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REPLY TO A LETTER

FROM

AN EVANGELICAL LAY PREACHER.

BY

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REPLY TO A LETTER

FROM AN EVANGELICAL LAY PREACHER.

DEAR SIR,—You apologize for trying to convert one a quarter of a century your senior, by telling me that you tremble for my state. You express fear, lest at my age strength of *will* may resist your efforts; in other words, you suggest that *wilfulness* is the great obstacle to my going back to opinions, which, I told you, were the opinions of my youth; were those to which my education and early connections biassed me; which I held in my early manhood, but long ago renounced, from finding them untenable. Is not your suggestion of my wilfulness somewhat insolent? Knowledge and truth have all my life been my earnest desire, and have never encountered resistance from my will.

You earnestly desire to know whether I have meditated on those words, "When my flesh and my heart fail me. . . ." What else can you mean, but that you expect me to tremble at death? How many brave men, not religious, not even in ordinary esteem moral, lay down their lives, without trembling, in the cause of duty! Whence comes your quiet assumption that other men are cowards? I leave that to your reflection. For myself I have only to say, that I regard premature death a great calamity, but death in ripe age or full time a divine blessing. Death is God's ordinance and gift, as much as life; each is good in its own time. As to the common talk, that "it is a fearful thing to go into the immediate presence of God," I reply,

“we are already, here and always, in His immediate presence, and never can be more so.” God is not a visible, tangible form, but an omnipresent Spirit ; and since He is purely good and wise, no man, be he better or worse, can have sound reason for wishing *not* to be in his immediate presence. Yet a *guilty* man, no doubt, may wish it ; and, it seems to me, you assume that one who does not agree with you must have a bad conscience.

You frankly appeal to me, “must we not *all* confess that we are sinners ?” and you add needless protestations of your own consciousness of being utterly vile. Who denies that we are *all* sinners ? I never yet knew a single fool to doubt it. Why impute such absurdity to *me* ? The tenour of your letters leads me to conjecture that the necessity of “atonement by blood” for sin is such an axiom with you, that you assume one who rejects it to be so self-righteous, as not to know that he is a sinner at all. Taking for granted that I am unreconciled to God, you generously offer to show me the way of reconciliation,—Christ ! and you assure me that my whole nature was corrupt from birth, and has lost the image of God in which Adam was created.

I have already told you, that you seem to me to confound *frailty* with *corruption*, but you have not understood me. Since Adam (according to you) sinned, his primitive nature was frail, yet you do not call it corrupt, you say it was created upright. If so, neither can natural corruption be justly inferred in *you*, from the very great vileness which you ascribe to yourself. If you are corrupt, it is your own doing, your personal sin ; your nature at birth was as upright and as frail as Adam’s, but not corrupt. I admit it was frailer in one sense than that of your Adam, for *he* was created, it seems, a full grown man, *we* began existence as infants. If, even with this advantage, he sinned on the first temptation, nothing worse could be done by any of us. We have not *lost* any of the image of God which a distant

ancestor of ours possessed. The very idea is dishonourable to the creator, that he would construct a progenitor endowed with the power of wrecking his whole posterity by his own single act. We should bitterly censure a shipwright, who sent to sea a ship laden with 500 emigrants, that foundered under the first feeble side-breeze. Can any one who means to be pious dare to impute to Man's Creator the making such a top-heavy nature for him, that with one sin of one Adam we all rolled, millions of millions, into an abyss of perdition, and need a stupendous effort of divinity to save . . . a very few!

Moreover, if the creator responsible for my nature is not God, but some Adam, and God is ashamed of it as a bad piece of work, (nay, necessarily hates it, as I understand you,) then God deals with me as a father who repudiates an affiliated child, denying that it is his. Hereby, disowning fatherhood, he forbids me to call him Creator, or to be grateful for an existence crippled, bastard, and impotent for good.

You are not satisfied with painting to me this world's miseries, but you assure me that—not through God's fault! Oh, no! but through Adam's fault—an eternity of sin lies before the vast mass of mankind. But when, according to you, that mass is utterly helpless, and the Creator knew they would be so, what, I repeat, are we to think of his wisdom and goodness (to say nothing of his Prescience) in so creating Adam?

In short, I mark three cardinal and pernicious errors, which you hold as cardinal truth. 1. That man's nature is *not as God created or intended it*; but that the Creator has been outwitted (by the Devil, I suppose) and poor mankind has to suffer through God's un-wisdom. 2. The horrible and incredible idea that God will retain in eternal sensitive existence beings who can do nothing but sin and suffer; whose sufferings are compared to everlasting flame. 3. That God cannot remit sin without shedding of blood, but is reconciled to

us (or reconciles himself to us? or reconciles us to himself?—for I do not know which phrase you adopt) by the BLOOD of Jesus.

