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RECENT THOUGHT ON THE ATONEMENT.

By H. R. MACKINTOSH.

In what follows, let it be premised in a sentence, no attempt is made to cover the whole ground of present-day literature upon our great theme. What has been aimed at, rather, is to bring out into prominence some few significant lines of tendency more or less discernible in recent works devoted to Atonement doctrine. For the most part these lines of tendency cross each other quite freely, and the effort to separate theological writers into distinct groups, standing apart from each other, not to say animated by a spirit of mutual antagonism, would at present be more than usually hazardous.

Today, as in every generation, a certain class of thinkers may be distinguished—they are often called radical—who appear to have no place at all for saving interposition on Christ's part. According to Weinel, for example, Jesus never regarded Himself as fulfilling a mediatorial function, for He knew that no mediator was required.* Writers of this group would deny that anything happened when our Lord died which directly or substantially affected the relation of God and man. Apart from the impression of Jesus' martyrdom, set forth by many of them with great power, they prefer to rest satisfied with a purely historical account of the causes which produced the event of Calvary, and they see no reason of a religious kind for going behind those causes, or inquiring as to the great Divine purpose they may exhibit, or the modifying influence they were meant to have upon the situation of the sinful. This mode of thought, I believe, is traceable at last to a principle, as old as Greek or even Hindu reflection, namely, that history as such, being the sphere of change and contingency, is at best imperfectly real, because all real being is eternal. To use a familiar illustration, history resembles the pictures on a cinemato-

*Jesus in Neunzehnten Jahrhundert, 282, pp.

graph screen; it presents but the moving symbols of wholly unchanging fact; it is not in any sense a realm in which an ultimately authentic contribution is made to the meaning or content of things. If this general principle be applied to our present subject, it means that Jesus' sole function is to point out the love of God, as other prophets have done. We must not regard Him, or more specifically His death, as producing a new relation or action of God towards His guilty children; the Divine forgiveness, it is contended, is a simple corollary of the Divine nature, and could not acquire reality from concrete events within the time-series. But as this position altogether excludes a doctrine or explanation of Atonement, on the ground that no fact of Atonement exists, we may put it on one side. In doing so, however, let us recollect that it represents a vast body of modern opinion to which it would be unjust to deny the name "religious."

The difficult problem is obviously suggested here whether the effect of the death of Christ has been to reveal a permanent relation of God to men, or in some real sense to develop that relation. Does the Cross merely indicate an eternal permanent fact—the infinitely gracious disposition of the Father; or does it give reality to possibilities of Divine action which, apart from it, would have remained no more than possibilities? Is the forgiveness of sins conditioned by historical events? This is a problem to which the progress of theology is drawing much eager and persistent thought.

When we turn to more positive views, it is evident, I think, that older walls of partition between theories of Atonement are giving way, slowly but surely. Gradually there is growing up the sense of a common experience shared by all who stand before the Cross in a spirit of humility. Thus it would be difficult to find a reputable theologian who still maintains that God had to be induced to love mankind, that He had need to be appeased and appeasement was the result of the sacrifice of Christ. It

is virtually common ground that the love of the Father is the fount of all redemption. One consequence of this will probably be that before long men will raise the question whether the term "propitiation," as used in discussions of the Atonement, is not dangerously fruitful in misunderstanding. Theologians ought to employ words, as far as possible, in their common signification; and to propitiate, the dictionaries tell us, is to bring to a favourable mind—which is hardly what the Christian thinker wants to say. All the live interests of faith can be provided for, we shall see, without the use of this morally equivocal term.

Again, in works written twenty-five years ago, the distinction between forensic and moral theories was much insisted on, the forensic ranking as objective, the moral as merely subjective. We hear less of this distinction now. Practically all theologians are agreed that no simply "forensic" interpretation of the Cross can be satisfactory. As it has been put: "To say that the relations of God and man are forensic is to say that they are regulated by statute—that sin is a breach of statute—that the sinner is a criminal—and that God adjudicates on him by interpreting the statute in its application to his case." Matters between God and sinners are not as they are between a magistrate and culprits in the dock. If they were, the initiative action of God in redemption would be unintelligible and inconsistent. Whatever the Atonement consisted in, it was accomplished in moral ways, and, if the presentation of it to men is to enlist the testimony of conscience, it must be stated in terms which derive their predominant meaning from ethical and spiritual life. Further, as regards the contrast of objective and subjective, it has become apparent that what used to be called the moral theory is, so far as it goes, equally objective with the other. What I mean is this: If it be maintained that what we encounter in the Cross is an amazing appeal on God's part, with a view to evoke human trust

