

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_churchman\\_os.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php)

## The New Evangelicalism.

BY THE REV. A. R. WHATELY, D.D.

THE preaching of the Gospel has lost much of its old force, because it has been felt necessary to qualify its traditional form. Some of this qualification has been sound, some unsound. Much of what is called the Gospel to-day is in essence little more than a haloed morality. The emphasis is shifted from specific fact to general truth, and when this is done, the case of redemptional religion is virtually surrendered. But we here assume a general agreement between the writer and the readers of this article upon such vital questions. What is more necessary to note is this: that not only unsound, but sound, qualifications of our old preaching have blunted the edge of its message. What, then, are we to do? We cannot fall back upon crude and harsh teachings, no more true to Scripture than to modern thought and feeling. For, even if we believed them true, they are becoming less and less effectual. And yet, on the other hand, we find it hard, under modern conditions, to preserve that clear-cut issue, that clash of two eternities, that sense of the transcendent reality of sin, that gave to the old preaching its spell.

The barbarian chief, in the early days, who, when told in answer to his inquiry that his heathen tribesmen were condemned to an inevitable hell, stood back from the baptismal water and said, "I will go to my own people," exemplified the recoil of the nobler, not the baser, side of human nature from what was preached as the Gospel. It is easy for us to-day to repudiate this alleged presupposition of the message of salvation; but we must follow up this presupposition as far as it will lead us. We must do so, not only to remove the reproach, but to adjust our view of sin and salvation upon a firm basis. For it is clear that the problem—if we call it such—of the unevangelized heathen extends itself in principle to all who have not had a really fair chance to appreciate the Gospel—all who have never really been brought face to face with the issue.

And this will include a vast number who have received orthodox instruction in the Faith. And it will raise the further question : Who really has rejected Christ, with a proper realization of of what that rejection implies ? Are there not degrees of guilt even in the crucifying of the Son of God ? And yet, on the other hand, has not Christ died to save us from sin, and does not that presuppose a lost condition antecedent to the hearing of the call ? When, therefore, we exempt the heathen, and some others, from the *massa perditionis*, are we not watering down—however necessarily—the stern truth to which the Gospel itself owes its light and power ? Have we not made an inroad upon a principle which, as a whole, we dare not disturb ? Dare not, because if we affirm baldly that Christ died only for the sin of rejecting Him, we reduce the whole Gospel to incoherence. And yet we seem compelled to make concessions which would lead logically to this conclusion.

But even if we could escape the dilemma by what I may call a fair and reasonable special pleading—by considerations drawn from outside the immediate terms of the problem—should we thus have gained all that we want ? A Gospel that has to be qualified loses by the very fact. Its freedom, simplicity, and grip are weakened, and at the same time it is not able to set at rest entirely the misgivings of all who demand of their religion that it shall not only tolerate, but embrace, all that is true, lovely, and of good report. We must not soothe with apologies or console with uncovenanted mercies the human soul that responds to our Gospel : “ I will go to my own people.”

We are now in sight of the real solution—a solution which lingers, I think, half-expressed in the background of such modern teaching as is sensitive both to the spirit of the Gospel and to the spirit of the age. It is not the object of this article to bring to bear any mere theory, not already present as a half-formed intuition, working towards conscious expression, in the best evangelical preaching of to-day. But to bring it into full daylight, and to formulate it sharply for self and for others, means, for many of us, a somewhat formidable breach with old

habits of thought. And yet, so far from tending towards a dead rationalizing level, it helps us far towards just that focussing and unification of Christian truth which is its best preservative against hostile or virtual attack. As little as possible will be said about its doctrinal context, in which alone we can do full justice to its significance. This, of course, is inevitable in a short article.

What we need, surely, is not to qualify this feature of absoluteness in the Gospel—its incisive contrasts, its balance of finalities, its language of eternity. If we dislike to talk bluntly of perdition, we cannot preach a *moderate perdition*. The anti-thesis must *somewhere* be absolute; *somewhere* a deadlock in life and thought must be discovered which only the Gospel can solve.

