The Preaching of the Atonement.

DURING the past half-century there has arisen in Protestant circles what may be described as a "cross-less" Christianity, a type of Christianity which does not seem to centre consciously and willingly upon the Cross of Christ, and which refuses to sing, with any genuine feeling and conviction, such classic hymns as "In the Cross of Christ I glory," "When I survey the wondrous Cross," and "There is a fountain filled with blood." In the preaching of the Primitive Church there was one dominating noun—Christ; that preaching linked to the dominating noun one overmastering adjective—it spoke of Christ *crucified*. We recall such mighty affirmations as those of Paul: "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." "God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." We remind ourselves of such pregnant sayings as those of Peter: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." "Who His own Self bare our sins in His own body *right up to* the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness; by whose stripes ye were healed." Paul and Peter between them represent the major emphasis of the thinking and preaching of the Apostolic Church. Not that they always agreed; far from it. On one important occasion, and with reference to one important issue, Paul "withstood Peter to his face." But not on the question of Christ crucified. There was no conflict of conviction on this great matter. The two great Apostles are typical of the whole of the Primitive Church in regarding the Cross and its meaning as the very heart of the Gospel. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" was the cutting edge of their message, and they could not conceive of any form of Christianity that did not centre on the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But how different it is to-day, save in certain circles which label themselves "Fundamentalist." There is a type of "evangelism to the modern mind" which is quite sure that a careful and appealing presentation of the so-called "Synoptic Jesus" is powerful enough to bring men to God. It anchors its faith quite sincerely to the life and character and teaching of Jesus; it finds its message of uplift in the "Christ of the Mount" and the "flaming Mystic of the Galilean hills" rather than in a soteriological interpretation of that crude and cruel event whereby He passed from this earthly scene. Let us, says the New Evangelism, set forth the mighty power of Christ as revealed in the most memorable incidents in His career, and in

His most memorable sayings—the healing of the paralysed man, the words spoken to the "woman of the city" in the house of Simon the Pharisee, above all the story of the prodigal who found his way back to the father's home, though he had never really been away from the father's heart—let scenes like these be presented warmly and sincerely, and they will never fail to bring sinful men and women face to face with God. On this view men can find God the Father independently of any and every theory of the Atonement and without reference even to the fact that Christ died on Calvary.

Of course, the most thorough-going and extreme manifestations of this tendency to regard the Cross as an irrelevance, even as an impertinence, are to be found outside specifically Christian circles. One of the most tender and beautiful of our modern poets, William Watson, has devoted a sonnet to this very theme, in which he urges that to-day it were more wise

> In His immortal greatness to forget
> The mortal agony and the bloody sweat,

and expresses his own deep conviction in the statement,

> To me His death is nought—His life is all.

Another modern writer, an American, quotes with approval this challenging verse from an unknown poet:

> I fight alone, and win or sink,
> I need no one to make me free;
> I want no Jesus Christ to think
> That He could ever die for me.

George Bernard Shaw has expressed the view with his usual forthrightness. "The central superstition of Christianity," he asserts, "is the salvation of the world by the gibbet." He does not like the superstition, and he will not accept the proffered way of salvation. He says quite emphatically that he does not glory in the Cross, that he considers the use of the Cross made by the Church as a deplorable and thoroughly objectionable proceeding, that had he been present in Jerusalem on the day of the crucifixion he would have done his utmost to have prevented such a stupid blunder, and that in his opinion "nothing has done more to hinder the spread of Christian doctrine than the substitution of a morbid interest in the sensational execution of Jesus for an intelligent comprehension of His views." I do not think that within the Church we could find this point of view so baldly and so vigorously stated. But the point of view is well expressed in present-day preaching and theology. Many of us have taken the Apostolic phrase, "Christ crucified," and have set the adjective at war with the noun. Christ, the supreme Fact of Christian history and experience! Yes, we agree. As Christians we know

that Christ is essential to our return to God, to our redemption from sin in this world and our "hope of glory" in the next. But "Christ *crucified*"! There's the rub. That's where we lose ourselves. We feel quite sure of the dominating noun. We are far from sure about the over-mastering adjective.