and penitence—and this is actually the moral theory at its highest and purest—still this in itself amounts to a genuinely objective interpretation; even if we add, as personally I should, that it deals inadequately with the guilty situation Atonement has to meet. It is objective, not subjective, because the whole stress is laid on the redeeming act of God. Salvation still comes to men from above; it is not won by any sacrificial or penitential effort on their part. In recent years, we may believe, men who share this conviction as to where the crucial emphasis in redemption should be laid—on God, not man—have happily grown more conscious of agreement than of difference. They are united in holding that in Atonement the doer is God, even if they differ as to what was done.

Now a good many writers who are frequently ranked, though somewhat carelessly, in the class of modern radicals, belong in fact to this great central group. It is striking how some people with a reputation for unorthodoxy become intensely positive and apostolic when their eyes turn to the Cross of Jesus. Harnack has long impressed me in this way. One significant passage is worth quoting. "The deepest and most earnest Christians," he writes, "embrace Jesus Christ not only as a Prophet, but as a Reconciler. Nor do they rest satisfied with seeing the Atonement in His life-work. They consider also His passion and His death as vicarious. How can they do otherwise? If they, who are sinners, have escaped justice, while He, the Holy One, has suffered death, why shall they not acknowledge that what they should have suffered has been suffered by Him? Before the Cross no other feeling, no other note, is possible."* Herrmann agrees cordially with this, declaring in his exquisite book *Communion with God* that Jesus took upon Him our burden, so that while He dispensed forgiveness, for example to the woman that was a sinner, "He at the same time did everything possible to establish the inviolable justice of

*The Atonement in Modern Religious Thought, 124.

God's moral order."* He maintains, indeed, that we ought not to make the ecclesiastical dogma of satisfaction the head and front of the Gospel, which the sinner is bound to accept before he can have peace with God through contact with Jesus, but this is a discovery which sooner or later most evangelical preachers make for themselves. The doctrine of Atonement, like all Christian doctrine, is an interpretation of personal Christian experience and is fully intelligible only to those who stand within the Christian faith. But apart from this, the quotations I have made are interesting for another reason. They dispose of the suggestion, often put forward with the air of a platitude, that the notion of vicarious Atonement is obsolete for the typically modern religious mind. Herrmann, whom most people would call a modern man, actually heads the section dealing with our topic thus: "The Value of the Doctrine of the Substitutionary Penal Sufferings of Jesus." That doctrine is for him the Christian's defence against the accusations of a bad conscience. His words, like those of Harnack, prove also that earnest men of different schools still reject as a moral horror the idea that Divine forgiveness of sins is a matter of course. This is a conviction binding them closely to the group next in order.

It is instructive to note how it is becoming usual, in writers of varied theological sympathy, to describe the Atonement as *the cost of forgiveness to God*. Who first used the phrase I cannot say, but the idea has taken root. One reason why this conception has only been analyzed carefully in quite recent works is that throughout the last generation it was more common to insist upon the unlikeness of God's forgiveness and ours, rather than the likeness. Attention is now called to the analogy between them. There must be some deep underlying moral principle which justifies the apostle in writing: "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, *forgiving each other, even*

*Communion with God (2d English edition), 135-6.

as God also in Christ forgave you.” On reflection it has come to be felt that forgiveness, provided there is something great to forgive, is always realized or imparted at the forgiver’s cost. It is a terribly exacting thing to pardon a great wrong, and a man is conscious of the involved wrench and strain and agony just in proportion as through personal goodness he has grown to feel the unspeakable evil of wrong-doing, while on the other hand in virtue of a sensitive sympathy he is able to divine the hurt inflicted on the offender’s soul by the wrong he has committed. The analysis of this conception, in its ethical and spiritual implications, is as yet incomplete. But already we can understand how if pardon is mediated through Jesus’ experience, culminating in death, that death must have in it a great Divine agony, a vast transcendent pain, which forms the vehicle of forgiveness and corresponds to the magnitude and intensity of the sin forgiven. Pardon, we repeat, is always costly, and here the price is paid not to God merely, but by God, who suffers in the suffering of His Son. This line of argument is one of those with which we have recently been familiarized in the books of Professor Denney and Principal Forsyth. Both writers have dwelt on the point that the Cross, conceived as the Divine-human pain through which forgiveness is conveyed, is unconditionally necessary to exhibit the perfect and constitutive holiness of God. Pardon on any other terms would be demoralizing. But what the holiness of God required as a condition of forgiveness was not reparation from man, but the perfect giving of Himself in Jesus and in the perfect submission to holy judgment upon sin represented by Jesus’ death. The cost was God’s. A typical passage may be taken from Dr. Forsyth’s *The Work of Christ*: “What is the real objective conception element in atonement? We are tempted to declare that it was the offering of a sacrifice to God outside of Him and us, the offering of a sacrifice to God by somebody not God, yet more than a single man. That

is the natural, the pagan notion of objective atonement. But the real meaning of an objective atonement is that God Himself made the complete sacrifice. The real objectivity of the atonement is not that it was made to God, but by God.”*