The old theology taught that eternal damnation rested upon sin, simply as it is. Beneath all blurred distinctions, we were told to assume, not merely two fundamental tendencies, but two complete states, at least wherever the Gospel was known; and conversion was the passing from the one to the other. Writing as to Evangelicals, I need not pause to defend the vital element of truth in this view, as against a mass of would-be liberal theology. For us the definiteness of the historical redemption has its consequence and reflection in the definiteness of the offer and the claim with which the Redeemer meets the individual soul. We believe in conversion. But we do need, I think, to readjust our conception of the state of ordinary unconverted soul, not definitely rebellious, and of the exact sense in which Christ died to save us from sin.

There is one great feature of certain pronouncements in the New Testament which are specially appealed to against all "moral," or rationalizing, theories of the Atonement: with all their substitutionary import, they set forth personal renewal and holiness as, no less than forgiveness, the *direct* object of Christ's atoning death. He "bare our sins . . . that we, being dead unto sin, should live unto righteousness." Deliverance from the power of sin is not a secondary, but a primary, object of His

death. Of course, the victory over sin in our hearts is progressive, and thus subsequent to acceptance with God; but, even so, sin is in principle overcome, as well as pardoned, as soon as it is renounced.

Christ came to save us from sin, whether regarded as guilt or as a power. Now, the ultimate issue of sin is the conscious rejection of the Saviour. This is so, because Christ reveals in Himself the ideal goodness, and to reject Him is in principle to reject goodness as such. All sin, therefore, in so far as it is conscious, deliberate, and cherished, tends towards this consummation. It comes short of this consummation only because it is not fully known for what it is. If we realized it fully in one solitary case, the temptation in that case would be the very crisis of life, the choice between Christ and apostasy. All actual sins, in persons not reprobate, are *partly* due to impulse or to deception. The more it tends to deliberateness, the more is it a movement of the whole man against God. Therefore, whoever breaks one commandment is in principle guilty of all. There is a solidarity in sins as in virtues; and the former find their goal in apostasy, as the latter in the new man created as such in Christ Jesus.

Now we are brought a step farther towards our conclusion. If we so regard sin, then we must certainly reject two opposite views of the position of the ordinary sinner. He is certainly not in a definitive condition of damnation, because his sin has not reached maturity. On the other hand, his position as a sinner is that of potential ruin. His lower nature, as in the saint also, rests under condemnation; though how far he has identified his conscious selfhood with it, or how far he has assented to the condemnation of it, is a matter between himself and God. The definite conversion to Christ differs greatly in different people, not only in other ways, but especially according to the condition of the will before Christ is inwardly apprehended. In some it is mainly an enlightenment, in others essentially a repentance. On the other hand, we repudiate the reduction of the idea of salvation to that of moral renewal,

which it undoubtedly contains. Such definitions are not only less than Christian, but less than religious.

No, we must diverge from the old soteriology and from rationalism alike. We must maintain that Christ saves the sinner from sin—*real* sin, with all its potentiality of eternal death, with all its need of real pardon—yet not, as it were, from *ideal* sin—sin to which the sinner has not yet attained, and which is but a false interpretation of his actual state.

At this point we come in sight of the meaning of conversion. We will not discuss the eschatological questions which of course arise. For they are secondary, however closely related, to the results that emerge from the analysis of primary realities of religious experience. If Christ is preached to men as their own renewed conscience, which in Him has gathered up its scattered and broken threads, emerged from the confusion and the mists, confronted the soul with a definite call to surrender and a definite promise of acceptance—then to reject Him is a self-damnation. For the rejection of One who unites in His own person all the scope and all the imperative of the moral law leaves no ground for any of those hopes that depend upon moral and spiritual issues. A man may neglect a half-appreciated offer of salvation in the hope that God will have mercy in the end. But in so far as he knows what he is doing (and it is the business of the evangelist to show him), he knows that in so doing he is renouncing and killing his own moral selfhood; he is cutting away the very grounds of hope. He cannot thus reject the grace of God *in toto* and as such, and yet keep a reserve of it for future need.