Yet one thing seems quite certain, viz. that in the book which is both the textbook of our faith and the charter of our commission the death of Christ is presented as the very heart of the Gospel. Both fact and meaning are there, both the plain print of history and interpretation in the light of experience. The New Testament writers did not make the distinction between fact and meaning to the extent of saying (as some modern preachers do): "Well, we can preach the fact of Christ's death without bothering to work out a theory of it." They knew that such a distinction cannot be made. They knew that a bare fact does not exist, that a meaningless fact is a sheer physical and psychological impossibility. They might not have been able to express this in philosophical terms. They were not at all familiar with the "implicative system" or "inferential whole" of the modern logician, who assures us that even so simple a judgement as "This is a flower" is not so simple as it looks, but implies a whole system of meaningful relations. But they felt that it was impossible to separate the fact of Christ's death from the meaning of it; and although they knew the categories of human thinking (whether derived from ancient sacrifices or from contemporary speculation) were inadequate to express what they themselves had found in the Cross, they were none the less convinced that some attempt ought to be made to find and convey the treasure of its immense significance in the earthenware vessels of human speech and language. Whether or not they were right in their attempts to explain the death of Christ in its relation to human need, whether or not there really was any relation between that death and man's spiritual necessities, is not the point here. The point is that in the New Testament the Cross is represented as being the heart of the Gospel, and that all the way through fact and theory are closely linked up as the essential message of God's redeeming love for the world.

The Gospel records, as we know, make much of the last week in the life of our Lord. The story of the events leading up to the crucifixion, and the crucifixion itself, occupies at least two-fifths of the evangelical material (and we need not exclude the Fourth Gospel in making that estimate). In fact the actual space given in the four Gospels to relating what happened to Jesus during those six momentous days from the cry of the multitude: "Hosanna to the Son of David," to the cry of the Crucified: "Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit," is out

of all proportion both to the rest of the Gospel narrative and to the time the events occupied. Of course, it is quite natural that the tragedy which ended the life of the Master should have produced an ineffaceable impression on the minds of those who loved and reverenced Him; and that fact may partly account for the large amount of space devoted to the tragedy in the Gospels. But is that the only explanation? Is it the physical horror, rather than the spiritual value, of that death which led them to linger so long and painfully on the details of the passion ? Or, further, if the spiritual value which they attached to the crucifixion was the thing which drove them to give the death of their Master such prominence, were they mistaken in attaching their soteriological theories to the plain print of history? Or were they reflecting what they themselves had learnt of the mind of Christ Himself ?

There are some who are quite certain that in devoting so much space to the story of the crucifixion the Gospel writers were expressing merely their own opinions (or rather the opinions of the Apostle Paul, who somehow seems to have mentally dragooned and bludgeoned the rest of the disciples to accept his " strange " doctrines), and not the mind of Christ at all. They tell us that Jesus spoke very little about His own death, that the New Testament writers gave it in their preaching a prominence not warranted by Christ's own conception of His message to the world, and that even the large amount of space accorded in the evangelical records to the events of the Passion Week are a reflection of the " theologising " tendencies of the Evangelists rather than an expression of Christ's own thought on the matter. But that contention can be met by pointing out that if Christ was reticent about His own death (and remember He was reticent about other things as well), then it was not without good reasons. For one thing, as James Denney says, Christ came " not so much to preach the Gospel as that there might be a Gospel to preach." For another, the death of Christ in all its spiritual value and significance was one of those things the disciples were unable to bear until it had been accomplished and the Holy Spirit given to lead the disciples into the truth of Christ. But, we may further ask, was our Lord quite so reticent as some of the critics would have us believe ? Did He not endeavour to familiarise the minds of the disciples with the thought of Calvary as soon as it was practicable ? To ask these questions is to answer them, for if we are at all familiar with the Gospel narrative we shall be reminded of the fact that (to quote Denney again) " that which, according to the Gospels themselves, characterised the last months of our Lord's life was a deliberate and thrice repeated attempt to teach His disciples

