

The Atonement and Democracy.

THE word "Atonement" appears in the New Testament only once—in Romans v. 11: "We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the atonement"; but here the word would be better rendered "reconciliation," as is done in the Revised Version, or the meaning of the Greek word may be very well rendered "at-one-ment."

The retention of the term atonement, however, is useful as suggesting the intimate connection that St. Paul makes between the Cross of Christ and the solidarity of the race. This is specially emphasised in some of his other statements, such as, "For we thus judge that if one died for all, then all died."

It is important to realise that when the Apostle Paul uses the term "atonement," or "reconciliation," here, he is not thinking so much of a doctrine of atonement, of a piece of mystical theology, as rather of a very definite experience—a fact in the lives of the men who knew Jesus.

We ought to understand very clearly in these days that we are not saved by theology, but by religion. We are not saved by our theoretical understanding of God's relationship to us, but by the actual relation realised in our experience. Just as there would be no astronomy without the heavenly bodies, so there could be no theologies without religious experience. The vital thing is the experience. The theory changes with increased knowledge—indeed, it is well to remember that there have been something like a dozen widely accepted theories of the atonement in the course of Christian history, none of which may be described as entirely satisfactory to the modern mind. It is instructive to recall that for nearly a thousand years the Christian church thrived upon a doctrine of the atonement associated with the Greek Father Irenaeus, that would find very few champions in these days, even amongst the most orthodox. It was the theory that at Calvary Jesus was paid over by God as a ransom to the devil. The devil, however, was not strong enough, or clever enough, to hold his ransom, who slipped through his fingers and rose from the dead. So man was delivered, Christ suffered no harm, and only the devil was worsted. Yet even through so crude a theory, which

nevertheless retains a grain of truth, the great common experience of reconciliation with God was mediated, and for nearly one thousand years men did receive the jewel of the gospel in this strange setting. It is then to the experience of atonement that we must direct our attention.

The disciples found that in contact with Christ their hearts were drawn to God in a new and more powerful experience of His presence and His love. Through Christ they came to the Father, they learned what God was like. This experience began before Calvary. Through Jesus they learned that God was a God who forgave sin, even "unto seventy times seven." But at Calvary the love of God which dwelt in Jesus blazed forth with supreme splendour, revealing itself as ready for any and every sacrifice required for human redemption. In the belief of Paul, whatever objective atonement human sin demanded was guaranteed in the death of Jesus. Brought up as the apostles were in the atmosphere of Jewish religion, they could not conceive of human deliverance from sin without sacrifice, and whilst possibly their visualisation of the type of sacrifice required may not be possible to us, the principle holds good self-evidently that without such sacrifice of the Best on behalf of the worst there can be no deliverance from sin.

This is a principle that we see operative about us in our own life. Human sin flings an often well-nigh intolerable burden of sacrifice and redemptive effort on to the shoulders of the pure and the good and the true. What we have learned of Jesus compels us to carry that principle right up to the Godhead as the fountain of such redeeming energy—as indeed the ultimate and supreme sacrifice.

We may say with reverent truthfulness that we do not know all that may be involved in this objective atonement—that we only know from Jesus and His Cross that the great transaction is done or the great process is in being. Through the Lord Jesus Christ we receive the atonement whatever it may involve. Here is a truth that should relieve souls that are perplexed theologically. The receipt of Jesus is the receipt of the atonement. Whatever be the truth about His Cross, whatever its efficacy, it can be ours only as we receive the Crucified, and it can be ours by receiving Him, however little or however much we may understand the doctrine. As John Oxenham has so eloquently expressed it in his poem, "Credo":

Not what but Whom I do believe,
That in my darkest hour of need,
Hath comfort that no mortal creed
To mortal man can give.
Not what but Whom.

Christ is to us Himself the pledge, in terms of most solemn sacrifice, terms so ultimate for our human condition—a sacrament of broken body and poured-out blood—that God *is on our side against our sin*, and however far that sin may have run beyond the power of our righting it cannot escape His atoning effort. To receive this truth with one's whole faith is to experience reconciliation or at-one-ment. One is put right with both God and man, even with one's self.