All this may be got over by plausible theories; but these theories must be judged not merely as abstract theology, but by the living and concrete logic of experience. Here we have that great truth of the consummation of religious issues in Christ, so subtly expounded in the Epistle to the Hebrews, the most directly relevant, perhaps, to the modern situation of all the New Testament books. And it rests upon the laws of man's nature, no less than on the dispensations of God. To "crucify the Son of God afresh," in its full meaning, would be to crucify

hope and belief within the man. The Christ who has gathered in the harvest of the ages, and the harvest of the individual's own past, leaves a desert behind Him for all who turn back. Therefore, to "neglect so great salvation" is self-condemnation, just in so far as the salvation neglected has been apprehended as the historical and logical consummation of God's mercy. Now, the idea of conversion, when broadened and deepened to its full dimensions, simply embraces the whole claim and resources of God and the whole personality of man into a point of luminous and awful finality. How the doctrine of Baptism does not modify this, but clinches and completes it, we cannot now pause to consider; nor, on the other hand, need we now vindicate the main principle of conversion, except as it is vindicated on the lines of our present argument. It is assumed that conversion, as a spiritual reality, is involved in the logic of any Christian faith that is not either legalistic or nebulous. My present attempt is simply this: to get behind the antithesis between the Greek and the Western theology; to see in Christ the Logos and the Redeemer at once—each because He is also the other.

The revised Evangelicalism, then, will offer a definitive salvation which presupposes a relative spiritual death, but not necessarily a "lost condition" actually reached. Christ, as in the New Testament teaching, will be the test, and human sin will define and reveal itself face to face with Him. We need not, then, be in a hurry to fix what we believe as to the Second Death, though there are teachings, on opposite sides, which we need not hesitate to disbelieve. For in the soul itself there is a sense of diremption, a shadow of perdition, moral, spiritual, and metaphysical, when it rises to a consciousness of its own unfathomable depth, but not yet of the life in God.

This new revivalism will thus speak from the broad platform of human experience, and yet from that platform proclaim, in the clearest and most unqualified language, the Divine supremacy and presence of the Son of man. It will speak very quietly and soberly, but the awe and thrill of the older message will attend its utterance. And the phantoms of unreality and mis-

giving, which seem present more and more to chill the preaching of the Gospel, will disappear ; for the whole field of heart and conscience will be taken into possession, and the light will flood the dark corners in which they now stand.

The old doctrine of human corruption will be turned to the opposite account. It will no longer be used to disparage the good in the unconverted ; but, on the contrary, the transcendent reality of human sinfulness will appear just precisely in this—that it can segregate even the Divine products of the *Λόγος σπερματικός*, and prevent the very virtues of the sinner from bearing him, by their own centripetal impulse, to the Christ who is their home. Thus, even as, in the historical climax of sin and grace, “ Adam’s sins have swept between the righteous Son and Father,” so, in human life, sin comes in between the Divine and the Divine ; breaks up the unity of the Logos, even in societies where Christ has been preached ; sets up against the Gospel not merely rival pleasures and rival gains, but rival ideals ; sets truth against truth and conscience against conscience.

We must claim all these things for Christ. We must hold Him up not simply as the exalted and Divine Jesus, but as the centre and fulness of all the scattered goodness around us in human life. And just for this reason intelligently to reject Him is to reject conscience and goodness even as such ; and to accept Him is, even there and then, to enter upon a new relationship with the universe and with our own selves. It is just *because* He is the Logos that His claim is absolute and His salvation grounded in the very foundations of Being. And it is just for this reason that conversion, which answers to His own personal approach—which settles our relation to Him, and in Him to all that is right and good—is on His side the primary claim, and on ours the discovery of the Pearl of Great Price.

Such is the revelation, as I think, which is even now dawning upon the confusion of human life. Such is the Christ who can dissolve the mists of our perplexities by the sheer white light of His Presence, and answer with the one word of His Gospel the insistent and intersecting questionings of our age.