something about His own death." And more, on the night in which He was betrayed, in the borrowed upper room, with His eleven chosen friends around Him, He instituted what we now call the "Lord's Supper." And—making all allowances for Pauline influences in the reports of the institution of the Supper—I think that we can see here a reflection of the thought of Christ with regard to His own death. Whether or not the Cross was present to the consciousness of Jesus when He set out on His public ministry is not clear from the Gospel records (though they who would say "yes" here are not without some foundation in the strange story of the Temptation), but no one who believes the New Testament to possess a sound historical basis can really dispute the fact that when it had presented itself to His mind it soon came to occupy the central and determining place in His thought. Unless the New Testament writers are guilty of having falsified, either deliberately or unwittingly, the story of Christ, we must believe that the Master came, before the end of His ministry, to make His death central to His message of the Good News of God. Both the Lord's Supper and the Lord's sayings are a revelation of the Lord's thought about His own death; and if that be so, then such great affirmations of the Primitive Church as "In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of our sins" and "He died, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God" must express the most fundamental article of Christian conviction.

Of course, in suggesting that the Cross is the heart of the Gospel we do not mean that the New Testament is all about the crucifixion, that there is nothing else in the New Testament save the death of Christ and its interpretation. Neither do we mean that the work of Christ is more important than the Person of Christ. The work reveals the person, but the person gives value to the work. One critic said of James Denney's great book on the Atonement that Denney was concerned with the *death* of Christ rather than with the death of *Christ*—a criticism that may be justly brought against more than one treatment of this theme and may partly explain the modern revolt against some of the older theories of the Atonement. We must recognise the comprehensiveness of New Testament teaching, and we must avoid dissociating Christ's achievement upon Calvary from His character as expressed in His life and doctrine. "But"—and here I quote Dr. H. R. Mackintosh—"if we have read the Gospels, and noted the extraordinary proportion of space given to the Passion; if we have read the Epistles, on the outlook for their main drift and interest, we are obliged to say that apostolic Christianity without Atonement is as inept as the sentence without a verb. The verb is the *word,* telling what is done; and the

Cross of Jesus is the great universal word of God proclaiming what He does to reach and win the sinful." To Thomas Carlyle's despairing complaint against the Almighty that " He does nothing," to Goethe's daring assertion, " If I were God, the sin of the world would break my heart," we can reply by pointing to Christ crucified. We can say that the sin of the world broke the heart of God in Christ upon Calvary. We can affirm that the Almighty Father did do something for man, something that man could not do for himself, when in the Lord of all good life He was cruelly done to death. Thus the Cross of Jesus both reveals God and evaluates man. It discloses, as no other event in history, the lengths to which sacrificial love will go in order to redeem the sinful; and it shows too that man, though utterly unworthy of that love which " stooped to share our sharpest pang, our bitterest tear," is nevertheless worth the Divine outpouring in the Cross. We sometimes sing: " In Christ I feel the heart of God." Yes, the *heart* of God! But where? In Christ on the mount, when " He opened His mouth and taught " the disciple-multitude? In Christ, when He had climbed the slopes of Hermon and in the presence of His three favourite disciples was transfigured with heavenly glory? In Christ, in His controversies with the Sadducees, or as He hurls his bitter invectives against the Pharisees? All revelations of the Divine character, no doubt! But it is in Christ as He hangs from that bitter tree that we feel the great throbbing heart of the Almighty Father—throbbing with a love which loves to the uttermost and gives of its best because it gives of itself.

