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THE PHILOSOPHY OF ATONEMENT

MODERNISM is developing apace. Slowly but surely it seeks to undermine and displace the historic faith. Thus, on the central subject of that faith, the Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ, two volumes have been quite recently published. They are something like epoch-making as they appear to definitely abandon the position hitherto, though not always, more or less reluctantly conceded by Modernism, that, in the New Testament as well as in the Old, it is clearly implied that the Atonement was necessitated by the fact that sin must be divinely punished and that by satisfaction made upon the Cross to Divine justice. Both these books now set themselves to prove that even this is not the case. It is proposed to briefly examine their arguments, and, afterwards, to discuss the pre-requisites which are essential for a right judgment on this vital subject by any critic who would escape the fatal misapprehension of being absorbed by one or two aspects of this great subject to the losing sight of features in the same that are vitally essential to the entirety of what was enacted on the Cross.

The first of these works is entitled *The Fulness of Sacrifice*. Its author is F. C. N. Hicks, D.D.¹

This volume deals more particularly with the place of sacrifice in religion, and contends that modern religion, while admitting that the universality of the historic interpretation points to an abiding reality and truth, yet rightly holds that this reality and truth "are overlaid by being associated with notions not inherent in them and mistaken in themselves." Instances enumerated are the notion of the substitution of the innocent for the guilty, the value and necessity of "destruction." A careful study of the sacrifices in the Old Testament is then made. This is said to disclose six elements of development, and the conclusion is arrived at that it is an error to identify the sacrificial act and the priest's office with the slaughter of the victim as is done in the historic faith. The priest's work, it is said, does not begin until after the death of the victim, and it consists in presenting the victim's blood, that is its life, before God upon the Altar. The purpose of the proceedings in sacrifices, therefore, is not slaughter

¹ Macmillan, London.

but presentation. In the light of these principles the sacrifice and priesthood of our Lord and their effect upon men gain an entirely new light—so it is asserted. The conclusion is reached that the death upon the Cross was necessary, but it was not the sacrifice, and Christ was not, at the time of its being made, the priest. His priesthood was exercised after His death and resurrection in heaven, and the sacrifice was the presentation of His blood then in heaven. His life was within the veil. And so a ritualistic point is gained, it is thought, to the effect that this sacrifice and priesthood are mediated through the Eucharist on earth which opens the door in heaven. Thus, also, the doctrine of the Real Presence, is reached. The Eucharist falls within the sphere of Christ's eternal heavenly offering, and is united with it. The sacrifice of the Eucharist, therefore, is the sacrifice of Christ in heaven, and the Body and Blood are present and must be present in one as in the other. The appropriation of the sacrifice by Christians in the Eucharist must be consequently thought of in the general setting of the Atonement.

This treatment of the subject is so one-sided and raises so many problems and is so contrary to widely accepted ideas that it will scarcely find much acceptance on the part of either Catholics or Protestants. The scheme thus suggested, or formulated is, so contrary to the spiritual instincts, the needs and desires, of the average believer, is so entirely out of accord with the general scheme of redemption given us in Scripture and in Church-teaching, as to make the book, while it may be said to introduce features challenging and, in the end, provoking thought, little more than an indication of lines of fruitful study.

The next book is entitled *The Problem of the Cross: a Study of New Testament Teaching*, by William E. Wilson, B.D., of the Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham.¹

The contention of the author of this book is that theories of the Atonement have obscured the meaning of the death of Christ, making the Cross a problem when it should be a revelation. The author shows, or believes that he shows, that there are no theories of Divine appeasement or penal substitution in the New Testament. The Cross, seen in its historical setting, is nothing more than the battleground of God's love and man's selfishness. It is so to speak the concluding item in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. The author also goes on to argue that Paul and other

¹ Clarke, London.