You have twice attempted to urge upon me belief in the theology of the book of Genesis. I must repeat more pointedly, what is not my discovery, but that of Christian divines long ago, that the theology of that book is very barbaric. What avails it to offer me a defence of "God repented that he had made man" (words which I have not attacked) when all the thoughts are alike barbarously crude? "Sons of God" beget "giants" out of daughters of men, and corrupt the earth. God repents that he has made man, and destroys him by a universal flood. He saves Noah with seven others, and with all sorts of beasts, under wholly impossible conditions, and with a result to the distribution of animals as certainly false as the deluge. After it Noah offers a burnt sacrifice of clean beasts, and Jehovah, like Homer's Jupiter, *smells a sweet savour*; and sets his rainbow in the cloud as a sign, again like Homer's notions. Jehovah also resolves *never again* to curse the earth for man's sake, for, says he, there is no use in it, so wicked are men! He might as well have thought of that before the flood. All is of a piece in these legends. Jehovah eats roast veal with Abraham, and teaches him the disgusting rite of circumcision as a religious duty. He honours Abraham, in the very base conduct of twice passing off his wife as a sister. So in Exodus, xxiv. 9-11, he shows himself personally to the seventy elders and to the nobles of Israel. Christianity professes higher and purer things than these, but by pressing on us as alike valuable, alike true, all parts of that very diverse collection of books which you call the Bible, you damage all your own better thoughts.

This Pagan notion of Atonement by Blood you make cardinal in your Christian gospel. "It is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away

sin," says the writer to the Hebrews. True, and equally impossible for a *man's* blood, or, if so you will have it, a *God's* blood. To suppose *moral* sin transferred from one being to another, is a barbarous absurdity; to transfer the penalty is immoral. It is not endured in any approved legislation. Jews insist that it was *not* endured in Judaism, only ceremonial "*errors*" (Heb. ix. 7) had ceremonial atonement: crime never had any. I believe this to be correct; but that is to me a question of history, not of theology. If the Hebrew law taught the immoral idea that blood could atone for moral iniquity, so much the worse for it: but shall Christian hymns therefore smell of the slaughter-house? Alas! they do. Far better said Paul, "offer yourselves as living sacrifices."—Again: "Unto Israel, saith God, I will take no bullock out of thy house; if I were hungry, I would not tell thee." The psalmist who wrote that, knew the vulgar idea of sacrifice to be the Pagan one, that the gods needed to *partake* of the sweet savour. The Psalms and Prophets have truly little sympathy with bloodshed for sin. Read the 103rd Psalm (it is but one out of many), you will find no idea in it that God wants bloody atonement. This coarse Paganism, as far as I understand, came in only as *metaphor* into the earliest Christianity, and did not attain its sharpest prosaic form until Archbishop Anselm under our William Rufus. But, unhappily, Luther and Calvin adopted Augustine's doctrines as a basis, and logically rushed into Anselm's extreme; thence it has come to vex and damage Protestantism, and is now presented to us as the Gospel or *Good News*, in connection with a corrupt humanity and an eternal hell. If you *will* preach such things, you must truthfully call them Bad News. Well, said David Hume, that the Protestant Reformation was checked, when the generation which followed Calvin found that they had to choose between believing that God was a wafer or that God was a cruel tyrant.

The core of the mischief lies in your monstrous and unproved assumption that books called Holy Scripture, widely different in age, merit, and doctrine, are all infallible. To me it is as certain as any fact in the world, that they are often self-contradictory, foolish, and barbaric; that they often show extreme credulity in the narrators, and are convicted of error in every branch,—moral, and theological, as well as literary and scientific. The very excellences of their more devotional parts (to which I do honour on every fit occasion) are mischievous, if they are allowed to stamp sanctity on the baser books, and on the unavoidable errors of the better. You profess yourself “not to have patience” to read criticism on the Bible by men whom you call “enemies of the Bible.” You must then, either be careless whether books are spurious, or believe that you have an inward divine gift to distinguish the genuine. But as I abhor fictitious authorship, and know the pernicious results of national credulity; as, moreover, I have no belief that I or you or any man can know literary facts of the past by an inward teaching, you surely ought to see the *impossibility* of my receiving divine lessons from you, while you ground them on the Bible, and flatly decline to give any reason why, against all my own perceptions and the result of many years’ anxious study, I am to receive the Bible as authoritative. It may be just worth while to observe, that, in particular, the narrative books of the New Testament seem to me to deserve little credit, and often to misrepresent events and words grossly and even recklessly. But I hold morality to be far more important than theology,—earlier in knowledge and more solid in foundation. Babes in science may judge soundly of morality, and by it confute the high pretensions of cursing theologies.

I am, truly yours,

F. W. NEWMAN.