

A Theory of the Atonement.

BY THE REV. W. L. WALKER, LAURENCEKIRK.

SOME references to the Atonement in recent numbers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES induce me to endeavour to give a brief statement of a view which has enabled one, at least, who had lost belief in the evangelical conception, to regain faith therein. It is founded on what Paul says concerning the Righteousness of God and concerning Christ as the Head and Representative of Humanity. God's imperative and absolute requirement for admission to eternal life is, Paul teaches, *Righteousness*. Reason and conscience must acknowledge the necessity of the requirement. Sin has played havoc with this world, and God is determined it shall never enter that permanent kingdom for which everything here is but preparation. Therefore '*Death* has passed on all men, for that all have sinned.' Humanity having become so involved in sin that no man is able to realize that perfect Righteousness, which God requires, the case seems hopeless, 'for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.' And, we repeat, there is no replying. We must all bow to the necessity of that requirement of Righteousness; we all know that sin cannot, even in the slightest measure, be permitted (and in the nature of things is unable) to inherit eternal life. God's Fatherly Love utterly forbids it. And no efforts of man under any 'Law,' whether that given through conscience, or that in 'the oracles of God' as its spiritual significance was expounded by Christ, can enable him to realize that perfect Righteousness that God requires. It is not morality merely, but the righteousness to which Christ called men—the spirit and character of sons of God.

But now, Paul says, God has provided a Righteousness, apart from all Law and from all efforts of man, with which every one who believes in Christ can be freely invested, and accepted as a son and heir of His kingdom. This He can do on the ground of that 'manifestation of His Righteousness'—here, His own judicial and personal Righteousness—which has been made in Christ, 'that He may be righteous and yet the-maker-righteous (justifier) of him who believes in Jesus.' And this ground is found in that which Christ did 'in His blood,' in His death for us on

the cross. There, as he elsewhere says (and it is the very ground of the gospel he preached), 'Christ died for our sins.' Again, he says, 'if one died *for* all, then all died,' and 'Him who knew no sin God made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.' Clearly, then, Christ died as our *Representative*, as representing our own death on account of sin. Now, what was that death to which we were doomed because of sin? This cannot be fully discussed here, but it meant essentially, as we have seen, exclusion from eternal life, or 'separation from God,' as we say. It was the death of *sinful* man, the death of man in that flesh which is the seat of sin and from which sin cannot be eradicated, by any efforts of our own. 'The flesh' being the principle of the life of the natural man, for us to have died that death would have been to 'perish' hopelessly. But Christ died *for* us, not only bowing to the penalty of sin in our name, but in that very act becoming the Source of a new life of righteousness unto us. For in Christ there was, not only 'the flesh,' but the fulness of the life of 'the Spirit'; it was the Spirit and not the flesh that was the principle of His life. Christ, therefore, could die in the flesh the death that sin deserved to die (and must die in us all if we are to rise into the life of the Spirit and enter God's eternal kingdom), and yet, so far from that being the hopeless death it would have been to us, Christ rises from that death in the power of the Spirit and becomes the Head of a new, redeemed, spiritual Humanity. In His dying in our name *for* sin He at the same time died wholly *to* sin, and man in Him rose 'freed from sin' into the full life of the Spirit.

In the death of Christ, therefore, two things were secured—the two things that were so necessary. God's own personal and judicial Righteousness, in view of His ordinance of death, as the wages of sin (or, we should rather say, its remaining in the case of man), and of His 'forbearance' in the past, was manifested; and the guarantee is given that man shall die to the flesh and be raised into that life of righteousness which is absolutely necessary for his entrance into the eternal kingdom.

It has been done in Christ, the true Head of Humanity, and it is there in Him for ever before God for us all. Christ has become a second Adam, 'a quickening Spirit,' able to raise into the life of spiritual righteousness all who accept Him and receive His Spirit. His Spirit comes to them, indeed, through their faith in His Cross. God can thus proclaim universal forgiveness and can 'justify the ungodly.' For Christ, our true Head and Representative, has in our name died the death that sinful flesh required to die, and has risen, also in our name, to the needed life of righteousness. All men can, therefore, be freely forgiven, and even 'justified' (accounted righteous), and made the sons and heirs of God *in Christ* their Head. It is only 'in Christ' we are 'justified,' and it is by the power of His Spirit or life in us we are 'saved.'

To such a view of the Atonement no objections based on the suffering of the innocent for the guilty can apply. It was our true *Head* thus bowed in acknowledgment of the sin in which the members of His body had become involved; it was Humanity, in its truth, acknowledging its sin, and dying, not only *for*, but *to* sin. We are not *others* in relation to our Head. And it was, at the same time, the Divine life of self-sacrificing Love, which *is* the truth of our Humanity as sonship to God, which, having fully incarnated Itself in Christ, thus gave Itself for us and is able to raise us up to Itself.

Did space permit, I might show how this is simply an explication of Christ's own sayings respecting His death, and of His experience as represented in the Gospels. There is no contradiction between Christ and Paul. It throws the needed light on both the struggle in Gethsemane and the cry on the cross, 'My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' otherwise so inexplicable. It was, moreover, an act in its essence wholly *ethical*, while yet, of necessity, expressed physically.

The death that God required was not the death of man as conceived in His own image, but the death of man as involved in sin—as a sinner,—the death of man '*in the flesh*' or to the flesh. Now, what we see throughout the life of Christ was the conquest of the flesh by the Spirit. From first to last He was man wholly after the Spirit. It was on the cross, which He accepted in obedience to the Father's will, that the flesh, which, as we see in Gethsemane, struggled hard and, as we might say, most 'naturally,' against it, was completely and for ever triumphed over by the Spirit. There, in that act of utter obedience, the life of Love was entirely victorious, not only over the sin of man as it raged against it, but over that *self* which is necessarily the principle of the flesh, and which belonged to Christ as appearing in the flesh, although in Him it never became 'sinful flesh.' There, not merely outwardly and physically, but inwardly and truly the flesh died and the Spirit rose into the fulness of its own Divine life, and man was represented as having 'died to sin' and as 'freed from sin' for ever. It was really the uprising of a new creation. From the standpoint of Evolution, it represented the ascent of man in His Head, and in 'promise and potency' for all men, to a new stage of existence,—that of life wholly after the Spirit, which is the life of the sons of God, and the only life that can possibly be the life eternal.

Note.—Since the above was written this theory of the Atonement in its connexion with the gift of the Spirit and with the Incarnation as a Divine process culminating in Christ,—showing Him to be our real Divine-Human Head,—and in view of difficulties in connexion with theories of the Atonement, has been developed and stated in a work by the writer entitled *The Spirit and the Incarnation in the Light of Scripture, Science, and Practical Need*, to be published shortly by Messrs. T. & T. Clark.