ARTICLE VI.

THE ATONEMENT AND CONSCIENCE.

BY HENRY C. MABIE, D.D., LL.D.,
BOSTON, MASS.

RECOGNIZING that the world has become disordered through sin, our present aim is to inquire what the moral sense of men has to say respecting the need of an atonement for sin. Apart from explicit Bible teaching, does conscience affirm an objective divine reconciliation to be necessary? It will be my aim to show that it does, although in so doing I shall state some of the terms of that reconciliation in less conventional forms than are commonly employed.

The attempt to answer our question involves a metaphysic of the conscience. But this need not distress us, despite that "superstitious fear of metaphysics" which Eucken says attaches to the so-called modern mind. If we are to have any criteria at all wherewith to test the validity of our reasonings, we must have a metaphysic; otherwise the term rational is without meaning. We decline responsibility for certain outgrown conceptions of metaphysics, as of the sense-philosophy, which have furnished objectors with an excuse for rejecting metaphysics altogether, as most Ritschlians do. We, however, stand with Eucken when he says that it is the peculiarity and the greatness of Christianity that "its metaphysics should be always ethical, and its ethics always metaphysical," and note also his pertinent caution that "If earlier ages made Christianity too mechanically and one-sidedly metaphysical,

we moderns must beware of allowing it to degenerate into mere ethics."

But what is conscience? It has been called "the moral judiciary of the Soul." It does not exist by itself separately as in a closed compartment. It always acts in organic, never in atomic, fashion; it is that mode of the abiding personal self in which all the other faculties also act, but with reference to some moral standard. This conscience not only has the power of judging, but must judge, according to the claim of duty, asserted by its own inward sense; for God himself founded it. It always asserts approval or disapproval with the degree of enlightenment it has. This enlightenment is indeed relative, and hence conscience needs education, for man is bound both to follow conscience and to have the best possible conscience to follow. Conscience is thus the sensorium of the moral soul; and within it the voice of God, in echo, is ever resounding, like the winding of a shell on the wave-swept seashore. It is the voice of God as lawgiver, and our best witness to him. Those who have a written revelation have the higher standard. But those who are without it have, in the law of conscience, an unwritten though compelling standard of moral judgment. And, in the thought of Paul, both Christian and pagan portions of the race will finally be judged according to the degree of loyalty or disloyalty to the light possessed, "in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my Gospel." The pagan, however, like others, including infants, has his moral trial under the ægis of redeeming grace, resident in the cosmic or essential Christ, even though as a philosophy it is but vaguely known.

The use and care of one's conscience, then, with reference to any degree of moral light, is of the highest moment to all

free agents, and its concurrent verdict an essential component in future destiny. The reason of this is, that that verdict is the judicial answer in man to the norm existing in God, its great Original. Relative though this answer be to the absolute standard, yet it is homogeneous with it.

If there be no such tribunal in conscience set in correspondence with the final one in God, — nothing of the same species in man's rational and moral constitution, — then there can be no ideal of moral excellence or basis of appeal anywhere. If even revelation is to be apprehended, it can be only upon the ground that organic correspondence exists between men and the Author of that revelation. If these things be not so, all judgments of an ethical and religious sort whatsoever are valueless or misleading. In that event, as Dr. Shedd says, "there's an end of both ethics and religion; anchor and anchorage are gone, and man is afloat on a boundless, starless ocean of ignorance and skepticism."

But that there is such a correspondence as I have premised, the universal history of mankind attests. Man's rational and moral nature in itself is a microcosm of that macrocosm which is in God. Since sin has come, the voice of conscience, ignorant or enlightened, has been ever uttering in the soul of man its low wail of guilt and death. The effort of man to hide himself in the garden was the primeval confession. The ever continued oblations, penances, self-tortures, and priesthoods of even the pagan world confirm it. Contemplating only one side of God's nature, man's sin indeed has so falsely projected itself as to belie God respecting his grace. Yet, in so far as a sinful conscience points to God at all, it affirms his necessary displeasure against sin. In this it speaks truly, for it knows in its own native light that a God as holy must disapprove and condemn sin. Nor can the conscience, seeing

only that side of the divine nature, be pacified, for that side of him constitutes the deep and abiding ground of all self-condemnation.