New Testament writers, when their words are freed from traditional misunderstanding, suggest an interpretation of the Atonement to the same effect, and one that really ought to make the widest appeal to modern minds. He sets himself to carry out two ideas, viz., to give a positive interpretation of the death of Christ congruent with His teaching, and founded upon the fact of the Gospel-story, and next, to demonstrate that the penal and satisfaction theories of the Atonement are contradictory to His teaching about God, and are not entertained by any New Testament writer. It presently appears that the main principle underlying Mr. Wilson's explanation of the Atonement is the Quaker doctrine of non-resistance! Thus: "Faithfulness to His message demanded that He should face His opponents. Universal love, which was the essence of His message, demanded that He should do this unarmed and unresisting; willing to suffer whatever they might do, so that men might see God. His death was therefore His own obedience to the advice He had given: 'Resist not him that is evil.' It was in this way that His death reinforced His message. Jesus lived and taught to bring to men the conviction that God is love. He died because love when faced with implacable enmity can conquer only by non-resistance." And the writer goes on to say: "He did conquer. As the centuries go by, He stands out ever more prominently supreme. No man has seen God, but the man Jesus hangs on the Cross despised and rejected of men, yet verily God manifested in the flesh, the Conqueror of the ages, King of kings and Lord of lords" (p. 40). And so, with the author, we emerge from the non-resistance theory of Quakerism to the familiar plea of Modernism that the love of God ignores sin for the benefit and happiness of the sinner who commits it. "God's answer to man's sin is love," says the author. "There can be no other answer from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Not the most superficial observer of nature and human life, no careful reader of the Bible, no one who in any true sense discerns the real nature of sin in itself and what it brings into the life of men can for one moment accept as the whole truth a statement which has only the most limited application. It is not the whole truth. It is something else than the truth.

This book opens with what is headed a "Preface and Dedication," and in this piece it so happens that there is an unexpected self-revelation which demonstrates not only the

origin of the work, but of the whole chain of inconclusive reasoning. The author says that after finding, for many years, the orthodox concept of the Atonement a stumbling block to himself, he was carried away by a sudden discovery in the history of that doctrine, viz., that after the close of the New Testament age, there is no clear indication of the penal view in the writings of any of the Fathers; that that view, in the form we have it, dates partly from the Middle Ages and partly from the Reformation; that these facts at once raised in his mind the question whether perhaps the belief that such a view was taught of Scripture was itself ill-founded, and that continued study led to increasing doubt whether Apostolic dicta, generally held to indicate the penal theory, had that significance at all. Out of his investigations of that point grew this book of nearly four hundred pages, with its conclusions. Some of these conclusions he words thus: "God does not punish, but sin itself destroys," "God saves, and His object is to show that sin itself destroys, and that inflicted punishment is no part of the Divine economy." He goes on to declare that when in addition to his investigation of the bearing of the New Testament on this question, he was engaged in the preparation of a book on "Christ and War," he saw, "by a sudden flash of inspiration," the whole work of Christ "illuminated" by that saying of our Lord: "Love your enemies, resist not him that is evil," and thence concluded that God does not demand punishment—"He loves His enemies, and in the person of His Son, refuses to employ methods of resistance to evil."

It is a striking coincidence that the ancient counterpart of Modernism, the great Arian heresy, originated in a precisely similar sudden "inspiration" arising from the perception of a truth from a certain angle only, salient and relative facts being ignored and essential truths lost sight of. "Gentlemen," said a lecturer in Alexandria, in Egypt, to his student hearers, under a sudden flash of inspiration, as he thought, "A father must exist before his son, or else he could not have had him as son, and therefore time was when God, the Son was not." Thus the formula $\eta\nu\ \pi\omicron\tau\epsilon\ \delta\tau\epsilon\ \omicron\upsilon\kappa\ \eta\nu$ (= There was a time when He was not), flooded the world, and thus, through a subject being looked at, suddenly and wholly in a minor aspect, there came to pass a widespread heresy, and the defection of a vast mass of Christendom!

