

THE ATONEMENT.

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THE Atonement is not only the characteristic thing about the Christian Faith, it is the focus point of the whole of the doctrines of our religion.

The doctrine of the moral tragedy in the human race which we call Sin : the doctrine of the Love of God for humanity : of the coming of God into our world in human flesh : of the restoration of men to fellowship with God : of the promise of Eternal Life with God : these doctrines and all others have meaning, reality and power only in relation to the Atonement.

Without the Atonement, Christianity becomes as meaningless and unthinkable as a solar system without a sun or as a circle which has no centre.

This statement is fully borne out by the emphasis laid upon Atonement in the Bible. I do not propose to dwell upon this at much length, but it must be noted and underlined that Jonathan Edwards' happy phrase is true : the Bible is " The Record of Redemption."

The Old Testament is full of the yearning after Atonement. Thus in the first chapter of human history the story is told of the birth of conscience : the realization that something was fatally wrong between man and God. Altars are built and sacrifice offered—witnesses to an awareness in the heart that something must be done to make peace with God.

The Jewish Faith and Ritual took their whole orientation from the same spiritual convictions. God has been outraged : He must be assured of human penitence : sinful men must make reparation as best they can by giving some evidence, such as sacrifices offered, of sorrow.

The conscience becomes more tender, and men who have felt the bite of sin pour out their sorrow and cry for pardon in psalms and prayers. Deeper and deeper, yet higher and higher, grows the understanding of the problem, till one of the greatest minds that ever lived sees a glimpse at least of the stupendous truth that the wrong can only be righted by One who " bears the iniquity of us all " and " by whose stripes we are healed."

Then follows the Gospel narrative, which states the historical fact that God intervened in the Person of His Son, " Who gave His Life a ransom for many."

In the subsequent books of the New Testament there is given the interpretation of the historical fact, the explanation of the Cross and its significance from various angles.

Thus we have in the Old Testament the anticipation of the Atonement : in the Gospels the achievement of Atonement : in the rest of the New Testament the interpretation of the Atonement.

It is, therefore, true to say that the Atonement is the central truth of the Christian religion, that it runs through the whole of

Scripture as the dominant note, the connecting link which unifies the whole collection of books.

There is no need to labour these remarks, as no one here is likely to challenge them. I have simply stated them as an appropriate introduction to the consideration of certain points which are of great importance for us to-day.

I am convinced that for many reasons there is an urgent call—especially to Evangelicals—to reconsider and reaffirm the doctrines of the Atonement. Among these reasons I mention these:—

(1) The Atonement is the driving force of Christianity. It is the doctrine which finds men and meets their needs.

(2) The lamentable absence of the sense of sin which has debilitated the whole life of the Church is due to the absence of forceful and intelligent proclamation of this doctrine.

(3) The Atonement has always been the main theme of the Evangelical message, and if we want to serve our day and generation aright we have got to get a firm grip of this truth and proclaim it in the language of to-day. This will need profound and prayerful thought, for the mere reiteration of threadbare phrases, or an exposition which is contrary to the moral sense, is useless.

Now in approaching this question, I venture to lay down two postulates which are, I think, fair and just.

First of all: if we wish to arrive at a Biblical view of the Atonement we must include in our survey the whole Bible.

I mean by this to protest against the way in which certain writers rule out the Old Testament anticipation and explain away the great classic passage in Isaiah liii., or stake off the Synoptic Gospels as virtually the one group of books which really matter, or disparage Pauline theology as a rather deplorable survival of rabbinical theologizing in an otherwise Christian mind.

The Bible is an unity. Granted—as we must do—that we have therein a variety of presentations of the Atonement, we claim that the truth must lie in a synthesis of these presentations. To talk as some writers have done of the Synoptic Gospels as simple historical sketches free from theological subtleties, and to describe St. Paul as the creator of an ephemeral theology which clouded the simplicity of the Gospel, is sheer nonsense.

There is not only enough theology in the Synoptic Gospels to set us thinking till the end of time, but the supposed conflict of views between the Evangelists and St. Paul has no shred of evidence to support it. The theory is historically untrue and critically unsound. St. Paul was not only in immediate touch with the whole apostolic circle, but two of the Evangelists, St. Luke and St. Mark, were among his most intimate friends.