Paul, in Romans, gives a true account of its workings prior to the discovery of the grace in Christ: "When the commandment came, sin revived, and I died"; "For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin"; "But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." This self-oppositeness, or antinomy, man feels to be his blight and curse. And so he cries out, "O wretched man that I am: who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

But the condemnation is more than legal. This of itself would produce essential unhappiness. But the dire thing about an accusing conscience is the sense of criminality in it, — something far deeper. "Unhappiness," says Shedd, "is a relatively low form of feeling, while the sense of criminality — intrinsic ill-desert — is a very high form of feeling. The more conscience is unmixed with other thoughts, the more thorough the operation of the moral faculty becomes." Nay, it may even drown the sense of mere distress, and be overwhelmed with the sense of the judgment brought on its God as well as itself. This sense of guilt is the most dispassionate of all realities; it is the silent, cool, and involuntary judicial pronouncement of the moral universe; it is "the wrath of the Lamb." Things have gone beyond the control of mere sensibility or volition; as with the once emancipated black of slavery days who in desperation staked his free papers at the gambling table and lost, so the abused conscience of itself is unable to regain its lost footing; it is its own accusing witness, and makes itself felt as pure remorse.

In the case against one Joseph Knapp in Massachusetts, who had when arrested confessed to a murder and afterwards repudiated his confession, Daniel Webster in summing up put the case thus: "The guilty soul cannot keep its own secret. It labors under its guilty possession, and knows not what to do with it. The human heart was not made for the residence of such an inhabitant. It finds itself preyed on by a torment as of a vulture devouring it, and it can ask no sympathy or assistance from heaven or earth. The secret comes to possess him and leads him whithersoever it will. He feels it beating at his heart, rising to his throat and demanding disclosure. He thinks the whole world sees it in his face, reads it in his eyes, and hears it working in the silence of his thoughts. It has become his master." The truth is, the conscience intuitively knows that its sense of guilt has a more than human and finite origin. If this were all, its torment might burn itself out. Man's chief fear is not of this finite and single self, awful as that is, but of his Maker and Judge. Because his conscience is the echo of a more ultimate and ulterior reality and person than his finite self, the unrenewed guilty one faces "a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries." Then this law of condemnation ever uttering itself in the soul is a constitutional thing.

But is this all that conscience has to say in reporting itself as grounded in God, or is there hope that in a fuller understanding of what is immanent in God as a Pardoning Being, the conscience may yet conceive itself as even more originally founded in God as Redeemer also, and, as such, conscience also may experience itself as redeemed?

In terms of time and experience, we may and shall speak of conscience as refounded. We thus speak in relative terms;

for, in strictness of thought, the conscience, like everything else in this world, except sin, is grounded in the God who is ultimately the world's Redeemer. Only, at first, sin clouds our vision of that side of God, and we need revelation and even some experience of his grace before we can deeply realize him as such.

Now all this brings us straight to the necessity of an atonement, — a necessity with which we shall deal on both its objective and subjective sides. This atonement we define as the adjudgment of mankind to a potentially redeemed status, on the ground of God's own sacrificial, judgment-bearing grace historically manifested in Jesus Christ, his Son. Our practical thesis is this: The atonement in itself is a reality so deep in God that it affords a basis for the historical refounding of the conscience in something even more original and profound than God as merely creative, namely, in God as Redeemer.

Our central reason for this conviction is, that the atonement revealed in the Scriptures is what Dr. P. T. Forsyth has called "a judgment-death," — the death of God in Christ, self-incurred on our behalf, irrespective of all depth of human ill-desert. Man left to his own natural sense as a transgressor can never forgive himself; but God can forgive him, so that, in the end, all sense of guilt may be eradicated.

The death of Christ, conceived as a "judgment-death," is especially adapted to pacify our sense of guilt. That death is entirely unique. It is no mere mortal dying of the Man of Nazareth as a hero-martyr attesting his own moral earnestness. Nor is it the death of one considered as a third party outside the Godhead. The death is rather what we might call the living death of the whole Deity, albeit visualized in the Christ, — an historical, concrete, expression of the

self-provided 'Lamb foreknown (as slain) from the foundation of the world.' It is thus not the imposition by an aloof God, upon an outside innocent party, of a suffering which he himself did not share. It was rather the self-oblation of the Word Incarnate, who was also Deity, — an offering made, as Shedd says, "wholly *ab intra* and not *ab extra*." The propitiation was a *self-propitiation,* made by God to God himself, with no ethical wrong done to any person or interest whatsoever, least of all to the only-begotten Son. It was "for the joy set before him" that he, the whole Deity, and not Jesus only, "endured the cross, despising the shame."