But what God did for us in Christ upon the Cross was not an isolated event in that time-series which we call human history. The Cross is not just something that happened once and for all and was done with. It is much more than a fact, a moment, even a crisis, in history; it is the revelation of an eternal principle. " You cannot," says William Adams Brown, " crowd all of God into a moment of time, though a moment of time may be sufficient to give you an insight into what God is always doing. After that moment has come, you will see Him where you had not known He was at work and discover divine meanings in things that happen to you every day. The crucifixion of Jesus was such a moment. It was a revelation of the heart of God." Is not that the suggestion of the New Testament description of Christ as a " Lamb slain from the foundation of the world "? The best illustration I know of this truth is to be found in Leslie Weatherhead's very popular book, *The Transforming Friendship*. He speaks of Calvary as the revelation of Love Everlasting, as the projection on to the plane of history of God's ageless sacrifice for His children. And he uses this very fine

illustration from his own experience. He was on a cruise in the Mediterranean, and one night the ship passed quite close to Stromboli, known as "the lighthouse of the Mediterranean," an island-volcano which rises sheer out of the sea. It was almost dark and suddenly there was a great burst of flame from the crater at the summit. Huge tongues of fire shot up, hundreds of feet high, lighting up the ocean for miles around. Tons of molten rock were thrown up into the air: red-hot boulders raced down the mountain-side; and gradually a stream of lava forced its way almost to the sea. For many hours as the ship slipped away towards the horizon, that red-hot stream of lava, like some awful gaping wound, gashed the darkness. What did it mean? It meant that for a few hours there had been revealed those great fires which had been burning in the heart of the mountain since the foundation of the world. The point of that apt illustration as applied to the Cross of Christ—the lengths of sacrifice to which His endless Friendship goes—is obvious.

But it is sharpened by the lines which Leslie Weatherhead quotes:

> I sometimes think about the cross,
> And shut my eyes and try to see
> The cruel nails and crown of thorns,
> And Jesus, crucified for me.
> But even could I see Him die,
> I could but see a little part
> Of that great love, which like a fire,
> Is *always* burning in His heart.

And he adds: "The friendship of Jesus, which the Cross could not end, speaks of the Friendship of the Father, which began with the dawn of human consciousness in the world, and which will never end. . . . Here is love revealed to our wondering eyes which, long before Christ came, was loving and suffering for men in a manner which only Christ could reveal, and which will go on loving and suffering until the last soul is voluntarily brought into harmony with Himself in the final perfection of the ultimate heaven."

But let us shift our ground a little, and ask the question: What are the elements in the death of Christ which justify us in calling Him our Saviour? What are the factors in the Cross which gave it value for God and gives it saving efficacy for man? It is to answer this important question for theology that the various theories of the Atonement have been propounded in the history of Christian thought. We may remind ourselves of the most important of these theories in order to realise afresh the difficulty of the problem of the Atonement and the earnestness with which the Church has grappled with it. For ten centuries the Ransom Theory had held the field of Christian thought, in