The wretched shifts to which writers of this kind have recourse would not be tolerated in any other realm of thought. Take for instance the way in which the late Dr. Rashdall tried to evade the difficulty presented to his theory of the Atonement by the passage: "The Son of Man came to give His Life a ransom for many." There the passage stands in two Gospels and not a MS. is extant in which

it does not occur. But the passage torpedoed his theory, and so it must be explained away by a number of pages of unconvincing "arguifying."

My second postulate is this: Not only must any complete theory of the Atonement take into account the whole Bible, but it must satisfy the demands of the whole man. Logic and reason are not our only taste of truth, perhaps they are not even our greatest. Conscience, the moral and spiritual sense, have also to be taken into account. "Mere sentiment" must not be ruled out as illegitimate. It will have a right to be heard, for religion is not only concerned with the head, but perhaps mainly with the heart.

Now with these thoughts in mind we may press forward hopefully in our inquiry. And to this end let us recall the main lines along which thought has moved in the quest of a theory of the Atonement.

Three main lines of thought are traceable in the great mass of speculation which arose: it will be sufficient to note the leading features of each.

(1) *The Substitutionary view* maintained that in some sense Christ took our place, and by His Death on the Cross did something for us which produced a change of attitude on God's part towards us. The key-note of this theory is that sin entailed a penalty, and it appeals for support to the great passage in Isaiah already referred to and the Scriptural references to "ransom," "propitiation" and similar terms, which are many in number. But its acceptance has been rendered difficult by the way in which its advocates have developed it into a transaction wherein God the Father and God the Son seem to be moved by impulses which are at variance: on the one part, wrath and justice, on the other, love. The penalty of sin is spoken of as a punishment inflicted upon the Redeemer by Divine Justice. Or, in other words, God is represented as if *He* had to be reconciled to man, His wrath against humanity appeased and transformed into love. Whereas in Scripture the love of God is described as eternal, *He* never needed to be reconciled to humanity. The Atonement is the exhibition of the love of God which was always there, it did not call that love into being. Nevertheless, despite the crudities and unintentional irreverence which have gathered around the popular and superficial preaching of this view, it stands for a tremendous truth, very difficult to formulate in words, but which must be preserved if the whole significance of the Atonement is to be grasped.

(2) At the other extreme lies the view, associated with the teaching of Abelard, that the value of the Atonement lies in the moral effect of Christ's death upon the human heart. All thought of the Cross as a penalty disappears from this view. In contemplating the wonderful love of God as revealed in the Incarnation, which did not shrink from a cruel death, the human heart will be melted into penitence, filled with horror of sin and seek for forgiveness.

(3) The view of Christ as *the Representative of the human race* stands intermediate between these two. The Son of God, by taking

human nature upon Him, became Representative Man, in the sense that what He did the human race may be reckoned to have done in and through Him. He lived before God the perfect human life of utter obedience, and in His life and death He offered to God for humanity a perfect penitence.

It is probable that these distinctive theories have arisen by just that very practice to which we have referred of isolating certain sides of the Bible revelation from the whole. They are each only partial, true so far as they go, but the whole truth can only be obtained by a synthesis of all the three main aspects, if that be possible. We may arrive at this if we approach the question by a different avenue.

The conclusion as to what is needful for a full Atonement depends upon our view of sin. If sin is merely a debt which the debtor cannot pay, his release from the obligation simply depends upon the good-will of the creditor. According to the Substitutionary theory, Christ pays the debt by His life and death. But as we have noted this is not satisfactory. It ascribes different and lower qualities to God the Father than to God the Son. The description of God as the inexorable creditor who demands payment to the uttermost farthing is unthinkable, and in addition the whole theory as thus stated trenches closely upon di-theism. These objections are fatal.

According to the Abelardian explanation, God remits the debt upon repentance. All that He requires is that man shall be truly penitent and to this He moves him by the supreme display of what Divine Love will do and suffer for man's sake. No objection can be raised to this view except that it is based upon an inadequate grasp of what sin is and does.