Is it not because the atoning work, unfortunately, has often been represented as something wholly outside the Deity and that of a Deity incapable of pain, a work confined to a temporal Jesus apart from the triune God, that the death of Christ has proved a shock rather than a solace to conscience?

Martineau's classic objection to the evangelical conception of atoning suffering is wholly on the ground of an imagined apartness of Jesus from the Father in that suffering. When, however, it is seen that "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" is, as Professor Royce calls him, "the Supreme Sufferer" in our universe, and that all our suffering is, — not, as Professor Royce says, "*identical* with his own," — but an *extension* of it, homogeneous with it; and that this world is, as Professor Royce also affirms, "the world of the suffering Logos," then it is the moral sense is won; and the judgment-death of Christ is hailed as the ground of a renewed and justifying conscience. "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, *purge* your conscience from dead works, to serve the living God?" It is this *purging* of

the conscience that is so needed, and by one who can quicken it for the new life.

Again, it is often quite overlooked that, on one side of the indivisible God, a propitiatory work may be going on at the same time that, on another side of his being, Deity as holy may be condemning sin. These two movements express an antinomy, not between two persons in the Trinity, nor between isolated attributes of a departmental God, but between two different *poles* or *rapports* in one and the same being; these may and do coexist. God's self-expiation provides what he exacts, morally "enables him to act as he feels." No device of an extraneous, foreign sort is imported into Deity to render him propitious or favorable in disposition. God himself, albeit in Christ, rather satisfied those immanent and eternal imperatives of the divine nature which, without that satisfaction of self-consistency, conscience affirms would compel punishment of the sinner. The calm anger of God against sin is entirely compatible with the existence and exercise of the other and opposite feeling at one and the same time, but only through the self-incurred suffering in the Godhead.

This is the supreme and eternal paradox in the personal God, the archetype of all the paradoxes belonging to personality, and as occurring in all redeeming experience. "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." From this point of view the atonement is cosmic and timeless. God's being as relates to our sin is an ellipse with two foci, rather than a circle with one center, — an ellipse in which the foci of holiness and love mutually condition each other. The synthesis of the two is grace, a "love outloving love," as it is also a *justice outsanctioning justice*. Even within our limited human persons, in the parental gracious discipline of children, these opposite polarities

— reflections of God's own — coexist; the one condemns wrongdoing, the other with equal intensity yearns to pardon. Indeed, the final throne of this universe is one neither of abstract holiness nor of abstract love, but a "throne of grace," "a throne with a rainbow round about it"; in the concrete personal action of our God toward us, justice and love coexist in individual grace. This grace arises only in the exercise of a self-imposed judicial sentence vicariously experienced in the heart of our very God.

Bronson Alcott, the American Pestalozzi, in his boys' school in Boston, made a rule that for certain misdemeanors the punishment should be inflicted not upon the culprit but on the master of the school. Mr. Alcott had in mind to show that vicariously incurred pain might be so linked to wrongdoing that it would work out for the transgressor a deeper character. At the first application of the new discipline the boy, in striking with the ferule the blow on Mr. Alcott's hand, burst into tears, and with him the whole school also broke down in sympathetic grief.

Judge Lindsey, the originator of the Denver Juvenile Court, resolved, in an effort to rescue incipient criminals, that he, the court himself, would come down off the bench and, at the cost of long-suffering love, make common cause with young criminals. He thus gave to our time, in the realm of jurisprudence, a fine object lesson of the grace which has its great original in the cross of the world's Redeemer.

The United States Government, acting on the Christian initiative of the late Secretary Hay, resolved, in sacrificial good will, to mediate its own disturbed relation to misguided China, and relinquish one half the indemnity of twenty-four million dollars legally awarded the United States for damages wrought by the Boxer uprising of 1900; and thus it also

acted on a principle of grace. In settling the Alabama Claims affair against Great Britain, our government proceeded on the lower legalistic plane. The case was arbitrated. There was in it no grace whatever.