The fact that the Most Innocent has chosen not to stand outside the sinful race of man, but has joined Himself to that race to focus upon Himself its weakness and error and to succour with His unquandered strength every sinbound soul achieves for the soul that will believe it a two-fold deliverance.

In the first place it provides a deliverance from the awful fear of judgment that sin dictates, so that the soul finds free access at last to the Heavenly Father, ready either to bear its judgment patiently or to pour its life forth in emulation of the Divine Sacrifice, knowing that it is in the hands of a God of infinite love.

In the second place, the believing soul is delivered from the fear of his fellow's sins and sinfulness, that fear which makes it so hard to forgive.

The late Dr. Dale used to be fond of arguing that in the Cross of Christ every human soul is already forgiven, and the gospel was the proclamation of that forgiveness. Certainly the doctrine of atonement seems to exert all too little influence upon the average Christian's judgment of his neighbour and upon his practice of forgiveness. If God pledges Himself in Christ to make our sins His responsibility, leaving us free to concentrate all our energy upon future obedience, then similarly we must see His grace as the counteracting power of all other human sin and overcoming in us of that fear of it which is so easily translatable into policies of suspicion, harsh repression, or cruelty. A world which holds the fact of Christ is a world in which the power of sin is fundamentally broken.

At this point we should be ready to see the bearing of this great fact of reconciliation in Christ upon the problem of democracy.

It is possible for us to say that *modern democracy has been the creation of Christ and of Christ crucified.*

Democracy in the ancient world was a very limited thing as enunciated by Aristotle and as practised by the Greek City States. The boasted democracy of Athens left out of account the vast hordes of unenfranchised slaves and aliens. The same was true of the Roman Comitia. The rudimentary freedom of our Teutonic ancestors, whilst testifying to more vigorous interest

in the liberty of the common man, was speedily corrupted by the autocratic elements in civilisation. With Christianity, however, in its earliest purity there appeared a new valuation of the individual soul. Says H. W. Nevins, in the *Growth of Freedom*: "The Kingdom of God is within you. That was the astonishing discovery in which lay the vital germ of Christianity's finest influence on the world. Law was made for man, and not man for law. Appeal was no longer made to Caesar, but to God. This insistence upon the incalculable value of every human being for whom Christ died was the great service of Christianity to the history of freedom. Laws, masters, officials, and emperors shrivelled to small account before a soul confronted with eternity and redeemed by the Son of God." The grand equality of Divine love manifested in the Cross to every human soul has remained ever since a great central fire at the heart of the Christian Church at which the impulse towards democratic liberty and democratic solidarity has kindled and rekindled itself time and time again in the course of human history. The Church herself has been far from faithful to that central truth; for the unhappy establishment of Christianity as a state religion in the Roman Empire, and later in other states, including our own, deeply corrupted the Church's loyalty to this intrinsic democracy of the gospel. Yet it is not too much to claim that the institution of political democracy could scarcely have reached the degree it has done among the Anglo-Saxon race if they had not been very deeply imbued with that free Christianity recovered in the Puritan and Evangelical strain.

The famous Declaration of Independence that lies at the foundation of the great Republic of the West was the offspring of that simple faithful democracy of the Crucified which sailed in the gallant little *Mayflower*. If, then, to-day, the common people of every nation are striving to realise their world-solidarity, it is because this valuation of the human soul for which Christ died has become so much the common property of mankind that its origin has been obscured or forgotten.

We must go on to say further, however, that not only is Democracy the creation of the atoning Christ, but it *cannot endure without Him*. The problem of human solidarity is proving itself a much more intractable one than the rather facile radicalism of the nineteenth century dreamed. It seems easy enough for us to realise the social impulse along lines of least resistance. We are easily persuaded to multiply cohesions of humanity that are perfectly convenient, yet this may prove eventually a very serious obstacle to real democracy. In the long run a class-consciousness may prove a very much bigger barrier to human sympathy than a strongly individualist one.