With very little emendation what has been said in the last two paragraphs still applies if sin be regarded as a crime against the Divine Majesty. The scene is changed so to speak from the County Court to the Central Criminal Court. In this case a punishment must be inflicted. But it makes no difference how we fence the expression with guarded phrases, vicarious punishment can never be squared with our moral sense, it outrages even the most elementary sense of justice.

In support of the theory that God requires nothing but repentance, the argument is commonly employed that in such a parable as that of the Prodigal Son it is clearly taught that all the sinner needed to secure forgiveness was simply the moral resolution to ask for pardon and to show his sorrow by a determination to amend. But this reasoning proves too much. If this parable is isolated from the rest of the New Testament and it is urged that it does not suggest the necessity of the Cross of Christ before Atonement can be made, then the obvious reply is, that in the Parable there is no figure which represents Christ at all. No one has yet advanced the opinion that Christianity teaches forgiveness of sin apart altogether from Christ!

The root objection to the Abelardian theory lies in the fact that beneath it there is an inadequate view of sin. Sin is God's problem

as well as ours: *simply to wash it away is not to deal with it finally at all.* The mischief which sin has done has got to be remedied. It has created a situation and it is this which requires treatment. It is partly true to speak of sin as a debt or a crime, but in essence it is a vastly graver thing. It is a power which has diseased the moral nature of humanity and reduced to impotence all capacity to realize goodness. The moral order is broken in the world and there is a sag in human nature. Man is not merely a criminal who needs pardon, he is a broken thing which needs mending. He needs a vast deal more than forgiveness, for his sin has brought with it other things beside the consciousness of indebtedness: it has brought shame, estrangement, moral impotence; and no Atonement which stops short of the repair of this damage is complete. To offer him merely forgiveness is not enough. He wants the power of sin broken, the entail of the past annihilated, a new beginning, to be as if he had never sinned.

A simple illustration will make this plain. A boy tells a lie to his father. But if there is a fibre of decency in the boy, he does not ask simply to escape the thrashing which threatens. He would rather welcome the punishment if it could accomplish what he really does want: that is, to have things as they were before. There is a breach of the old trust between father and son, and the punishment, whether given or remitted, does not touch the case at all.

Here let me make a remark in parenthesis, but one which I think is very important. Although in this paper I am using the word forgiveness as a synonym for escape from punishment, yet this is dangerously inaccurate, for forgiveness must not be equated with being "let off." Forgiveness of sin is a much more complicated ethical problem than this implies. The importance of mere escape from punishment has been dangerously over-pressed, and the conclusion of the enemies of Christianity that we believe for safety's sake has had some justification. The inadequacy of many of the theories of the doctrine which have been advocated lies in this mistake.

However logically satisfying all arguing may be that repentance is all that is required to reinstate man, our deepest convictions and our common experience tell us that this is not so. We want not only a Father whose love is infinite and who in consequence will "let us off" when we say we are sorry, we want shame and guilt and estrangement removed, we want power to realize our best. *In other words we want more than a Forgiver, we want a Saviour.* Forgiveness is, of course, a large part of salvation, but it is only a part, and it is just this other part, the price of Atonement or "the price of sin," as the children's hymn puts it, which constitutes the real problem. There is the easy way of escape—to deny that there is any "price" to be paid, but though this has certain advantages, as the avoidance of a difficulty generally has, there is our moral consciousness to be reckoned with. It may even be true that forgiveness is ours solely on the ground of our repentance, but it is probable that penitence could have been induced in us by the life, teaching and example of our Lord. Why then the Cross? Our moral instinct is not wrong. We read the

story of the Passion and we meet something there which strengthens our conviction that a penalty of some nature had to be paid by the Saviour. The Bloody Sweat, the "strong crying with tears," the terrible wail of agony from the Cross, indicate that here is something more than a brave man facing death: here is some nameless horror which must be borne if salvation is to be won for man. Love alone cannot do it. The Love of Christ is not the same thing as the Blood of Christ.