In dealing with China our government did justice to the two poles in all higher governing principle, namely, the instinct to punish and the passion to pardon. In other words, our nation experienced in kind a judgment-infliction. In so doing we adjudged the transgressor to the benefits of grace; and grace is that unique thing which, while conserving all the interests and sanctions of justice, nevertheless expresses love. Thus, in any governing relation over men, things are raised to a higher and diviner place than if the uttermost farthing were exacted. Indeed, grace is something which can be expressed only by a governing authority; in the nature of things it is always vicarious.

And how did China — even pagan China — respond to our nation's grace? Like David who declined the water from Bethlehem's well, brought him through jeopardy to his mighty men, she poured out our bounty as a libation, declined to use it for self, and sent us in lieu thereof her sons to educate.

Conscience is peculiarly sensitive to the categories embraced in illustrations like these, although no human illustration is equal to the whole meaning of the divine atonement.

In this light it is plain to see we are saved not only *from* judgment but also *by* judgment, and *unto* a judgment that is *beyond* all judgment in all worlds. And so, as Dr. Forsyth says, "Judgment by grace becomes salvation." And one far greater has said: "For judgment [a new kind of judgment] I am come into this world, that they which see not, might see, and that they which see, might become blind." In all

this the conscience of men finds in the self-oblation of Deity "the conscience of the conscience," and can only utter its exultant "amen!"

Bearing in mind, then, the ethical nature of God "as redeeming Creator," and the pronouncements of man's moral nature founded in God, ever resounding in the depths of Mansoul, we must see that, if sinful man is ever to have real complacency towards God, the primary ground for it must be in God himself, and in that judgment-death of God in Christ embraced in the objective atonement.

Here is the eternal foundation of that self-reconciling work wrought in God "before the foundation of the world"; it entered into the very structure of that unique redeeming government under which man was foreordained to exist, under which God can consistently forgive sin, be "just, and yet the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."

It further constituted for man a gracious renewing ægis, symbolized by the Shekinah sacrificial flame, the bow in the cloud, and the Passover blood, under the benign sway of which man in Christ was to live, move, and have his being. In this, conscience finds its basal quiet, a "peace that passeth all understanding." Without this objective dynamic reality, there is little hope for the refounding of conscience in that wide and effective way which the bringing in of the gospel contemplated.

But, if the demands of conscience are to be more consciously met, there must eventuate from this atonement certain subjective changes also. These are needed in order that, in the end, the soul may be brought into a new, spontaneous, and sensible conformity to the requirements of God for which man was made. Only so can there be created that new correlative correspondence between man and God that can supplant

the older one which speaks only of sin and condemnation. Unless the conscience can thus be refounded, primarily indeed in God, yet secondarily, also, in its own subjective soul, it is vain to hope for final felicity.

But, thank God, it is this very new correspondence which the regenerating spirit produces in the soul. This new creation results in an inward verdict of grace deeper than the previous verdict of doom; it becomes an echo behind the echo, predictive of eternal harmonies, beginning to revive in the previously disordered soul.

This subjective process works out in several ways; e.g.—

1. The new discovery disarms a false suspicion of God which so belies him and holds him at such distance from the soul as virtually denies his deeper being, his saving immanency in man.

2. It awakens also an adequate repentance for essential sin. This repentance is more than "a change of mind." It is a change of *care* respecting the bearing of one's sin upon a gracious authority which has also deeply suffered for it; it realizes what occasionally an imprisoned criminal feels and confesses, that he has got the court itself into trouble, and he becomes eager to repudiate all real or constructive part in such a wrong. Repentance is thus the correlative of the vicarious suffering discovered in its gracious God. This, and nothing less, is that deep evangelical "repentance which needeth not to be repented of."

3. This discovery in God lays the basis for a new and positive loyalty towards him, and inspires hope of new moral conquests on the fields of old defeats. Thus the whole earlier course of life is reversed as the sin cure goes on to do its work.

4. And thus all eventuates in a new spontaneous delight

in the divine will in which the new life in Christ is one of ever growing fellowship and love.