which the death of Christ was regarded as a ransom paid to the devil for the release of the elect. This view was given its quietus by Anselm's epoch-making little book, *Cur Deus Homo,* whose "Commercial Theory" (as it is called) regarded Christ's death as an infinite satisfaction made to God by Christ for the infinite wrong done to God by man's sin. At the Reformation Anselm's "Superfluous Merit" theory (to give it its other name) was modified by the introduction of analogies derived from criminal law. The Penal Satisfaction theory of the Reformers maintained that the satisfaction rendered to God by Christ in His death consisted in the fact that Christ endured the punishment which, in the ordinary course of events, must have fallen upon the "hell-deserving sinner." Calvin, for example, does not hesitate to say that on the Cross Christ endured the very torments of the damned, and interprets the "Descent into Hades" as a literal suffering of the pains of hell. The next great attempt to explain the Death of Christ as our Saviour was made by the famous Dutch jurist, Grotius, in his Governmental theory. Grotius rejected altogether the ideas of legal substitution and mathematical equivalence and held that Christ was not actually punished for the sins of men, but that He endured suffering which God—as the vindicator of the moral order of the universe—could accept as a substitute for punishment. Through the death of Christ God remained just, while at the same time He became the justifier of the unjust. Finally we have the various Moral Influence theories which stress the fact that the death of Christ was the revelation of the heart of God designed to bring sinful men back to their Heavenly Father and to win their love for Himself. For example, Dr. McLeod Campbell held that an *adequate* repentance would be sufficient satisfaction for sin, and maintained that Christ in His death offered to God, on behalf of man, this adequate repentance and so fulfilled the conditions of forgiveness. Again, Horace Bushnell taught that the death of Christ was an expression of the *vicarious nature of love,* which identifies itself with its object, even to the bearing of the object's sins, and so proves the strongest influence leading men to repentance. Probably Protestant theology to-day is split between the Penal Satisfaction theory on the one hand and some form of Moral Influence theory on the other. There is considerable vitality in the older view, a vitality which springs from the important element of truth which I feel the theory contains; but it cannot be denied that the later theory is more in line with the modern psychological approach to the problem of human sin and salvation. Sin estranges men from God and the death of Christ, by helping men to realise what is their true attitude to God, induces them to turn aside from the pride and selfishness

which separates them from their Heavenly Father. In the Cross of Jesus the moral qualities of faith and love are revealed at their highest, and it is these qualities which give the death of Christ its value for God and its saving efficacy for men; but this saving efficacy is possible only because in Christ we have the revelation in human form of that redemptive love which has been in God from the beginning.

What can we say to these—at points—conflicting theories? Two things. One is that not one of them contains the whole truth, and every one of them conveys some of the truth about the saving efficacy of the death of Christ. The other thing is that there is an important truth which is common to all these theories of the Atonement. It is this. *Christ went freely to the Cross.* When we have noted the historical circumstances which attended His end and have endeavoured to assess them, we have not reached the heart of the matter unless we also mark the faith and love, the devotion and loyalty, which characterised every step of the way until He reached Golgotha's crown. It was the attitude of mind which Jesus exhibited, the moral quality of a perfect and whole-hearted obedience, that makes the Cross of Christ acceptable in the eyes of God. He went to His death willingly, in order that men should live; and hence He fulfilled the divine ideal of sacrifice. Dr. P. T. Forsyth, in his thought-provoking volume *The Cruciality of the Cross,* discusses the old phrase, "the blood of Christ" and endeavours to express the truth it contains in such ethicised terms as will appeal to the modern mind. He urges that it would not have mattered one whit if no single drop of Christ's blood had been shed, that it would have made no real difference if Christ had come to His end by some other form of execution than that of crucifixion. There would have been no change of essential truth—only of the imagery by means of which we set forth the truth. But he goes on to say, "it would have mattered a whole world if Jesus had met his death by disease or accident. Everything turns, not on His life having been taken from Him, but on its having been laid down. Everything, for His purpose, turns on the will to die." It was His faith in God, His love for man, and His utter devotion to His cause, which led Him to go freely to His death. It is this free surrender of His life that gives the Cross value for God and saving efficacy for man; and it is this recognition of this truth that constitutes the common element underlying all the various theories of the Atonement.

Quite a number of pertinent questions arise at this point. For one thing, the insistence upon the fact that Christ went freely to the Cross suggests the enquiry, Did He commit suicide? The questions sounds irreverent to us, but it has been asked and

