy alone, then, seek joy at any cost, and you will not find it. How then may it be attained?

The search for joy in religion seems to have ended in disaster. God is found to be enveloped in impenetrable mystery, and in awful righteousness; man is confined in the prison of the world, trying to make the best of his condition, beautifying the prison with tinsel, yet secretly dissatisfied with his bondage, dissatisfied with a merely relative goodness which is no goodness at all, dissatisfied with the companionship of his sinful fellows, unable to forget his heavenly destiny and his heavenly duty, longing for communion with the Holy One. There seems to be no hope; God is separate from sinners; there is no room for joy, but only a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation.

Yet such a God has at least one advantage over the comforting God of modern preaching — He is alive, He is sovereign, He is not bound by His creation or by His creatures, He can perform wonders. Could He even save us if He would? He has saved us - in that message the gospel consists. It could not have been foretold; still less could the manner of it have been foretold. That Birth, that Life, that Death — why was it done just thus and then and there? It all seems so very local, so very particular, so very unphilosophical, so very unlike what might have been expected. Are not our own methods of salvation, men say, better than that? "Are not Abana and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?" Yet what if it were true? "So, the All-Great were the All-Loving too"- God's own Son delivered up for us all, freedom from the world, sought by philosophers of all the ages, offered now freely to every simple soul, things hidden from the wise and prudent revealed unto babes, the long striving over, the impossible accomplished, sin conquered by mysterious grace, communion at length with the holy God, our Father which art in heaven!

Surely this and this alone is joy. But it is a joy that is akin to fear. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Were we not safer with a God of our own devising — love and only love, a Father and nothing else, one before whom we could stand in our own merit without fear? He who will may be satisfied with such a God. But we, God help us sinful as we are, we would see Jehovah. Despairing, hoping, trembling, half-doubting and half-believing, trusting all to Jesus, we venture into the presence of the very God. And in His presence we live.

The atoning death of Christ, and that alone, has presented sinners as righteous in God's sight; the Lord Jesus has paid the full penalty of their sins, and clothed them with His perfect righteousness before the judgment seat of God. But Christ has done for Christians even far more than that. He has given to them not only a new and right relation to God, but a new life in God's presence for evermore. He has saved them from the power as well as from the guilt of sin. The New Testament does not end with the death of Christ; it does not end with the triumphant words of Jesus on the Cross, "It is finished." The death was followed by the resurrection, and the resurrection like the death was for our sakes. Jesus rose from the dead into a new life of glory and power, and into that life He brings those for whom He died. The Christian, on the basis of Christ's redeeming work, not only has died unto sin, but also lives unto God.

Thus was completed the redeeming work of Christ — the work for which He entered into the world. The account of that work is the "gospel," the "good news." It never could have been predicted, for sin deserves naught but eternal death. But God triumphed over sin through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But how is the redeeming work of Christ applied to the individual Christian man? The answer of the New Testament is plain. According to the New Testament the work of Christ is applied to the individual Christian man by the Holy Spirit. And this work of the Holy Spirit is part of the creative work of God. It is not accomplished by the ordinary use of means; it is not accomplished merely by using the good that is already in man. On the contrary, it is something new. It is not an influence upon the life, but the beginning of a new life; it is not development of what we had already, but a new birth. At the very centre of Christianity are the words, "Ye must be born again."

These words are despised to-day. They involve supernaturalism, and the modern man is opposed to supernaturalism in the experience of the individual as much as in the realm of history. A cardinal doctrine of modern liberalism is that the world's evil may be overcome by the world's good; no help is thought to be needed from outside the world.

This doctrine is propagated in various ways. It runs all through the popular literature of our time. It dominates religious literature, and it appears even upon the stage. Some years ago great popularity was attained by a play which taught the doctrine in powerful fashion. The play began with a scene in a London boarding-house. And it was a very discouraging scene. The persons in that boarding-house were not by any means desperate criminals, but one could almost have wished that they had been — they would have been so much more interesting. As it was, they were simply sordid, selfish persons, snapping and snarling about things to eat and about creature comforts — the sort of persons about whom one is tempted to say that they have no souls. The scene was a powerful picture of the hideousness of the commonplace. But presently the mysterious stranger of "the third floor back" entered upon the scene, and all was

changed He had no creed to offer, and no religion. But he simply engaged in conversation with everyone in that boardinghouse, and discovered the one good point in every individual life. Somewhere in every life there was some one good thing -- some one true human affection, some one noble ambition. It had long been hidden by a thick coating of sordidness and selfishness; its very existence had been forgotten. But it was there, and when it was brought to the light the whole life was transformed. Thus the evil that was in man was overcome by the good that was already there.

The same thing is taught in more immediately practical ways. For example, there are those who would apply it to the prisoners in our jails. The inmates of jails and penitentiaries constitute no doubt unpromising material. But it is a great mistake, it is said, to tell them that they are bad, to discourage them by insisting upon their sin. On the contrary, we are told, what ought to be done is to find the good that is already in them and build upon that; we ought to appeal to some latent sense of honor which shows that even criminals possess the remnants of our common human nature. Thus again the evil that is in man is to be overcome not by a foreign good but by a good which man himself possesses.