Singularly, and yet naturally, it is in the same way precisely, as the author makes clear, that the subject of the Atonement came to be treated in this book. To mention, in a brief article like this, one item alone, the assertion that after the close of the New Testament age there is no clear indication of the penal view in the writings of any of the Fathers does not prove that it did not exist. Vast numbers of the writings between the Apostolic Age and the *Gur deus homo* of Anselm, have perished. The writings, still existing and referred to, as will be seen by a careful perusal, do not necessarily exclude the penal view, but leave it possible that, although not formulated, it may have been at the back of the minds of the writers. What really happened was that only subjects which did not evolve or raise that particular point were discussed in the books *that have survived*. We know that great heresies and many urgent subjects demanded attention during the period referred to. During this period also, as at all times, there was the active propaganda of the faith by the Church, and, in that propaganda, the subject of the Atonement, in the Apostolic sense, was probably prominent. In this period also originated the Creeds which, while they do not go into details on the subject of this doctrine, yet by the use of the words "salvation" and "save," in close connection with the Atonement, do so clearly point in the apostolic direction that they render the impression of the author of this book, as to this particular period, quite inconclusive. The Reformation, it may be added, was a revival of old truths, possibly a reformulation of those truths, but a reformulation made with the deliberate intention, as also announced, of avoiding the introduction of anything, which in essence had not gone before.

We have here therefore two *ex parte* works which make clear the position of each particular party on the subject of the Atonement, but the vital and all important considerations in connection with the Atonement are, probably unintentionally, mostly lost sight of in a prevailing atmosphere of modernism. In what sense this is the case may be best indicated perhaps by some further discussion as to some of the aspects under which modernism appears opposed to New Testament teaching, and to right reason.

One of the primary and most common objections of modernism to the historic exposition of the Atonement is that the idea of the substitution of the innocent for the guilty occurs in the Bible only. The omission, in the title of this paper, of the

article before the word, Atonement, is intended to mark the fact that, on the contrary, the idea of the substitution of the innocent for the guilty occurs in the entire range of human experience, history, and law! It has been truly said that the "God of Nature is not so different after all from the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ." "In nature we see all life feeding upon other life, all creatures giving their lives that others might live." The War was an outstanding instance of this. But, says Modernism, even if this is so there are elements in the strict satisfaction theory of the Atonement, as for example, the satisfaction of justice, and the substitution of the innocent for the guilty, which are unnecessary and unjustifiable. Some two or three years ago, however, both elements were demonstrated in the Wandsworth Police Court, where a Magistrate felt himself obliged by law and justice to condemn a woman to pay a fine of 5s., but realised that he himself could pay that fine, and, by paying it satisfied law and justice, so that the woman went free.

It has further been argued that as human forgiveness does not need an atonement so God's Pardon should also be regarded as independent of any such sacrifice as the Atonement. To this it has been well retorted that when a man cancels a debt he of necessity loses the amount, and if he pardons an insult or a blow he accepts in his own person the injury done, so that even human pardon, if it cancels any wrong, does so at its own expense, and this is the principle of the innocent suffering for the guilty which is a fundamental conception of the Atonement in Scripture. Human forgiveness, therefore, so far from obviating the necessity of the Divine Atonement really indicates and illumines that necessity. It is mercy which has first satisfied the principle of justice. Christ's death made it possible for God to forgive sin, for what His justice demanded His love provided in that death.

On this subject language is often used like this: "My religion is the religion of the Prodigal Son, I do not believe in a God requiring blood to be shed by way of amendment. The Prodigal Son came to himself in the foreign land to which in his sinful career he had gone, far from his father's home. He turns his back on sin and makes his confession on his return home. There is no mediator, there is no sacrifice provided on the requirement of the father, who, in the parable, surely represents God! The son is received back, embraced on his confession, clothed in the best robe, and feasted." "If this parable means

anything," objects the opponent of the Satisfaction theory, "it is that a man is saved without an Atonement or mediator, and that God receives him back on his confession merely."

