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The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement.

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II.

SUCH would appear to be the Scriptural Doctrine of the Atonement. But we are now told that a transactional, and even an expiatory, view of the Atonement should be abandoned. Such a conception as is involved by those views is, it is said, revolting to the reason ; is a crude idea, worthy, no doubt, of the days of the early Fathers, but one which in the nineteenth and twentieth Christian centuries will not bear examination, and prevents many good men and women from becoming Christians. The supposition of "an angry or averted God" is intolerable. Anything like a change in the attitude of the Divine Being is resented as unworthy of Him, and implying that God the Father has a different mind from God the Son.¹ "Christ," says Archdeacon Wilson in his "Hulsean Lectures," "has plainly superseded high priest, mediator, sacrifice, veil and altar," although Christ's own words are : "I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfil." Propitiation is weakened down by the same author to meaning "no more than the assurance of God's love towards us and His union with us" (p. 64). The sacrifice of Christ's death is, in his view, merely an example of self-sacrifice, "a suffering for others, which from its sublimity is as a magnet to draw all men upward and call out their own nobleness . . . but in it there is *no thought of substitution or expiation which have so closely attached themselves to the word sacrifice*" (pp. 64, 65).² What the Archdeacon styles the "ransom theory" of the Atonement he condemns under the astonishing phrase of "Christian mythology" (p. 67). Finally, evolution should teach us that, as there has been alteration in men's ideas of the creation of the world, the antiquity of man, the nature of the punishment of the lost, and the inspiration of the Bible, so, it is argued—not alone by Archdeacon Wilson, but also by the late

¹ See Archdeacon Wilson's "Hulsean Lectures for 1888-89," p. 82.

² The italics are the present writer's.

Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology at Oxford, Dr. Moberly, in his "Atonement and Personality," we must expect there will be alteration in our ideas of such a fundamental gospel truth as the nature of the Atonement; that, whereas it has been considered hitherto to consist in the death of Christ upon the cross—that death being, of course, in close connection with the Agony in Gethsemane and the whole great Life of obedience and sacrifice—the Atonement should now be considered as the indwelling of God in man, first and most perfectly in Christ, but subsequently, to some extent, in every Christian.

Let us examine these statements in order :

1. *The expiatory view of the Atonement is untenable, being a crude conception, evoking not faith, but repulsion and unbelief.* But this view, it must be remembered, has not been taught merely by ordinary theologians, of whatever school or age, but by inspired Apostles. While, as to its repelling rather than attractive power, is it not the case that every Christian doctrine possesses this double or alternative power, and is a "savour from death unto death" or "a savour from life unto life"? (2 Cor. ii. 16). The Cross always has produced and always will evoke resentment as well as devotion. If intelligence and conscience are to be respected, is not God's word also to be considered? If some persons of culture and refinement are deterred by what appears to be the Biblical doctrine of the Atonement from accepting the Christian creed, St. Paul's experience also was that "not many wise after the flesh are called" (1 Cor. i. 26).

2. *Change in the Divine Being is not to be thought of.* But why not, if that change has been always foreseen and fore-ordained? Or, rather, by what right is change spoken of at all in this connection? The Apostle Peter declares our Lord to have been "foreknown" as a sacrifice "before the foundation of the world" (1 Pet. i. 20), and St. John, using still more striking language, speaks of Christ as "the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. xiii. 8). Nor has the Divine Son any different mind from the Father, for if the latter "spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up

for us all" (Rom. viii. 32), the Son also "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant . . . humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death" (Phil. ii. 7, 8). But even as to a so-called change in God being brought about by Christ's expiatory sacrifice, why should this be unthinkable? If there has not been a change in the relations between God and man since Calvary, how is it that the light which rose in the East has travelled steadily westward everywhere, producing change and blessing, though the unchanged East itself still remains to be enlightened? It is not inevitably a "shock," as Archdeacon Wilson declares (p. 74), to have it suggested that a reconciliation with God is necessary, as attributing to Him something less than perfect fatherly love. His absolute justice and perfect holiness demand what His marvellous love and mercy were able to supply. Even an earthly father—and the more the better father he is—may require reparation before reconciliation with a son. The Archdeacon makes much of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, having in it no hint of any traditional view of the Atonement. That parable illustrates, indeed, the conversion of a sinner from both the Divine and human sides, but was possible only because of the offering which He who spoke it was about to make. He it was who was to procure the "new robe" with which the Father would cover the rags of all prodigals returned.

3. *Propitiation means "no more than the assurance of God's love towards us and of His union with us."* But if this were truly the case, surely that assurance could have been given us without the death of Christ.