Certainly there is a large element of truth in this modern principle. That element of truth is found in the Bible. The Bible does certainly teach that the good that is already in man ought to be fostered in order to check the evil. Whatsoever things are true and pure and of good report - we ought to think on those things. Certainly the principle of overcoming the world's evil by the good already in the world is a great principle. The old theologians recognized it to the full in their doctrine of "common grace." There is something in the world even apart from Christianity which restrains the worst manifestations of evil. And that something ought to be used. Without the use of it, this world could not be lived in for a day. The use of it is certainly a great principle; it will certainly accomplish many useful things. But there is one thing which it will not accomplish. It will not remove the disease of sin, it will indeed palliate the symptoms of the disease; it will change the form of the disease. Sometimes the disease is hidden, and there are those who think that it is cured. But then it bursts forth in some new way, as in 1914, and startles the world. What is really needed is not a salve to palliate the symptoms of sin, but a remedy that attacks the root of the disease.

In reality, however, the figure of disease is misleading. The only true figure — if indeed it can be called merely a figure—is the one which is used in the Bible. Man is not merely ill, but he is dead, in trespasses and sins, and what is really needed is a new life. That life is given by the Holy Spirit in "regeneration" or the new birth.

Many are the passages and many are the ways in which the central doctrine of the new birth is taught in the Word of God. One of the most stupendous passages is Gal. ii. 20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live but Christ liveth in me." That passage was called by Bengel the marrow of

Christianity. And it was rightly so called. It refers to the objective basis of Christianity in the redeeming work of Christ, and it contains also the supernaturalism of Christian experience. "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" — these are extraordinary words. "If you look upon Christians," Paul says in effect, "you see so many manifestations of the life of Christ." Undoubtedly if the words of Gal. ii. 20 stood alone they might be taken in a mystical or pantheistic sense; they might be taken to involve the merging of the personality of the Christian in the personality of Christ. But Paul had no reason to fear such a misinterpretation, for he had fortified himself against it by the whole of his teaching. The new relation of the Christian to Christ, according to Paul, involves no loss of the separate personality of the Christian; on the contrary, it is everywhere intensely personal; it is not a merely mystical relationship to the All or the Absolute, but a relationship of love existing between one person and another. Just because Paul had fortified himself against misunderstanding, he was not afraid of an extreme boldness of language. "It is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" — these words involve a tremendous conception of the break that comes in a man's life when he becomes a Christian. It is almost as though he became a new person — so stupendous is the change. These words were not written by a man who believed that Christianity means merely the entrance of a new motive into the life; Paul believed with all his mind and heart in the doctrine of the new creation or the new birth.

That doctrine represents one aspect of the salvation which was wrought by Christ and is applied by His Spirit. But there is another aspect of the same salvation. Regeneration means a new life; but there is also a new relation in which the believer stands toward God. That new relation is instituted by "justification" the act of God by which a sinner is pronounced righteous in His sight because of the atoning death of Christ. It is not necessary to ask whether justification comes before regeneration or vice versa; in reality they are two aspects of one salvation. And they both stand at the very beginning of the Christian life. The Christian has not merely the promise of a new life, but he has already a new life. And he has not merely the promise of being pronounced righteous in God's sight (though the blessed pronouncement will be confirmed on the judgment day), but he is already pronounced righteous here and now. At the beginning of every Christian life there stands, not a process, but a definite act of God.

That does not mean that every Christian can tell exactly at what moment he was justified and born again. Some Christians, indeed, are really able to give day and hour of their conversion. It is a grievous sin to ridicule the experience of such men. Some-times, indeed, they are inclined to ignore the steps in the providence of God which prepared for the great change. But they are right on the main point. They know that when on such and such a day they kneeled in prayer they were still in their sins, and when they rose from their knees they were children of God never to be separated from Him. Such experience is a very holy thing. But on the other hand it is a mistake to demand that it should be universal. There are Christians who can give day and hour of their conversion, but the great majority

do not know exactly at what moment they were saved. The effects of the act are plain, but the act itself was done in the quietness of God. Such, very often, is the experience of children brought up by Christian parents. It is not necessary that all should pass through agonies of soul before being saved; there are those to whom faith comes peacefully and easily through the nurture of Christian homes. But however it be manifested, the beginning of the Christian life is an act of God. It is an act of God and not an act of man.

That does not mean, however, that in the beginning of the Christian life God deals with us as with sticks or stones, unable to understand what is being done. On the contrary He deals with us as with persons; salvation has a place in the conscious life of man; God uses in our salvation a conscious act of the human soul — an act which though it is itself the work of God's Spirit, is at the same time an act of man. That act of man which God produces and employs in salvation is faith. At the centre of Christianity is the doctrine of "justification by faith."

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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