Such a contention loses sight of the fact that there are three parables placed here together. They are called this parable, the three of them, in the early part of the chapter, and, therefore, as they stand here, they must be read together, though our Lord may possibly have spoken them at different times. The first parable is the Parable of the Loving Shepherd, the second parable is that of the Lost Piece of Money, and the last parable that of the Prodigal Son. Together they form a picture of the work of the Trinity in the matter of redemption. The first parable is the work of the Loving Shepherd, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, that is Calvary; the second parable is of the work of the Holy Ghost, that is Pentecost; and the third parable is of the reception by God, the Father, of the penitent and converted man. The order in which they follow each other is that of time and experience, and it is because of that which has been done on Calvary where atonement has been made that the Holy Ghost comes at Pentecost and ministers the great truths of the possibility of forgiveness to the sinner, and the third and last picture is what takes place in a man's heart, and the experience a man passes through that he may realise the benefits enacted for him on Calvary, and which are made real to him in his own heart by the blessed Spirit who came after Calvary. The experiences, thoughts and deeds in the parable of the Prodigal Son are those of the converted man, converted through the two foregoing agencies. The introduction of the Atonement into the parable of the Prodigal Son would, therefore, have been a *contre-temps*!

Again, much modern language implies that God's love is so great that it renders the Atonement unnecessary. Against this it has been argued, much to the point, that "if we spoke less about God's love, and more about His holiness, and more about His judgment, we should say and imply much more when we come to speak of His love." "It is round the sanctuary of the Atonement that the camp is set, and the great battle really waged." Questions about immanence may concern philosophers, questions about miracles may agitate physicists, but, for the soul, the first dividing issue is not the Bethlehem cradle, nor the empty grave, nor the Bible, nor any social issue; it is the answer to the question, "Why did Jesus die?"

The self-evident fact in Scripture is that Jesus, and all His interpreters, represent the Atonement as somehow accomplished through His death. The more precise question which, however, remains is as to how the death of Christ saves us? In other words, what do these various statements imply as necessary to be believed concerning that death if a man is to be saved? Needless to say, that on this definite point theories are many.

Now, before describing and discussing these theories, it is necessary to state that certain prevenient conditions and postulates are requisite within the soul of man before it can be possible for him to form a sound judgment on this subject and as to the statements made in Scripture. This surely is plainly implied in the memorable passage: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." It is because in the persons forming theories there is a lack of the necessary spiritual experience and insight that so many defective statements on the subject of the Atonement are arrived at! It is because of misconceptions going before, that the Modernist can bring himself to speak of the "blood-curdling theory of substitution." Thus Anselm says in the *Cur deus homo*, "Right order requires that we should believe the deep things of the Christian faith before we presume to discuss them by means of our reason." Just so a quite modern writer says: "Christian truth must commend itself to the Christian consciousness by its power rationally to justify the facts by which that Christian consciousness knows and owes its existence. The question therefore whether the forms of the Apostolic explanation of the relation of the death of Christ to the forgiveness of sins are final and binding upon faith will depend upon their adequacy permanently to interpret the experience that Christian men will always owe to their knowledge of those facts in which the Christian experience first originated."

The postulates, without which (however great learning of a theological kind there may be) the necessary qualification for arriving at a correct judgment on the theory of the Atonement does not exist, and upon which views of that theory will inevitably depend, are, amongst others: (1) the idea of the Nature of God, and more particularly His sovereignty; (2) the essence of sin and the total depravity of man; (3) the Incarnation and the Deity and the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ;

(4) Particular redemption, and (5) generally, the essential nature of salvation, sanctification, and final perseverance.

(1) As to God's nature, Modernism is emphatic in beginning with the Fatherhood of God, and from this draws certain ultimately unwarranted conclusions. Now, God is not Father only, and in the first instance, but Judge, and Sovereign of all men and things. As to this, His Nature, even Israelitish religion of old put the question, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" and as to His sovereignty, it is plainly stated in the words: "He worketh all things after the counsel of His own will." Very significantly in this connection our Lord begins His ministry with the words: "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God"; and, in Revelation xiii. 8, the Saviour is called, "The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world." All this suggests, and even implies, that the Atonement is no mere incident or accident, in the world's history, and that it is never correctly understood unless it is first approached from the Godward side. It is a bold but true statement that "The Atonement was offered by God to God." Yet Modernism argues far-reaching conclusions entirely within the human sphere. It says in effect, "No man with any love in his heart would send another man to hell, and, therefore, because of His love for men, God will, yea, even is bound to, save all men. To administer punishment of sin either on the individual or a substitute is foreign to His nature."