4. *The sacrifice of Christ's death was merely an example of self-sacrifice, exercising, on account of its sublimity, a magnetic attraction for men, but having in it "no thought of substitution or expiation."* The foregoing part of this paper, it is to be hoped, meets this view. If anything in Scripture seems to be plain to a mind unbiassed, it is surely the need for the great Expiatory Offering of Calvary—"apart from shedding of blood there is no remission."

5. As to the "*ransom theory*" of the Atonement and

"*Christian mythology*," one ventures to question by what authority the word "theory" is joined to ransom at all in this connection. The Bible, whether New Testament or Old Testament, does not theorize. It states *facts* and inculcates *doctrines*, whether explicitly or implicitly, but it does not *theorize*. Our Lord's own words state no theory, but a profound, though no doubt mysterious, truth, when He says, "The Son of man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. xx. 28). The expression "Christian mythology" can have no real meaning unless the story of the Cross is to be regarded not as an historical fact, but as a fabulous myth. The language of the Book of Common Prayer and of the Articles of the Church is unmistakably in accordance with the substitutionary or expiatory doctrine of the Atonement. Especially is this evident in the Holy Communion Service and in Articles XI., XII., XV., and XXXI.

6. Lastly, we have the contention that *the Atonement is but the Incarnation, or an extension of the Incarnation in the persons of all Christians*. Here, chiefly, I come in contact with Dr. Moberly. There is undoubtedly much in his book, "Atonement and Personality," which one can readily accept as beautiful and true. But there is, I think, at the same time much that is nebulous, conjectural, and undefined. The Professor starts with the assertion that punishment is always (except in hell) to some extent disciplinary, and that the more the discipline is accepted and welcomed, the more the retributive aspect and sense of punishment disappears (see chapter i.). This, no doubt, is true, but it suggests the caution and query, May not the idea of the welcoming of punishment for the sake of its purificatory power develop the thought of *merit* in self-inflicted pain? Forgiveness the Professor defines as an attitude of love to be consummated in the perfect holiness of the recipient (see chapter iii.). This, no doubt, is again true; but is it not both more comforting to the sinner, and more in accordance with the teaching of Scripture, to say that forgiveness is a present possession by faith? Neither the Jew before

Calvary, nor the Christian since, has been taught by the Word of God to believe that he must wait to receive forgiveness until he achieves a state of sinless perfection. Again, Dr. Moberly says the Atonement made by Christ was that of a "perfect penitence." This could be experienced only by One who was personally sinless, and who had perfect consciousness of the true nature and measure of sin, and whose love was quite literally infinite. This penitence was consummated at the cost of a voluntary dissolution (see chapter vi.). Who can doubt that this was so? What sense of the sinfulness of sin must not He have had who, though He "knew no sin," was "made sin"? And who shall plumb the depths of either the great Agony or the awful cry of desolation on the Cross? Yet the emphasis of the satisfaction is laid by Scripture *not* upon the *penitence*, but upon the *death*. The sacrifice of Christ's death, says the Professor, is potentially and objectively the "sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world," but to be an effectual personal atonement it must be objectively realized by faith, contemplation, love; and this can only take place by the action of the Holy Spirit on the subjective personality (see chapter vii.). From this, though it might be differently expressed, most Christians probably would not dissent. But when Dr. Moberly reaches his conclusion, we find it is this—that "the Atonement is Christ in us: ourselves realized in Christ," "a real achievement of perfect sinlessness in the perfectly sinful, a real transformation of the conditions and possibilities of humanity" (p. 275). Whatever this is, it is not, I venture to assert, the teaching of Holy Scripture.

There appears to be in the above view a confusion between the Incarnation and the Atonement, between the Atonement and the subsequent effects of believing on that Atonement, between justification and sanctification, between Christ's work for us and the Holy Spirit's work in us, between our gradual growth in holiness here and our complete attainment of sinless perfection hereafter. The Atonement is not, in the view of Holy Scripture, the Incarnation; far less is the Atonement an

extension of the Incarnation—the indwelling of Christ in all professing Christians. The *order of importance* in Scripture is not (1) the Incarnation and (2) the Atonement, but (1) the Atonement and (2) the Incarnation. The Son of God took the nature of man with the ultimate design and express object of dying for man. The teaching of Scripture is that the love of God was the primary cause of the Atonement which Christ offered, and that upon faith in that Atonement or death of Christ forgiveness of sins and a title to everlasting life is accorded. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,” etc. (John iii. 16); “being now justified by His blood” (Rom. v. 9); “being therefore justified by faith” (Rom. v. 1)—these are the words of Inspiration.