Alongside of this we may place a fine page from Professor Adams Brown’s latest volume, *Modern Theology and the Preaching of the Gospel*. “It is a law of life,” he writes, “that we can have only what we pay for, and the things that are most valuable cost most. That is the meaning of the doctrine of atonement—that great truth which lies at the heart of the Christian religion. It is the expression of the fact that the law of cost is valid for God as well as for man. God, too, can have only what He pays for; and for Him, too, the things which He valued most highly cost most. God could not save without loving, and He could not love without suffering. God is the great sufferer because He is the great lover. Atonement is not something which happens outside of God to make forgiveness possible. Atonement is something which happens in God. It was what it cost God to bear the world’s sin, your sin and mine.”† Possibly some may scout this as so much sentimentalism, and others may ask why the cost of the world’s redemption should be narrowed to the suffering of Jesus. But the idea really goes back to the New Testament; nay, it goes back further still. Centuries before, Isaiah had written the great words: “In all their afflictions He was afflicted; in His love and in His pity He redeemed them.” Moreover, it is evidently one of the religious advantages of this form of statement that it holds the work of Christ the Reconciler in very close dependence on His person as Divine. The Atonement *cannot* by the cost of forgiveness to God save as He was personally present in the Sufferer.

*P. 92.

†P. 169.

Up to this point, it is probable, a wide general agreement would prevail amongst Christian thinkers as regards the main positive doctrine affirmed by these various groups. We might not be altogether satisfied, perhaps, with the phrases employed by this or that writer, or with the distribution of emphasis, but we should not feel bound to reject much; our criticism might rather take the form of proposing additions, of prolonging or deepening but not curtailing or minimizing. There is much sharper divergence of opinion respecting the last type of recent theory I shall adduce—that which defines the Atonement of Christ as consisting, to formulate it briefly, in His *vicarious penitence*. This theory, in its main elements, can be traced to Dr. McLeod Campbell, whose noble treatise on the *Nature of the Atonement* belongs to that small class of books not to have read which is proof of a woefully defective theological education. There, in what undoubtedly forms the most original part of his argument, he describes our Lord as having made in death a perfect response to the Divine wrath against sin; and that response, he adds, “has all the elements of a perfect repentance in humanity for all the sin of man.”* This was in 1856. Forty-five years later the suggestion was further developed by the late Canon Moberly, in his *Atonement and Personality* (1901), where it was expounded with great subtlety as well as deep spiritual feeling. His son re-stated it the other day in the collection of Oxford essays entitled *Foundations*. “Love,” he there writes, “involves sympathy, sympathy with those in trouble involves sacrifice, and sympathy with those in sin involves vicarious penitence. Here,” he goes on, “we reach the very heart of our subject; for this, in our interpretation, goes to the very root of human need.”†

I said that opinion regarding this theory was likely to diverge pretty sharply, and in fact I do not see

**Nature of the Atonement* (6th edition), p. 117.

†*Foundations*, 307.

how we can avoid taking sides according as we do or do not hold that "vicarious penitence" is a self-contradictory idea. As it functions in Canon Moberly's argument it is, whether self-contradictory or not, at all events fruitful in extremely paradoxical consequences. Thus it involves the difficult position that only the Sinless One can be wholly and unreservedly penitent. Not only so, but I have never seen any attempt to connect it with the teaching of the New Testament which could claim the faintest kind of backing from precise exegesis. It is the very heart of the matter, we are told, yet the apostles pass it by in complete silence. Nor does human experience, I think, afford any real confirmation. Mr. W. H. Moberly, in his *Foundations* essay, strives to illustrate it by a finely conceived analogy drawn from David Copperfield: he finds vicarious penitence to be the vital part of Mr. Peggotty's redeeming sympathy for Em'ly. When, however, we put aside the imaginative glamour of the passage, we are compelled to ask whether Mr. Peggotty, in so far as his feeling for the girl's sin was one of penitence, would himself have claimed to be altogether without blame. One feels sure he would not; penitence in his case must then have in part been penitence for personal shortcoming, for deficiencies of influence or example. In addition, it is impossible not to feel that the main argument rests fundamentally upon an unreal and unfortunate use of the word "penitence," a use which no psychology or logic will justify. This is virtually conceded by McLeod Campbell, who, in continuation of the passage cited above, declares that the response of Christ in death has "all the elements of such a repentance, and that in absolute perfection, all—excepting the personal consciousness of sin." That "excepting" will always count heavily with the spiritual common-sense of the Church.