Such reasoning further vitiates the whole character of God, and what are self-evidently His dealings with men on earth. Does the so-called love of God ever pass over the consequences of sin here on earth? Does God treat all men after the example of merely human love? Does He give to all the same health, the same opportunity, and the same success? On this supposition, is it loving for Him to make the differences He does between men? Is it right of Him to put one from his birth into a lifetime of agonising disease and pain, while on another He bestows a plenitude of health and pleasure? Surely the Old Testament saint, Job, was wiser than Modernists when he says in the midst of his agonising experience: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." As a matter of fact, God cannot be judged within the limits of time and sense as men are judged and must be; but even in the sphere of time and sense a special principle can at time be seen at work. It has been well put thus: "If a man knew there were one hundred

beggars all equally needy on a certain road, would he be unjust to give one of them a shilling unless he gave a shilling each to all ! If he has a vacancy in his office for a clerk, and if one hundred persons all equally suitable applied for the position, would he be morally bound to employ all or none ? If he wanted a wife, and knew of a hundred single ladies, all equally suitable, would he consider it unjust to marry one unless he married all ? Has not God a right to do as He will with His own ? Is God bound to fit any [sinful] man for heaven ? ” “ The potter has a right over the clay, from the same lump to make one part a vessel unto honour, and another part unto dishonour.”

(2) The total depravity of man is another doctrine which is a necessary postulate to the proper understanding of the Atonement. By this, and what has gone before, of course, is not meant that a man cannot apprehend or receive the benefits of the Atonement unless he has grasped intellectually all that is necessary to its complete understanding ; but the question is, has the man arrived at that state of heart in which these conceptions are implied ? If so, there is the same difference between him and the man who has not come under the influence of that Atonement by actual spiritual enlightenment that there was between the publican, who smote upon the breast, saying, “ God be merciful to me a sinner,” and the Pharisee, who said, “ I thank Thee, O God, that I am not as other men are.” Modernists ridicule the story of the Fall in the earlier chapters of Genesis. Thus, they say, “ Modernists refuse to believe that by one man sin entered the world.” The idea is ridiculed that for eating an apple merely Adam should have been expelled from the presence of God. But this is precisely a point of strength and surpassing fitness in the spiritual significance of that record, because the offence was the deliberate setting aside of the known will of God, and this is emphasised as the essence of the offence, by the very smallness in itself of the matter involved. That sin, however insignificant in itself, does invariably and always exclude from God, *is* implied in a true reading of Scripture concerning the Atonement. Sin is like the drop of poison that falls into a glass of pure water : thereafter death is in that water. It can no longer be taken without death following. Another aspect of the same truth is seen in the words of the Old Testament, “ All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags.” Sin is a momentous fact and God cannot ignore it. The Fatherhood of God is always moral

and righteous. If God's forgiveness can be declared and bestowed apart from the Atonement, we cannot explain Christ's death at all, but we shall not entertain such an idea if we first grapple with the immense terror of eternal ruin !

(3) And this leads to yet another prominent feature connected with the understanding of the Atonement, namely, the Incarnation of the Son of God, His miraculous conception and His birth of the Virgin, in which He was both God and Man in the full sense of each word. This great truth is inexplicably bound up with the value of His Person and work, for if there be such a thing as human sin, we are compelled to fall back upon a miraculous Christ as Mediator. In answering the question, whether the idea of substitution applies to the atoning sacrifice of Christ, it is obvious that much depends upon the power of the Substitute and the adequacy of His work. No mere man could have accomplished anything in this matter. Hooker's phrase has to be borne in mind, "The infinite worth of the Son of God." It may be repeated here that though He was God, He was also Man, and so He suffered truly, any idea of our Lord's suffering being only apparent being absolutely excluded.