Judge Lindsey tells us that, at one stage in the conduct of his juvenile court, he found the deputies were playing him false — instead of conducting their probationers promptly to the reformatories, they would bunch up the boys in some lockup for days together, and when convenient take them up *en bloc* and charge dishonest mileage. So the Judge called before him some detained boys, took them into his confidence, and thereafter began to send them up with the commitment papers in their own hands, escorted by no officer at all. The effect more and more was to make new characters. The dynamic in the process was the sense that the court itself had become a vicarious responsible sufferer for them, — " the Judge " had become their surety and friend. This operated in the boys to awaken a better conscience, a conscience which no mere benevolent-minded private individual could have induced, — a phenomenon which all who set aside the judicial factor in atonement would do well to study afresh.

Judge Lindsey affirms that, out of five hundred and eight boys sent up in five years, all but five of them faithfully went straight to the reformatory, unattended by officers; while during the same period the records showed forty-two " breakaways " from the officers in charge of deported criminals.

Psychologically, a reconstructed moral nature became at least incipient in every such culprit as had the moral nerve to confess judgment and deliver himself over to the punitive authorities. Thus, in penitence, our hearts break when we discover the bearing of our sin on a suffering vicarious authority so ultimate in the universe as our redeeming Lord. Then it is that we soar heavenward, free from the sense of guilt and condemnation.

That God can forgive sin where there is real repentance is undoubted. But how to secure such repentance is the problem. A man cannot repent by an act of will — it is too deep a matter — it involves a change of care respecting something more objective. Hence it requires such a unique exhibition in God himself as the historical atonement — the sensation of the ages consummated on Calvary — affords to rouse man up to the real situation.

Says Professor Denney: "The love which can literally go out of itself and make the burden of others its own is the radical principle of all the genuine and victorious morality of the world. It is one of the startling truths of moral life that the consequences of sin striking visibly on the innocent, have in certain circumstances a peculiar power to redeem the sinful — something is appealed to in the guilty which is deeper than guilt — something is touched which is deeper than sin — a new faith and hope are born to take hold of love so wonderful, and by attaching themselves to it the evil past is transcended. The suffering of such love, they are dimly aware, opens the gates of righteousness to the sinful in spite of all that has been — sin is outweighed by it — it is annulled, exhausted, transcended by it. The great atonement is somehow in line with this." This is the essential cure of sin, a matter which nothing else in our world except the Christian gospel even proposes, much less accomplishes.

Sometimes, in our contemplation of the woeful depths to which the natural conscience drives us, we become appalled and wonder that a beneficent God ever created us. And we ask, "Is it all worth the candle?" Our difficulty, however, is immensely relieved when we see that, amid all the obscurities of God's ways, this conscience was made in full purpose and prospect of becoming refounded in the grace of God —

that thus it might arise to such values and felicities in God's final universe as will incomparably outweigh all the perversion and waste incident to the moral trial.

Within the station of an electric railway one may read the sign, "Danger, live rail!" but were it not for the perilous potencies inherent in the electric fluid which necessitates such warning there would be no friendly values to be utilized for the public convenience. There must always be the potential opposite of evil in every good offered to free personality; there could be no freedom without it.

The dread language of Scripture respecting the hardened heart implies never a threat, but the necessary sequence which, for better or worse, must attend every action under our moral order. God never wantonly hardens or blinds, but it was impossible for him to create an order carrying within it the potencies of grace, without the dire alternatives of grace possibly despised also.

Says Sir Oliver Lodge, "The universe is not a machine subject to outside forces with everything mechanically determined, but a living organism with initiations of its own. There was a risk about creation. God might have kept man by main force, but that would not be 'playing the game.'" As Professor James says, "A football team desire to get a ball to a certain spot, but that is not all they desire — they wish to do it under certain conditions, and overcome other inherent conditions, else might they get up in the night and put it there." Says Professor Lodge again, 'The creation of free beings who in so far as they do right do so because they *will*, not because they *must*, was the divine problem, — and it is the highest of which we have any conception.'

Hence the sum of the matter is this: That the conscience itself may become so reborn, through the grace of the atone-

ment, that in the end it will just as exultantly approve its new self in Christ, as once it condemned its old self in the natural man. This is the potentiality of heaven. "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again, and who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us."

That very conscience which, at the first, as grounded in the moral God, condemned us as sinful, becomes, when refounded through our reconciliation with the Godhead as Redeemer, the potency of our eternal, ever enlarging felicity and glory. Indeed, the moral necessities of the two relations stand or fall together.