None the less, this group of writers have made a permanently valuable contribution. They help us, as probably no other group does, to understand how making

Atonement was no official transaction by a Divine functionary, but an ineffably deep experience of Jesus' soul. Also they have shown how poignant is the sense to be ascribed to His self-identification with the sinful, how really and with ever-growing intensity, by His own act, He was numbered with the transgressors, and took their burdens as His own.

If we attempt, before concluding this brief survey, to state some main positions in which all serious writers are united, and to state them at their highest power, the result, I think, is something of this kind. All who look with penitential faith to the Cross of Jesus confess that they receive a two-fold impression. They feel that in Calvary there has been given a final condemnation of human sin. Sin is judged there without hope of appeal; an irreversible sentence on human guilt has been pronounced by the Holy God with whom evil cannot dwell, and all who in faith unite themselves to Christ and submit in Him to the Divine sentence on sin are reconciled to God. Thenceforward no one who understands what the Cross means can take sin lightly, or believe that it is lightly taken by the Eternal. This in the first place. And secondly, they receive at Calvary an impression of the Divine love which is absolute at once in quality and in range. For in Christ it is God who stands beside us, it is He who takes the load of our transgression, in its immeasurable gravity for His mind and ours, upon Himself.

Two principles of considerable importance for our views of method appear to emerge from recent discussions. One is that debate on the Atonement, if it is to lead anywhere, must be conducted within the bounds of Christian experience. That is the only field, the only atmosphere, in which it can be beneficial. No one but the man who has believed in Jesus will have in his mind the presuppositions essential for appreciation of the Saviour's work. But he will have them. There will be a true sense of sin; there will be an ever-deepening con-

sciousness of debt to Christ and an experience of His actual power to mediate between God and sinners. Anselm began his great work by professing to put historic facts on one side, and to prove by convincing logic, altogether irrespectively of Christ, that salvation is impossible except through the God-man; and he ends by claiming to have satisfied by argument not Jews merely but even Pagans. It cannot be said too strongly that this is hopeless. Nothing in the Atonement can be discerned or spiritually appraised from the standpoint of the mere onlooker. As with the beauty of the glowing cathedral window, we behold its meaning only from within.

Once more, there is a maturing instinct in the Christian mind, freely expressed in present-day theology, which bids us look askance at explanations of Jesus' death that are only too complete. In such matters the facility, exhaustiveness, and rationality of a solution is a sure sign of its narrowness and shallowness. What is this instinct based on? Surely it reposes on the conviction that in the Atonement there is something infinite, something as great and deep and high as God. Whatever the Son of God "anticipated in Gethsemane and underwent on Calvary," it was an event, an experience, which evokes wonder and a sense of mystery. We feel its reality, we give thanks for it day by day; but we cannot measure it in logic or reduce it without remainder to ordinary or manageable terms. Is it not clear that the inconceivable evil of sin both demands and promises—to those who believe in God—an infinite and amazing act of deliverance? Sin is a thing of such guilt and weakness that in logic there is no remedy. Purely rational thought can do more in this region than assure us that God is omnipotent, that He is inescapable, and that He must inevitably crush all who move in antagonism to His will. And when despite all this we know ourselves reconciled to God in Jesus' death, so that the towering omnipotence which menaced us is become a shield and hiding place, it

follows that the work of Christ through which this revolutionizing change has been effected is something transcendent and supernatural—that in magnitude and scope it outgoes all we could ask or think. For that has happened which the sinner's conscience, not to speak of his logic, had affirmed to be impossible. The Father has interposed in Jesus on our behalf, abolishing the power of sin to exclude us from His fellowship. Thus the more deeply we reflect upon the miracle of forgiveness—its wonder, its grace, its moral inspiration—the more ineradicable is our conviction that the Cross of Jesus, in which forgiveness became real, is itself charged with that illimitable transcendence which we specifically name Divine.