The mention of the word “justify” will arrest attention. With regard to its true meaning being to “*account* righteous,” it may be pointed out that in the whole range of classical literature there is no known instance in which the word means to “*make* righteous.” In the LXX. it is used forty-five times (Old Testament and Apocrypha), and always, or very nearly always, in the forensic sense. The nearest approach to an exception is in Ps. lxxiii. 13, where the word seems to mean “pronounced righteous,” “I called my conscience clear.” Again, as touching this question of an imputed righteousness, it is important to notice a distinction between the rendering of the Authorized Version and the Revised Version in Rom. i. 17. The latter translates, “For therein” (*i.e.*, in the Gospel) “is revealed not ‘the,’ but ‘a’ righteousness of God by faith unto faith.” Now “*a* righteousness of God is not *the* righteousness which God Himself possesses; *a* righteousness of God is not *the* righteousness of Christ: this would be to mistake the cause for the result; *a* righteousness of God is not the right relationship into which God puts the believer with respect to the law and God Himself: this is to put the consequence for the cause; *a* righteousness of God is not the *method* by which God pardons and accounts righteous and entitled to glory, for this is to substitute an idea for the reality, a theory for an act; but ‘*a* righteousness of God’ is a righteousness founded on the entire work of Christ in

the flesh, which He bestows on the believer. Man possessed of this gift of righteousness is pronounced righteous, and is in a state and standing in which he has acquittal of sin and acceptance with God."¹ Dr. Moberly asks (footnote, pp. 335-336): "Is it possible that when anyone is pronounced, or regarded, or treated as righteous *by the very truth* of God, his being so pronounced can be in its full and proper meaning dissevered from his so being?" In answer to this it may be said that no doubt, when God declares or accounts anyone righteous He *does so with the design of gradually making* that person righteous, until, when the process is at last complete, he is "set before the presence of His glory without blemish in exceeding joy" (Jude 24). Truth of fact and ideal truth are not opposed to one another. The raw recruit is called a soldier as soon as he is enlisted, because the intention is that he shall be properly trained until he is what his name implies. But this is not to say that he must realize that he is a thoroughly trained soldier before he can so style himself or believe that he is one. Here seems to me to lie the fallacy of Dr. Moberly's view of Atonement. There is in that view, as no clear definition, so no finality, and so no certain ground of comfort. If I cannot believe that a definite and sufficient sacrifice has been offered in substitution for myself, and *needs no addition on my part*, when shall I be certain that I have added sufficient, or sufficiently realized the presence of Christ in myself? Nay, how be sure that I am not self-deceived? How shall I feel secure, or, indeed, at all sensible of any peace? I fear if I were to go to a dying man with a page of Dr. Moberly in my hand, it would be but cold comfort; but if I go with the announcement that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. v. 8), "the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. iii. 1-8), there is a solidity, a definiteness, a finality which has power to soothe the soul of one who must die, or to furnish a stimulus to quicken to holy living one who may live. The doctrine of the

¹ See article on "Righteousness of God," p. 614, in "A Protestant Dictionary." The italics are the present writer's.

Atonement is one of those doctrines which the ordinary mind must be able to grasp. The doctrine as stated—or in so far as it is stated—by the late Regius Professor of Pastoral Theology at Oxford, and can be mentally grasped by anyone, is one which it needs a trained mind to follow and a subtle intellect to apprehend at all. It is a doctrine highly esoteric. Not such a gospel as this is it which is “in all the world bearing fruit and increasing” (Col. i. 6).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries after Christ have been anxious to apply hard-and-fast logic, metaphysical and philosophical speculations, and science to the plain statements of the “word of the truth of the Gospel” (Col. i. 5), and to the “simplicity which is toward Christ” (2 Cor. xi. 3), by and in which our forefathers believed and passed to their rest. We may well doubt if the world will be the better or the happier for these ambitious strivings. The early Church Fathers, and the doctrinal writers who followed them, are scorned to-day for what is termed “their crude theory of the Atonement.” But, at any rate, by keeping close to Scripture they preserved intact the central truth of the Christian faith, and did not fritter that truth away. Even to-day, in the full light of modern theories of the Atonement, one cannot but believe that so early a writing as the Epistle to Diognetus comprised the truth on this subject, rather than present-day subtleties and mysticisms—though Dr. Moberly’s rendering and what he sees in the passage form a fine example of what one may read into an author if one is determined to find it there. “God gave up His own Son,” says the writer of that letter, “a ransom for us, the holy for the unholy, the innocent for the wicked, the righteous for the unrighteous, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins but his righteousness? In whom was it possible for us, the unholy and ungodly, to be justified, but in the Son of God alone? Oh, unlooked-for blessings! that the transgression of many should be hidden in a righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors” (“Ep. ad Diog.,” ix.).