answered with a decided affirmative by some. Again, it may be asked, Was Jesus done to death because His pacifism would not allow Him to adopt a policy of self-defence? But to answer this question in the affirmative is to raise other problems not easily solved; for example, Why did He not seek safety in flight? Or was it that He could not escape? If that is so, then it must follow that He died because He could not help it? Or if we suppose that He might have escaped but would not, does it follow that His followers must also refuse to escape death by flight? Again, it may be asked, Was the death of Christ merely that of a martyr? If we say "yes" to this does it not make Christ's death less than that of a martyr? We have only to compare Socrates in the prison cell in Athens drinking the cup of poison without a tremor, greeting the unseen with a cheer, and dying with a jest upon his lips, with Jesus in Gethsemane, with His soul exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death, and praying that the cup might pass from Him—we have only to make this comparison to see that if Christ died a martyr's death and nothing more, then He was (and I say it quite reverently) a pretty poor specimen of a martyr. Yet further, we might ask, How does the death of Christ prove the love of God? How does the death of one person (Christ) prove the love of a third person (God)? Or does it mean that we cannot really speak of a third person but rather must identify Christ and God so that what Christ does for us is really what God is doing for us in and through Him? And yet once more, we may ask, How can the death of Christ prove God's love to us unless men were in some spiritual danger from which only such an event as the Cross could save them? In other words, do such phrases as "the wrath of God" and "the terror of the Lord" express anything more than a warped or inadequate view of the Deity?

All these questions have a bearing upon the problem of the Atonement from the point of view of its preachableness, but I cannot stop to deal with them here. Two points only will I deal with briefly in closing. The first is this: The conviction that Christ in some way died for, or on behalf of, men dignifies and enhances the value of human personality. We see that expressed as an ethical first principle in the New Testament . "Destroy not him with thy meat, *for whom Christ died,*" exclaims the great Apostle, and it is the fact that Christ died for men that lifts them up out of the miry clay, sets their feet upon a rock, establishes their goings, and puts a new song in their mouth. Dr. T. R. Glover has given several instances of the way in which the sacrifice of Christ has conferred a new dignity on men. In the fifth century there was a bishop in North Africa who remonstrated with a governor for ill-treating the natives. He said:

"You are treating men as if they were cheap, but man is a thing of price, for Christ died for him." There is the case of the scholar Muretus in the sixteenth century, who was journeying on foot through Italy. He became ill and was carried to a hospital in a strange town. As he was laid on the operating table he heard one of the doctors say to another in Latin, "Try your experiment on this cheap life"; and he himself called out, also in Latin: "Do you call a life cheap for which Christ did not disdain to die?" But probably the best expression of this is to be found in that masterpiece of early English literature, *The Vision of Piers Ploughman,* by William Langland. Langland has been referring to Calvary, and then says:

> Blood-brothers did we all become there
> And gentlemen each one.

Thus the Cross not only binds us to God, it binds us also to one another. It is because Christ died that we have the assurance that man is "better than a sheep" and that his life is not simply that of the gnat that dies in the summer's sun.

The second point is this. A Jew and a Christian were once arguing about the Virgin Birth, and at last the Jew flung down this challenge: "If a woman were to tell you the story which Mary is supposed to have told, would you believe her?" "Yes," replied the Christian, "*if her Son were Jesus.*" He meant that so incredible a happening as the Virgin Birth became more easily believable when considered in relation to the uniqueness of the person who is alleged to have come into the world in that strange and unusual way. We may apply the same principle in speaking of the death of Christ. We must not separate the Cross from the Crucified, we must not separate the death of Christ from the Person who died. It is not merely the circumstances of His death that makes it different from every other death; it is the fact that it was He who died. In a sense, it is not the Cross that saves, it is the Christ of the Cross who is the Saviour of the world. We cannot understand that Cross, we cannot understand His own attitude towards it and His recognition of its necessity, unless we are prepared to believe that Christ was a unique Person with a unique mission. As W. E. Orchard puts it, "the full explanation of Christ's acceptance of the Cross can only be found in the complete doctrine of His Person as human and divine, and in His death as being the only means of redeeming the world." The Early Church proclaimed the good news of Christ crucified. We live in a different age. Yet men's fundamental needs are just the same in the twentieth century as in the first, however much they may be camouflaged. And we can preach—yea, not merely can, but must preach—the same message Christ *crucified, Christ* crucified.

JOHN PITTS.