It is quite true that class-consciousness has often proved a liberation of the individual to a bigger outlook upon life. The world class-consciousness of the working man is infinitely preferable to his old self-centredness and crass nationalism; but if his sympathies are permitted to harden at the class-conscious level, the sense of resource, the sheer weight of numbers involved, all the common tendencies of crowd-consciousness may conspire to precipitate conflicts far more terrible and destructive of civilisation than the world has yet known. It would not be the first time that in human history the hour of supreme opportunity has proved the hour of supreme peril.

Is there a power that can inspire the social impulse to travel *the lines of most resistance*, to bridge the deep gulfs of misunderstanding, dislike, and even hate that divide the classes? Is there a great power that can inspire to great forgiveness and the setting aside of ancient grudges and hoary injustices; that can lift human sympathy over the dreaded colour bar, and put a girdle round the earth which shall leave not even the vilest human soul outside? The answer is, that there is such a power in the love of God as it comes to us in Jesus Christ. If it be said that Christianity has failed in its reconciliation of the classes it can be claimed that not only is it the parent of such sympathy as already exists, but that it has amply compensated for its measure of failure here by its great work of reconciliation *between races* as evidenced in its gigantic and extraordinarily successful missionary enterprise. Not even the Socialist International can show such a record of white devotion to the coloured races as the Christian Church is exhibiting daily. That Christianity has not entirely succeeded is a responsibility that must be laid at the door of those who refuse it as well as those who accept it. Christianity is not something that works automatically; it calls for human choice. It is not a Divine compulsion, it is a Divine appeal. A faith that has done so much to reconcile such deep antagonism, to keep classic instances in mind, as Jew and Gentile, Patrician and Plebeian, Master and Slave, English Peer and Little Factory Victim, Anglo-Saxon Capitalist and Negro Slave, Hindoo Aristocrat and Hindoo outcast, European Scholar and Camaroon Native, Holy Christ and Dying Thief, is surely a faith that is worth trying upon the greatest scale possible!

Dr. L. P. Jacks, in his recent *Challenge of Life*, has pointed out that whereas the moral problem of the past has been largely the problem of discovering the moral hero who could give effective leadership, the peculiar problem of our time is *the production of mass action of the moral heroic type*. Less and less must we depend on leadership and more and more must the

average man yield himself to the right spirit and take risks for his ideals if true democracy is to be achieved. Yet how shall the average man fall in love with all humanity, especially in its strange, often so objectionable and definitely repulsive types? How shall he surmount his fear of the drunkard, the vicious, the militarist, the greedy extortioner, aye, even the tyrant, and indulge a real hope of world democracy unless he can feel with utmost confidence that Love is at the heart of things and is working in and through all things, its great work of reconciliation or at-onement. The atonement waits for its effectiveness *to be received*, and there is no more reasonable appeal to every true lover of democracy the wide world over than that voiced by Browning in the cautious language so beloved of the modern world:

What say ye of Christ, friend,
 When all is done and said,
 You like this Christianity or not?
 It may be false; but will you wish it true?
Has it your vote, to be so if it can?

In other words, will *you* receive the atonement?

A. D. BELDEN.

WALTER WILSON, who published a history of dissenting churches in London, Southwark and Westminster, prepared one copy of the work for annotation and illustration; that copy, on large paper, bound in eight volumes, is in Doctor Williams' Library. He gained very little further information on Baptists, but as to the origin of Maze Pond he does make explicit correction of the usual story, citing the church records. Samuel Mee is never mentioned there, the first pastor was Thomas Warburton, who was succeeded by Edward Wallin. The statement involves further corrections.

Wilson procured several contemporary portraits, which he mounted. The Baptists are:—Abraham Austin, Richard Burnham, William Clarke, James Foster, Andrew Fuller, John Gale, John Gill, John Gosnold, Thomas Gwennap, Richard Hutchings, Isaac Kimber, Caleb Langford, John MacGowan, John Martin, Benjamin Messer, John Piggott, John Reynolds, John Rippon, Robert Robinson, John Rudd, Joseph Stennett, John Stevens, John Sutcliff, Dan Taylor, Timothy Thomas, Samuel Wilson. Such a collection makes us wonder at the century which appreciated these men, and ignored Gifford, Ward.