The testimony of the human heart agrees with the Gospel record. We need more than forgiveness. The conscience is not easily satisfied. "Some one has got to suffer for this," is its instinctive testimony when awakened by the conviction of sin. This is just what the Gospels seem to depict in the Lord's Passion. He is enduring a penalty. Any theory of the Atonement which does not take full account of this element in the Gospel narratives can never be accepted as satisfactory.

Now it is just because it does try to include this element in its theory that the Substitutionary theory lives on. It has been seriously wrong in some of the positions it has maintained, but it has laid hold of an essential fact in the Atonement which the conscience insists upon as vitally necessary. Right through the Bible lies a chain of passages, all of which have this running through them as an undercurrent.

"The chastisement of our peace was upon Him and by His stripes we are healed."

"The Son of Man came . . . to give His Life a ransom for many."

"Who Himself bare our sins in His own Body on the tree."

"Without the shedding of blood there is no remission."

It really cannot be too strongly insisted that any interpretation which glosses over this prevailing element in the Bible must not claim nor expect to receive very serious attention. It is a fatally eviscerated view of the Atonement which does not give full weight to such passages and true emphasis to the doctrine to which they witness.

Now it is just this element in the Atonement which Evangelicalism has always tenaciously maintained to be absolutely vital. Its popular expositions have often been difficult to defend, and in insisting upon some catchwords as essential shibboleths it has been at least unwise. But in its loyal emphasis of what is the deepest demand of our moral nature it has done an incalculable service to religion and truth.

In the Cross of Jesus, God did for us and apart from us something which we could not do for ourselves. Something had to be done for us to which we ourselves could not in any way contribute, and God did it through Christ for us by the Cross.

Theology has several terms which refer to this aspect of the Atonement: ransom, propitiation, reconciliation and so on. But human language is a clumsy medium which can only express profound truths very roughly. Men skilled in logic-chopping argue with the terms used, and darken counsel by scoring a victory over

ineffective and even erroneous attempts at expression. But the underlying truth can never be eliminated, the moral consciousness demands it even if words cannot be found to express it adequately.

What Christ did upon the Cross was to put right the situation created by sin. This is the demand of the human conscience: not merely to escape punishment, to get off scot free, but to be right with God and to be at peace with itself.

Sin has outraged the moral law, and to repair the situation Christ by His life and sacrificial death paid a full and final tribute to the moral order. By identifying Himself with us, He became involved in our disaster and all the misery and horror which sin has caused was endured by Him. He became one of us in our misery, disgrace and downfall. But He was more than equal to the occasion, and the Resurrection witnessed to His triumph. "It behoved Christ to suffer" if He was to save, but it was essential that He should triumph over suffering if His sacrifice was to be of avail for human needs.

Such is perhaps a not wholly inadequate statement of the root truth in the Substitution theory of the Atonement.

The question still remains, how does all this meet the case? To speak of Christ as our Substitute, enduring the punishment of our sin is not admissible. But there is no difficulty in speaking of what He endured as "vicarious suffering." There is nothing in that idea which offends our sense of justice, it is indeed a common human experience, and suffering is the price which love has constantly to pay in our own relations with one another. But "vicarious punishment" is an impossible thought. Even so, how does the work of Christ become available for us?

It is here that the Representative view of the Atonement comes in to fill up what is wanting. Christ endured the consequences of sin not *in our stead* but *in our behalf*. All that He did was done in the name of humanity and as Representative of the human race. So that we may even say that in Him humanity endured to the full the consequences of sin and paid its penalty. By an act of faith we appropriate and make our own all that He did, we become identified with Him in "a mystical union" and what he did for us, we do in Him. His sufferings become our sufferings, His death becomes our "death unto sin," His Resurrection becomes "our new birth unto righteousness." "God does not accept Christ's death instead of ours. He accepts our death in Christ."

St. Paul's words perfectly express what we are trying to state: "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me."

It is the language of paradox, but it works out true in practice. Christ has become the Head of a new race in which sin is expiated and pardoned. Humanity makes a new start in which the handicap of sin no longer exists. A new situation has been created in which every one can share by an act of trust. Men are restored to full union with God. The claims of conscience are fully met, and man in his relation with God is as if he had never sinned.