(4) Here also questions of particular redemption, etc., come in. In this connection Modernism says that it is no longer possible to read the Bible and suppose that "God relates Himself sympathetically with only part of the race." But sinful man stands in need not of inducement and assistance in saving himself, but of actual saving ; and Jesus Christ came not merely to advise and urge, to induce and aid men to save themselves, but *to save men*. The sympathetic tendency is popular today, and to press salvation in the real sense is to be accused of a reactionary bias in theology, but a God who is merely or mainly sympathetic is not the Christian God. "The Father of an infinite benediction is not the Father of an infinite grace," and if a theory of human-like sympathy can be entertained even for a moment, what becomes of the glorious, gratefully-adoring words of our Lord Himself : "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth"—let this phrase be noted—"because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes ; even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Thysight"—let this phrase again be noted.

(5) The true theory is that Christ expiated our sins as our substitute in the strict sense. But a substitute represents definite

persons, and his service when accepted actually discharges the obligations of those for whom it was rendered, although, of course, we experience forgiveness only when we are invited to Christ. Christ being our substitute under the covenant of works, actually and perfectly satisfied all the demands of the covenant. In that case the terms of the covenant themselves provide a satisfaction for those for whom it is made; the promise is given that they shall actually enjoy the reward. It is not the possibility of life, but life itself that is promised. The Scriptures declare everywhere that the design and legal effect of Christ's work is not to render salvation merely possible, but, actually, to save: to reconcile God, and not only to render Him reconcilable. The Scriptures everywhere teach that Christ purchased faith, repentance, and the Holy Spirit's influences by His death and obedience. Hence He must have purchased them for those for whom He suffered and obeyed; and they cannot, therefore, be *merely* conditions on which the enjoyment of the benefits of His death are suspended. If the Atonement merely designates some sort of reconciliation with God apart from the blood of the Cross, there is an impassable gulf between this and the Biblical idea of vicarious satisfaction.

It thus becomes true that while a number of theories concerning the Atonement describe part of the benefits bestowed thereby, yet apart from the Satisfaction theory they are calculated to mislead. There is, for instance, the mystical theory that the reconciliation effected by Christ was brought about by a mysterious union of God and man, accomplished by the Incarnation rather than by His sacrificial death. Next, there is the moral influence theory, according to which the sole object of the life and death of Christ is to produce a moral effect upon the individual sinner, subduing his obdurate aversion to God and his sullen distrust of His willingness to forgive, thus reconciling men to God instead of God to men. Then there is the governmental theory that Christ's sufferings were part of governmental provision for the good of the world. They were designed not to satisfy Divine justice, but to impress the public mind of the moral universe with a sin-detering motive.

While these theories embrace some aspects of truth, they fail in the essential point on which the integrity of the whole depends: for (1) only real *bona fide* punishment can be an example of a punishment, or a proof of God's determination to punish

sins ; (2) the essential justice of God is ignored, as is the fact that sin is an essential evil in itself, and the fact that Christ suffered as the Head, in whom all members were united.

The satisfaction theory consistently embraces the positive elements of a moral influence, and other theories before stated, but it is something more and essentially distinct. "The death of Christ delivers both from the guilt and the power of sin. Christ died not only for original guilt, but for all actual sins of men." These words state the exact truth, provided the error of Antinomianism is avoided. Nor are we ever to forget that Jesus Christ is an all-sufficient Mediator, so that all who hear the Gospel concerning Him are warranted to receive Him as their own Saviour, and that those who reject Him are guilty of rejecting God's greatest proffered gift. The words of the Prayer Book may perhaps form a fitting conclusion : "We thank Thee, Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who in Thy tender mercy didst give Thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption ; who made there (by His one oblation of Himself once offered) a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world."

If Christ's Atonement does not provide an adequate ground for the forgiveness of sin two results would follow : (1) the feeling which man inevitably realises that God must necessarily demand for Himself that which He requires of man in vindication of His own righteousness, is not met ; and (2) man is shut up to making his life a long effort for procuring the forgiveness he needs, but, as all that he can do and more is due from him to God as his existence is continued, the guilty past remains a debt unpaid, and is added to. The man, therefore, who does not "receive" the saving grace of God, and who is not therefore free from the guilt and power of his sins, if he so remains, let it be said with bated breath, will be eternally lost !

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